

India's Shifting Nuclear Doctrine and Its Impact on the Strategic Stability of South Asia

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Abstract

The paper analyzes the potential implications of transitioning India's nuclear doctrine from a No First Use (NFU) policy to a First Use (FU) policy. Based on neo-realist theory, the paper argues that India has been experiencing a shift in doctrine in its quest to acquire relative power vis-à-vis Pakistan and China. India's current policy, defined by strategic ambiguity, can be adjusted in response to evolving regional security dynamics. Nevertheless, the introduction of FU brings new complexities, and it may lead to the destabilization of the strategic balance and possibly an arms race in South Asia. India's aggressiveness underscores the logic of relative gains, in which maintaining its advantage over Pakistan is prioritized over the stability of the two nations. This may further lead to major economic problems for Pakistan, which is already struggling with heightened investment in national security, and raise the risk of entanglements between the two countries. The inherent ambiguity in India's nuclear doctrine also makes the command-and-control problems highly severe; hence, the risk of unauthorized or accidental use of nuclear weapons could also be on the rise. The research suggests that China's evolving strategic position may be a key factor driving this potential doctrinal shift, adding further complexity to regional security dynamics, particularly for Pakistan. The paper also highlights the importance of preemptive diplomacy, Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs), and greater transparency in India's nuclear policy for enhancing regional and global security.

Keywords

India, Pakistan, nuclear doctrine, arms race, deterrence

Introduction

India's nuclear policy has consistently been based on the No First Use (NFU) principle. This policy was formalized in India's draft nuclear doctrine in 1999, before being consolidated in the 2003 official Indian nuclear doctrine (Bano, 2020). Lately, India's nuclear stance has slowly been shifting. Some recent Indian defense ministers have

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indicated that the NFU policy is not guaranteed and may change with evolving circumstances (Ehtisham, 2022). NFU of the Indian Nuclear Doctrine implies that the state will not ever be the first to use nuclear weapons in conflict, and the first use (FU) does not preclude the initial nuclear strike (Dalton, 2019). If implemented, this proposed change would shift from an FU policy, which could have serious implications for regional strategic stability and deviate from the Indian conventional policy paradigm.

Since its early days, India's nuclear strategy has centred on the NFU. A move to FU will lower Pakistan's nuclear threshold, the point at which a state might use nuclear weapons, creating uncertainty and increasing tensions. At the same time, India is modernizing its military and pursuing further superiority and relative gains, creating a security dilemma. From a technological perspective, the possible transformation of the country's nuclear policy raises concerns about the consequences for regional security, particularly for Pakistan and China. This move will have enormous consequences for the national security of both countries and strategic implications for regional stability.

Since independence, India and Pakistan have been engaged in multiple conflicts in which nuclear capabilities play an important role in maintaining strategic stability and act as a deterrent (Schumann, 2019). India's recent signals to reconsider its NFU policy have raised concerns about its commitment, thereby heightening tensions in Pakistan. How India's nuclear policies change can significantly alter the regional environment. In this paper, a thorough discussion is presented of how this shift would have a ripple effect across multiple areas. This altered nuclear doctrine can change the escalation scenario between India and Pakistan.

Introducing these factors will undoubtedly raise questions about the impact of balancing deterrence strategies, especially in an asymmetric context with Pakistan. The paper begins by tracing the development of nuclear policy in India, then examines how the policy evolved within the framework of neo-realism and concludes by evaluating the consequences of these changes for Pakistan and regional stability. To further structure and refine this study, the research addresses the following questions: (i) How does India's evolving nuclear doctrine affect regional stability in South Asia? (ii) How have India's nuclear policies developed over time? (iii) In what ways might this doctrinal shift contribute to crisis entanglement in the region?

Evolution of India's Nuclear Doctrine and Implications for Strategic Stability in South Asia

South Asia is home to two rival nuclear states, which exacerbate the nuclear dilemma in the region. The book 'Emerging Threats and Shifting Doctrines: The Current Challenges to Strategic Stability in South Asia' examines India's strategic move to deploy advanced technologies across sectors and, possibly, to shift from the NFU policy to an FU policy in nuclear strategy (ISSI, 2023). Additionally, India's steady progress in weaponry, particularly in its intelligence, reconnaissance, and surveillance (IRS) capabilities, is noteworthy. These capabilities are comparable to those of China. The book emphasizes the potential shift among leaders, who have traditionally avoided first use of nuclear weapons, towards contemplating the possibility of FU including pre-emptive strikes. These changes in the Doctrine are foreseen as a serious impediment to nuclear deterrence at the regional level, leading, most probably, to a 'race for arms' that will ensnare Pakistan's expenditure capabilities (ISSI, 2023).

