

Deciphering India's Nuclear Strategy: A Realist Perspective

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Abstract

Nuclear weapons have proved to be a source of deterrence in terms of managing national security. The international security situation has been volatile since the end of the Second World War, which created a security dilemma among nation-states, rendering the erstwhile architectures of security either obsolete or demanding periodic evaluation and evolution. China's nuclear test in 1962 created a heightened sense of insecurity in the minds of policymakers in India, coupled with the accentuating Sino-Pakistan strategic nexus. India's scientific community and political leadership in the early years realised the power of the atom. The development of atomic power was not only crucial for the development of nuclear energy but also acted as the technological feeder and launchpad for larger external security concerns. Although the Pokhran I test was categorically characterised as a 'peaceful nuclear explosion' by India, it decisively led to the initiation of the production of the bomb, which was manifested in the Pokhran II tests in 1998. The explosion of the bomb had far-reaching consequences on India's economic as well as political engagements with the rest of the world. Despite the threat of sanctions, India decided to march ahead with the test, which proved to be one of the dynamic and necessary decisions in India's foreign and security policy, leading to what is termed deterrence. Since the 1998 test, India's strategic engagements have been dependent on how India takes on the nuclear conundrum with the rest of the world, especially with arbiters of the global non-proliferation regime, navigating the maze of proverbial strategic autonomy successfully. The paper aims to explore the various facets of India's nuclear policy in terms of the realist framework of international relations. The paper analyses India's changed image in the global scenario post the test and the civil nuclear deal with the United States. Further, the paper contends that India has achieved the security objective of the dual-use program and is yet to achieve and further the energy objective as envisaged by our founding fathers. For the research, both primary and secondary sources have been referred to. Interviews, government policies, and documents form the primary sources, while newspaper articles, magazines, and books form the secondary sources for the study.

Keywords: Nuclear Strategy, National Security, Deterrence, Realism.

1. Introduction

The idea of security has assumed prominence for nation-states since the end of the Second World War. Nation-states have been concerned about the protection of their territorial integrity and sovereignty in the wake of rising threats. The states therefore have increased resource allocation over the years in terms

of defence spending and acquisition. Security has been primarily seen in two contexts: national security as well as human security. The 21st century has witnessed more focus on the issues of human security, such as environmental crisis, and so on. However, the focus on issues of national security has remained crucial for ages. The idea of national security has transformed over the years and has undergone many changes with the development of technology. (Buzan, 2009) Over the years, the nature of warfare has transformed from the first-generation warfare to the fifth-generation warfare. The development of new weapons system has made warfare more sophisticated. However, the pertinent development in the area of warfare has been the invention of the atomic bomb. The production of the nuclear bomb and nuclear weapons led to a drastic change in conflicts and warfare. It brought with it the idea of mutually assured destruction. Nation-states soon started the production of nuclear weapons to create deterrence and to safeguard themselves from external threats to their security. India too was concerned about the security architecture in South Asia, especially in the wake of two troubled neighbours. This led the Indian establishment to think about permanently safeguarding itself and averting any attacks on Indian soil. (Bandyopadhyay, 2003) The paper aims to understand Indian nuclear thinking and its developmental trajectory over the years and decipher the aspect of realist thinking.

Objectives

To understand the role of nuclear power in safeguarding India's national security.

To analyse the reasons which led India to become a nuclear state.

To scrutinise India's nuclear policy and inspect if India has achieved its strategic and security objectives by becoming a nuclear state.

Methodology and Sources

For research, both primary and secondary sources have been used. Interviews with officials and scientists associated with India's nuclear program have been conducted. Books, magazines, journals, and newspapers have been extensively referred to, along with online references.

Limitations

The study focuses on the security and strategic aspects of India's nuclear conundrum and not the technological and civilian aspects.

Tracing India's Nuclear Trajectory

National security is the ultimate security that a nation strives to achieve. History has been a testimony to the fact that every nation has tried to safeguard its territorial sovereignty and integrity despite various constraints. A nation's national security determines the extent to which that nation progresses in the long term. According to realist scholars, states have been the primary actors in international relations and have time and again defined their national interests to safeguard their sovereignty. (Schweller & Priess, 1997) The subject of national security has been looked at from various perspectives. This paper aims to evaluate the domain of security studies through a theoretical lens.