Kazi (2014, p. 50) further highlights India's nuclear doctrine and posture. He also mentions the NFU policy of India, which states India "will not be the first to use nuclear weapons. Having stated that, there remains no basis for their use against countries which do not have nuclear weapons". This raises important concerns about whether the NFU policy of India applies to all states or just the states that do not possess nuclear weapons. This dilemma puts a huge question mark on India's NFU policy. In this paper, the author also notes several indications that India will reframe its nuclear policy. In its 2014 election manifesto, the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) indicated a revisit to the Doctrine to make it relevant to contemporary challenges (Kazi, 2014).

To further elaborate on the literature on the evolution of India's nuclear doctrine, Tellis (2019) examines the present state of nuclear weapons development in India and Pakistan, approximately 20 years after their 1998 nuclear tests. It seeks to assess the primary threats to regional security posed by nuclear weapons and how the international community can assist both countries in addressing them. While the document does not go into detail on China's nuclear program, it does underline the country's importance as a nuclear actor in the region (Tellis, 2019). Pakistan's nuclear capability is inextricably linked to Chinese funding. This may be one reason India is shifting its policy toward FU to contain China. This paper also underscores the technology and weaponry in which India is excelling, such as MIRVs, short-ranged submarine-launched ballistic missiles, and nuclear missiles like Prithvi-2, Agni (1-5), Dhanush SLBM, Brahmos, with advancements such as new development from Brahmos 1 to Brahmos 2 (Tellis, 2019).

Some studies delve into the fast-changing nature of nuclear doctrines, which depend on the evolution of threats and technological innovations. Sultan (2018) focuses on India's outdated 'period doctrine' in 2003, which is still facing challenges in adapting to the contemporary security environment, even though the government often emphasizes the multidirectional security challenges. This aggravates the difficulty further, causing India to plan its 'escalation dominance' over Pakistan and 'assured retaliation' against China. Furthermore, the disparity between India's claims and its actual nuclear posture may compel other countries to take offensive measures. As a result, the temptation to attack first will always exist, preventing the adoption of deterrence as the best means of ensuring long-term stability in this region. For India to articulate and make its nuclear strategy open, it has to provide information on the NFU of nuclear weapons as well as its approach to challenging reprisals. Furthermore, India should determine the minimum level of deterrence and the degree of reliability required to maintain its status as a legitimate nuclear state.

The literature in the context of India's Shifting Nuclear Doctrine and its Impact on Strategic Stability of South Asia emphasizes the necessity to investigate why India is changing its nuclear strategy. The current focus on potential causes for India's nuclear strategy shift frequently centers on its ties with China, as will be elaborated in the next sections. Furthermore, the danger that conventional and nuclear systems, including dual-capable missiles, will be difficult to distinguish during crises will be examined in this paper. This gap emphasizes the need for a more comprehensive knowledge of the precise elements impacting India's evolving nuclear strategy on regional stability and the extent to which it is influenced by its strategic interactions.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine India's evolving nuclear doctrine. Primary sources are official statements, defense white papers, peer-reviewed

journals, and organization reports like NTI and SIPRI that contain direct information on policy and capabilities. Secondary sources include scholarly books, think-tank publications, and reliable news sources, particularly those with a South Asian framework, to provide depth in context. This analysis follows the neo-realist model, where the study can interpret a change in its Indian doctrines as a result of security dilemmas and power politics, to evaluate its consequences for deterrence stability in South Asia. The study hypothesizes that the shifting nuclear doctrine of India has an adverse effect on South Asian strategic stability.

Discussion Analysis

The prospect of changes to Indian nuclear policy, specifically shifting the NFU's status to the FU, remains under discussion. This change, proposed by India's leaders, has geopolitical implications for stability in South Asia. Therefore, recent statements by Indian leadership suggest that the policy may be altered, with profound implications for the region's security dynamics. This could lead to new regional instabilities. The existing hostile environment between India and other nuclear powers, namely Pakistan and China, may become more strained. It can increase the likelihood of a lower nuclear threshold and the prospect of an arms race in the region. There may also be other adverse economic implications for Pakistan. Every shift in Indian nuclear policies and strategies raises the prospects of an escalating nuclear arms race in the region while putting pressure on Pakistan to divert its scarce resources towards defense, which greatly affects other areas that require focus. Moreover, it may result in a crisis of confusion, whereby conventional and nuclear crises become inextricable. This entanglement could increase the likelihood that a conventional conflict escalates to nuclear levels by blurring the distinction between the two. It can also impede decision-making during a crisis, increasing the likelihood of error or misjudgment. In this paper, these issues will be discussed in greater detail, with regard to the effects that changes in Indian nuclear policy may have on regional instability, arms buildup, and the economic factors that may affect Pakistan.

Evolution in Nuclear Policies of India

In 2003, the Indian Nuclear Security Advisory Board (INSAB) released the official Nuclear Doctrine (DND), which the Cabinet Committee on Security (CSC) reviewed and approved, making it the official nuclear doctrine of India (Rajagopalan, 2016). The doctrine of India about nuclear weaponry is built on the principle of NFU, which means that India will never be the initiator of a conflict by employing nuclear weaponry (Kanwal, 2001). This concept, called 'assured retaliation', was born on the basis that no one would dare to start a nuclear war if they had a clear idea of what the retaliation would bring – even a weak retaliation would be enough to deter the adversary. India's nuclear doctrine holds the concept of deterring the enemy by the threat of retaliation with weapons of mass destruction as a last resort. Nevertheless, being officially proclaimed as an NFU State does not stop India from deliberately keeping ambiguity in its nuclear doctrine.

India's nuclear policy is built on several fundamental cornerstones, each one playing a vital role in shaping its strategic attitude and guiding its nuclear actions. However, the most important aspect of these principles is a strong reliance on the NFU, which explicitly states that the country will not initiate a nuclear conflict under any circumstances (Sajjad, 2022). It not only forms an appropriate basis for Indian nuclear policy but also provides considerable support to regional and global stability by

lowering the risk of nuclear escalation. The doctrine reflects the official NFU line, known for its nuanced ambiguity, which allows flexibility and adaptability in responding to evolving security challenges while further enhancing its nuclear capabilities. In line with Shyam Saran's view, a former Indian foreign secretary, this ambiguity could be exploited by India to expand its nuclear arsenal and develop new weapons and systems, such as Multiple Independently Targetable Reentry Vehicles (MIRVs) and Ballistic Missile Defense Systems (BMDs) (Kanwal, 2016).

Alongside the NFU policy is the concept of 'assured retaliation', on which the deterrence crusade relies (Rajagopalan, 2016). This principle guarantees that any enemy who contemplates a nuclear attack on India will be subject to a credible and principally strong retaliatory response, thus deterring probable enemies and increasing the state's security (Ehtisham, 2022). At the heart of India's nuclear doctrine is the principle of Minimum Deterrence, which serves as a guide for the nation as it strives to develop a credible nuclear deterrent while simultaneously limiting the size and scope of its nuclear arsenal (Levesques et al., 2021).

When seen through the lens of neo-realism, by signaling towards a potential move to FU as opposed to NFU, India pursues relative gains, as opposed to parity. This move by India would be seen as an aggressive step, seeking excessive power without any limit. This aggression could lead to a security dilemma, where India and Pakistan are cause and effect to each other, as Pakistan perceives India to be threatening them, and in response, Pakistan will take various steps to spur the arms race and create greater instability in the region.

Furthermore, the lust for strategic advantage can be seen in India's rejection of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the pursuit of its independent nuclear weapons. This firm stance affects the nuclear stance and its interpretation by other countries. The highly assertive nature of India's nuclear policy, in combination with the ambiguity of its nuclear doctrine, can generate doubts about signaling India's intentions and management of perceptions (Zakre & Davenport, 2017). The mixture of resoluteness and ambiguity can be a source of tension, complicate crisis management, and may even lead to the miscalculation of strategic goals.