Two major theories have been prominent in the domain of international relations and security studies: realism and liberalism. The realist theorists contend that states remain the primary actors in world politics and opine that the state's primary concern is to always protect and safeguard the national interest. Realism has branched out into various forms and strands since its inception. For the purpose of the research, it is pertinent that certain aspects of realist theory have to be taken into consideration for theoretically deciphering national security. All the theories of realism point towards two major aspects, which are national interest and national power as the guiding principles on which a nation's security strategy can be evaluated. Realists think that international politics entails a continuous struggle for power. It is based on the assumption that anarchy is ever-present in the global order and that nation-states have to formulate strategies to ensure their survival. (Wendt, 1992)

The writings of Indian scholars like Kautilya as well as Western scholars like Thucydides, Morgenthau, etc., have influenced this discourse. The idea of national security formally dates back to the Treaty of Versailles, which led to the formation of nation-states, and thus the focus on national interest and national power became vital for every State. In the aftermath of the treaty, various nation-states came to be established, which led to the focus on a nation's national security and territorial sovereignty. In the wake of this, it was pertinent of the nation-states to safeguard their power and prevent any attack on their soil. The security considerations have undergone a vital change since time immemorial. Till the twentieth century, the focus of the nations was on building up military capabilities to ensure their survival. Military and defence security were seen as the basic fundamental power projection capabilities and strategies to ensure the long-term security of the state. (Cusack & Stoll, 1994)

The First and Second World Wars led to the idea of security being taken seriously in the domain of governance and policy formulations. Nation-states were soon engulfed in the acquisition of arms and ammunition, which led to the proliferation of the arms race. The end of the Second World War led to the development of the atom bomb, and its power was witnessed by the world after the attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The testing of the atom bomb by the USA was subsequently followed by the nuclear tests conducted by the USSR. Soon, states like the UK, France and China too conducted tests and declared themselves as nuclear weapons state. The world very soon came to be divided between nuclear haves and have-nots, which further proliferated insecurities.

India, soon after independence, was concerned about its security and survival in the very first place. Having witnessed the 1948 war with Pakistan and the subsequent 1962 war with China, New Delhi was very concerned about the security architecture in South Asia. India has been extremely critical of strengthening and protecting its integrity and security. The first PM of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, realised the power of the bomb immediately after independence, which is well reflected in the creation of the Atomic Energy Commission in the year 1948. Moreover, Nehru ensured that the Atomic Energy Commission reported directly to the PMO bypassing many of the bureaucratic hurdles. He entrusted his complete faith in Homi Bhabha and enshrined in him the responsibility to develop a dual-use nuclear program, both civilian and military. (Arnold, 2013) In 1948, Jawaharlal Nehru wrote to Defence Minister Sardar Baldev Singh, "The future belongs to those who produce atomic energy. That is going to be the chief national power of the future. Of course, the defence is intimately concerned with this. Even the political consequences are worthwhile." (Karnad, 2008) Adding to the concern was the fact that

China conducted the nuclear test in 1964 immediately after the 1962 Indo-China war. (Douglas & Doyle, 2014) This led to various apprehensions in the minds of the policymakers in India. The international community, led by the P-5 states, soon brought in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to restrict the proliferation and testing of the nuclear bomb. India was sceptical of signing and ratifying the NPT as India considered the treaty to be discriminatory and contemplated that it would permanently place the nuclear haves in a position of dominance. (Rajagopalan, 2008) The neo-realists, or the structural realists, talk about the anarchic nature of the world and attribute that this leads the states to undertake security as the primary goal. India, too, after the 1962 Indo-China war and the 1964 nuclear tests, experienced threats to its territorial integrity, which factored into the thinking to conduct the nuclear test and be a nuclear power. (Perkovich, George; Dalton, Toby, 2016) However, it is not only the China factor that led India to rethink its nuclear options but also the international conditions prevalent in the 1970s. One of the major events was the 1971 Indo-Pak war, which was not limited to both nations but involved the superpowers. The role of America and its support to Pakistan in the 1971 war was a huge constraint for India, which was viewed as a mounting threat to its existence. (Wariavwalla, 2009) To quote K. Subramanyam, “Perceiving a threat to an ally (Pakistan), the United States responded by moving a large naval force into the Bay of Bengal off the coast of India.” (Tellis, 2001) In the same context, President Nixon disclosed subsequently that ‘he did contemplate the use of nuclear weapons at that stage. (Subrahmanyam, 1998). Post the 1971 incident, India began to view these events in light of greater security considerations. Indira Gandhi exercised the nuclear option in 1974 by conducting the Pokhran-I test. The reasons for the testing of the atom in 1974 emanate from the structural theory of realism given by Kenneth Waltz, which propounds that the international and regional security architecture plays a critical role in chalking out the security policies of a state. The test drew widespread criticism from the international community; however, the nuclear program continued with limited objectives. (Walt, 2017) The decade of the 1980s and 1990s was characterised by the accentuating Sino-Pak axis. Chinese assistance to Pakistan through nuclear and missile technology deepened India’s fears and insecurities.