Shifting Nuclear Doctrine from No First Use to First Use

South Asia's changing security patterns have sparked debate in India about revising its long-standing NFU policy. In the neo-realist approach, the possible transformation of India from NFU to FU indicates its quest to survive and dominate in an anarchic system. While addressing concerns over Pakistan's growing nuclear arsenal, India's Chief of Army Staff, General Deepak Kapoor, advised that India reconsider its NFU strategy in light of allegations of Pakistan stockpiling more nuclear weapons (Subrahmanyam, 2011). This viewpoint was also echoed by Jaswant Singh, the former minister for external affairs, defense, and finance, who emphasized the importance of policy modifications in 1998 and 1999, citing the drastic shift in global and regional security (Tellis, 2019). Additionally, Shivshankar Menon (2018), the country's former National Security Adviser, stated several points regarding nuclear strategy that demonstrated flexibility beyond the standard NFU doctrine. According to Menon (2018, p. 110):

There is a potential gray area as to when India would use nuclear weapons first against another NWS [nuclear weapons state]. Circumstances are conceivable in which India might find it useful to strike first, for instance, against an NWS that had declared it would certainly use its weapons, and if India were

certain that the adversary's launch was imminent. But India's public nuclear doctrine is silent on this scenario.

Certain aspects of India's nuclear strategy, such as NFU against non-nuclear-weapon states, are quite conceptual and may not reflect the stance employed by fully-fledged nuclear-weapon states. Therefore, his 2016 assertion that India's nuclear policy has much broader elasticity than is given credit for suggests a preparedness to adjust to the dynamics of the security environment (Sundaram & Ramana, 2018). In the year 2012, a task force, under the chairmanship of P.R. Chari, a former civil servant from the Indian Defense Ministry, presented an alternative blueprint of Indian nuclear strategy, thus bringing to life the debate on future amendments to the current nuclear posture (Joshi, 2015). This reassessment might not only be complicated but also very confusing, causing large-scale instability and possibly grave implications. As a consequence, the Pakistani side can interpret such acts as the initiation of hostilities on the factual level, imposing a possibility of initiating a preemptive nuclear action under the cover of the FU policy of India.

The Underlying Motives of India's Nuclear Doctrine Shift

While Pakistan has long been India's primary security concern, China's nuclear program has played a significant role in shaping India's strategic outlook. China's NFU policy has prompted extensive debate and speculation about its nuclear posture. Since conducting its first nuclear test in 1964, China has consistently highlighted its commitment to the NFU policy, asserting that China would never employ nuclear weapons at any time or under any circumstances. This stance has been reaffirmed in China's defense white paper and official statements (Zhang, 2015). However, doubts remain about the true nature and flexibility of China's NFU policy, raising questions about its sincerity and posing challenges for countries like India. The NFU policy states that a nuclear-armed nation would never initiate conflict with nuclear weapons and would reserve its use solely for retaliation after a nuclear attack on its territory or military forces (Cunningham & Fravel, 2015). Critics argue that this policy lacks value because it is non-binding and subject to change. China is known to maintain its nuclear forces in a manner consistent with NFU criteria, with warheads stored separately from missiles, which reduces the likelihood of a preemptive nuclear strike. Nonetheless, China's potential policy shifts and rapid military expansion fuel ongoing speculation and discussions. These debates are intensified by ongoing conversations within China about the NFU policy.

Furthermore, the absence of explicit mention of NFU in the 2013 defense white paper has led to confusion over the policy's strictness (Blasko, 2013). For India, China's NFU policy creates significant uncertainty and raises concerns about potential policy changes, thereby affecting regional security. Both India and China officially subscribe to NFU policies, yet China's unclear stance and military modernization prompt India to reassess its nuclear strategy. India might need to bolster its nuclear deterrent and adopt a more flexible posture to address potential threats. This could include acquiring advanced missile defense systems, enhancing retaliatory capabilities, improving intelligence, surveillance, and analysis infrastructure, or even moving toward a FU policy (Hussain, 2024). Such shifts could explain India's evolving strategy toward containing China. Ultimately, the only way to maintain deterrence might be to declare the FU of nuclear weapons.

Implication for Regional Strategic Stability

Strategic stability at the regional level can be defined as a condition in which neither party is able to initiate a nuclear war. This maintains the stability through the concept of mutual assured destruction, where both countries possess nuclear weapons that, if used, will cause intolerable damage to one another, and thus the option of launching a nuclear attack is implausible.

As per the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) (2023), India owns about 164 nuclear weapons, whereas Pakistan holds approximately 170. An adjustment of Indian nuclear policy may destabilize this balance of equilibrium, escalating into an arms race. The intensifying arms race may also increase defense spending, thereby endangering the country's budget. The risks of an escalation of conventional wars to nuclear exchanges pose another significant problem. This change towards NFU could commence an arms race, forcing Pakistan to improve its nuclear arsenal and method of delivery to remain credible, thus undermining its economy and likely moving resources away from socio-economic progress.

Notably, the two countries have faced each other in four major wars and numerous minor skirmishes since gaining independence. India might adopt an FU policy that could lower the threshold for nuclear use, which may further lead to an increase in escalation during conflict in the future. Besides command-and-control problems, the nuclear infrastructure of Pakistan is also a serious issue. According to the Nuclear Threat Initiative's (NTI) (2023) nuclear security index, Pakistan scores 49/100 on nuclear materials security, indicating areas for improvement. The confusion and insecurity that stem from India's potential policy shift might intensify these issues, thus increasing the chance of unauthorized or accidental launch of nuclear weapons.

India's geopolitical and diplomatic outcome, due to a possible policy change, can be a wide spectrum. A nuclear deterrence shift of the balance of power could eventually transform not only the relationships between India and Pakistan but also China and the United States. As a result, U.S. policy toward the Indo-Pakistani arms race could be significantly reshaped. Economically, it could make the deviation of finances against development to defense notable since Pakistan is no exception to these effects. According to the World Bank (2024), Pakistan still allocates a low share of its annual gross domestic product (GDP) to health care and education. This occurs at levels of 2.3% and 0.9%. The allocated resources may be reallocated to reduce social-sector expenditure.

The Vicious Cycle of Arms Buildup and Fiscal Strain for Pakistan

This shift of India toward an FU nuclear posture instead of NFU would undoubtedly trigger a new arms race in Pakistan that would compel Pakistan to reduce the nuclear threshold and speed up the acquisition of advanced conventional and nuclear arsenals. A historical example is the Indian Cold Start-type limited-war doctrine that, although never fully operationalized, nonetheless increased the conventional-nuclear interdependence and compelled both parties into an expensive arms build-up, resulting in Pakistan acquiring a short-range ballistic missile, Al-Nasr, a Tactical nuclear weapon (TNW), that overstretched deterrence in South Asia and increased the possibility of escalation at the tactical level. The projected change in doctrine, therefore, would not only exacerbate the strategic dilemma but also divert scarce Pakistani resources from development into a constantly accelerating military-technology contest, thereby weakening long-term stability in South Asia.

On 1st February 2023, India increased its defense budget to 5935.38 billion INR (72.6 billion US\$) (Mustafa, 2023). This is the 13% increment from the year 2022-23 initial estimated defense budget of INR 5251.66 billion (Mustafa, 2023). This increase in India's defense budget, as seen through a neo-realist lens, will be interpreted as India seeking relative gains against Pakistan. This compels Pakistan to counter-build despite its less stable economy, illustrating the traditional security dilemma in which measures taken to secure one state create insecurity for another. Responding to India's increase in its nuclear aggressiveness, Pakistan ended up having to allocate more of its scarce budgetary resources to defense expenditures. In response to a question at the annual Air Force Day press conference in 2017, Air Chief Marshal BS Dhanoa stated, "As far as the Air Force is concerned, it is not only with tactical nuclear weapons, but any target across the border; we can locate, fix, and strike targets across the border" (Unnithan, 2017).

As a result, there is a high likelihood that Pakistan's capacity to allocate additional resources to socio-economic development will be severely constrained, leading to stagnation or decline in areas essential to the country's development. Consequently, Pakistan's allocation of a larger defense budget to counter India's counter-movement may strain the country's already limited financial resources, leading to cutbacks in other important development projects and fueling an arms race in Pakistan. In the years 2023-2024, a 16% increase in the Defense budget of Pakistan has been noted from Rs1,804 billion compared to the revised defense spending of Rs1,591 billion (Yousaf, 2023). Moving with the same speed, Pakistan could be subjected to the additional burden of having to increment defense budgetary allocation to achieve the desired level of credibility in deterrence with India, which has reportedly been considering a change in its nuclear posture (Mills, 2022). Such escalated military spending may create problems of financial discipline, and resources might be spent on the war front at the expense of education, health, and infrastructure.

Moreover, Pakistan has to buy advanced weaponry and delivery tools to keep pace with India, which in turn would trigger India to procure more advanced systems, resulting in a constant spiral towards arms build-up with no end. The ongoing race to develop military plus the possibility of an arms race pose a challenge to regional economic safety and stability in South Asia (Khan, 2014). Unfortunately, Pakistan's economy is in a dilemma. Currently, the country's real GDP growth, at 1.8% in FY24, is unsatisfactory (World Bank, 2024). The government is also tightening its fiscal policies, and the inflation rate is 26.0%. The underlying issue of poverty persists at 40%, compounding further with a fiscal deficit of 8% of GDP (World Bank, 2024). The arms race will, though, enhance the problems facing countries, for instance, straining budgets and obstructing efforts to revive economies. Thus, the shift of resources away from education and health to defense is an example of how the security dilemma causes not only strategic but also socio-economic implications. This arms competition does not exist in a vacuum; rather, it contributes directly to the threat of entanglement, where conventional-nuclear lines are lost in crisis circumstances.

Risk of Nuclear Entanglement

The nuclear entanglement concept implies the complicated intertwining of non-nuclear and nuclear military systems (Acton, 2019). Transitioning India's nuclear doctrine from NFU to FU will generate a profound nuclear intricacy in South Asia. Such a scenario offers a new dimension of strategic uncertainty, for it obscures the distinction between conventional warfare and nuclear conflict. It can increase the possibility of escalation

from traditional conflict to the use of nuclear weapons when added to the existing tensions and military conflict between India and Pakistan. In the national security context, entanglement has a dual meaning. First, it suggests the interconnectivity and interdependence of policy-making and subsequent consequences, finally leading to a web of micro and macro interactions. The idea of this paradox is related to the concept of quantum entanglement, where the states of two particles remain interconnected despite the distance between them (Acton, 2019). Given India and Pakistan's history of conventional conflicts and crises, the possibility of an FU policy is more probable to destabilize the relationship further. The uncertain nature of India's nuclear doctrine, with the shift towards a diverse approach, would confuse Pakistan, and it could take a reactive measure, therefore, increasing the risk of non-nuclear conflict escalating into a nuclear one. The adoption of India's Nuclear Doctrine from an NFU to FU would lead to a complicated holdup of the national security dynamics of both India and Pakistan.

Such is the FU policy conundrum that would open a new phase of dilemma and uncertainty for both Pakistan and India. Apart from ensuring strategic ambiguity, which provides flexibility and different advantages of deterrence, it also brings complexity in crisis management and decision-making at the strategic level. Given the real-time example of a BrahMos missile accidentally falling into Pakistan in 2022, which demonstrates the severe dangers of South Asian entanglement, the dangers would only increase if India officially abandons its NFU policy in favor of FU posture (Korda, 2022). India's NFU position during the accidental launch conveyed a sense of restraint, as Pakistan was more likely to perceive the incident as an accident rather than a deliberate nuclear attack. Nonetheless, concerning a doctrine of FU, any subsequent misfiring of a dual-capable system such as BrahMos would be misunderstood by Pakistan to have been an act of preemptive nuclear attack, particularly with a lack of dependable communications systems and where severe time constraints were in decision-making processes. In a state of anarchy where there is no central power to ensure security, Pakistan cannot risk thinking of benign motives when a dual-capable missile is shot on its land. With the threat of destruction, the leadership may be tempted to respond on the spot, and a conventional mishap may turn into a full-scale nuclear war. So, the doctrinal change in India not only reduces the nuclear threshold but also intensifies the misperception and miscalculation risks, where any technical error can cause disastrous results between the two states and the region at large.

Moreover, this indeterminacy might cause difficulties in the communication of intentions as well as the shaping of perceptions, which in turn could have an impact on India's strategic relations with other nuclear-armed states, including China. Therefore, under neo-realism, the doctrinal change of India increases the risks of entanglement, as any mistake can turn into a whole nuclear confrontation based on misconceptions, survival instincts, and the logic of the international system competition. This transmutation in India's position in the world would require a re-evaluation of its general strategic outlook and regional ramifications for stability. For instance, Pakistan's opinion of India's strategic assessment would likely influence its national security. The status of India's nuclear mission is uncertain, which in turn leads to the evaluation of uncertainties and challenges associated with defining India's nuclear behaviors and judgment lines. This would result in more insecurity and frustration, where Pakistan will have to readjust its inner logic of strategic thinking, as the entanglement being caused by India will demand an analysis of the regional stability implications. In addition to this, the complexity of this policy shift is significant in the

political and diplomatic arena. It can affect Washington, Beijing, Delhi, and Islamabad to strike a balance, and they might have to establish regional security architecture and crisis management mechanisms effectively. The strategic exchanges between contending countries, as well as the implications of these decisions, determine the intricacies and interconnected character of regional security.

Conclusion

This paper explored the potential transition of India to a FU nuclear posture, as opposed to an NFU, and its significant implications for the strategic stability of South Asia. India has a long history of nuclear doctrine rooted in the NFU, but with the steady increase in indicators of flexibility and pressure, there is potential for a shift in nuclear doctrine. This change, when examined in the context of neo-realism, indicates that India seeks relative gains and strategic advantage in an anarchic system; at the same time, it creates a strategic dilemma, forcing Pakistan to lower its nuclear threshold and intensify security measures. The ensuing arms race pulls limited resources of Pakistan away, into defense spending at the expense of the socio-economic development of Pakistan, further straining the finances and compromising long-term stability.

The vague stance of India, as well as the modernization of its defense, heightens the risks of nuclear entanglements in areas of overlap between conventional and nuclear. The accidental launch of the BrahMos missile highlighted how, under a potential FU doctrine, such an incident could be misinterpreted by Pakistan as a deliberate nuclear strike, thereby significantly increasing the risk of rapid escalation toward a full-scale war. This intricacy, together with ineffective communication channels and tight decision-making schedules, increases the risk of erroneous calculation. Lastly, the regional balance of power, particularly China's influence, shapes India's nuclear calculus and further complicates the security situation. India's ambitions to balance China by asserting doctrines create even greater insecurity for Pakistan, resulting in a vicious circle of competition that disrupts the already delicate balance in the region. Considered in combination, the shifting nuclear posture in India reveals the convergence of doctrinal ambiguity, arms accumulation, and strategic rivalry under neo-realism, which undermines deterrence stability, strains economies, and increases the likelihood of escalation in the South Asian crisis.

An active and well-rounded approach is needed to mitigate the complexities and challenges that may arise from a shift in India's nuclear doctrine from NFU to FU. Such strategies would comprise diplomatic, strategic, and confidence-building measures operating in concert to mitigate the risks associated with this policy. The first step could be for India to take transparency seriously in its nuclear doctrine, rather than maintaining strategic ambiguity. While the uncertain nature of ambiguity has created flexibility and impeded escalation, uncertainty may intensify tension and misunderstanding. The transparent approach is one of India's key strategies for signalling its intent, perception, and apprehension of escalation risk. However, articulating the circumstances under which India would resort to nuclear FU policy may be the first step to providing more transparency about its nuclear thresholds and redlines. Second, strengthening the institutions of CBMs should be a priority for India and Pakistan to mitigate the complexities associated with policy shifts. CBMs undoubtedly possess enormous power in reducing tensions, preventing the escalation of conflicts, and promoting mutual trust. This could comprise steps such as establishing direct communication channels between the military and political leadership of the two

countries, increasing transparency of nuclear capabilities and intentions through various means, and holding regular high-level meetings on nuclear issues.

The third step for India and Pakistan is to hold comprehensive bilateral dialogues to address outstanding issues and security concerns. These meetings provide an opportunity for both countries to discuss their issues, resolve their differences, and consider establishing joint security mechanisms. Frequent dialogues are an effective tool to fortify the ties of mutual understanding, promote openness, and contribute to the process of normalizing the relations. Lastly, the major powers such as the United States and China can play an important role in promoting stability in South Asia. This may include facilitating dialogue, supporting CBMs, and encouraging renewed engagement on nuclear risk reduction initiatives.

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