Desmond Ball, quoting the Far East Economic Review, writes the following on the Sino-Pakistani strategic collusion: In 1974 ... China reportedly assigned twelve scientists ‘to help Pakistan develop a nuclear device’; in 1977, China agreed to assist Pakistan with the construction and testing of a nuclear weapon; in 1983, China gave Pakistan a ‘complete design for a nuclear weapon and enough enriched uranium for two bombs’; in 1986, China gave Pakistan enough tritium gas, as well as enriched uranium, for ten nuclear weapons; in 1989, Pakistani scientists were allowed to observe a Chinese nuclear test; and during the 1990s China has provided Pakistan with the technology to manufacture critical technologies, including a 300-megawatt reactor, a tritium gas purification plant, and ring magnets for production of weapons-grade uranium. (Malik, 1998)

With the fear of nuclear neighbours looming large, India in the 1990s decided to review its security and defence policies. The disintegration of the Soviet Union led India to rethink its security considerations, given the fact that it now had to be independent. The extension of the NPT in the year 1995 permanently divided the world into nuclear haves and have-nots, to which India was not in favour of. (Weiss, 2010) These changed security considerations in the subcontinent are believed to be the reasons for India to conduct Pokhran-II.

It was in the 1980s that strategists like K. Subrahmanyam and General K. Sundarji highlighted the importance of nuclear weapons. Immediately after India conducted the nuclear test in 1974, Pakistan established the Karachi Nuclear Power Plant, a gas centrifuge uranium enrichment plant at Kahuta. The Zia administration encouraged the Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission (PAEC) and the Khan Research Laboratories (KRL) to continue developing the nuclear arsenal. As part of the new nuclear cooperation agreement in 1986, China provided Pakistan with the first nuclear reactor, which was established at Chashma. (Khalid & Bano, 2015) The relations between India and Pakistan started deteriorating in the 1990s, with Kashmir becoming the new flashpoint in the region. As per the Nuclear Watch Report that was given by McGraw Hill Companies Inc., Pakistan possessed 100 to 200 kilograms of Highly Enriched Uranium (HEU) in 1998 and could possess as few as five bombs or as many as twenty-five. (Kapur, 2001) It is then that, under the leadership of Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee, India conducted Pokhran-II in 1998, code-named Operation Shakti.

India conducted five nuclear tests of advanced weapon designs on 11 and 13 May 1998 at the Pokhran range in the Rajasthan Desert. The first three detonations took place simultaneously on 11 May. These included a thermonuclear device, a fission device, and a sub-kiloton device. The other two nuclear devices were detonated simultaneously on 13 May 1998. (Albright, 1998) After having attained the status of a nuclear state, the need for formulating India's nuclear doctrine to have a coherent policy regarding the usage of nuclear weapons became predominant, mainly to establish India as a responsible nuclear power.

It was on the 4th of January 2003 that the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) met and shared India's Nuclear Doctrine. The doctrine enlists the following provisions:

- i. To build and maintain a credible minimum deterrent
- ii. "No First Use": nuclear weapons will be used only in retaliation against a nuclear attack on Indian territory or Indian forces anywhere;
- iii. Nuclear retaliation to a first strike will be massive and designed to inflict unacceptable damage.
- iv. Nuclear retaliatory attacks can only be authorised by the civilian political leadership through the Nuclear Command Authority.
- v. Non-use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapon states;
- vi. However, in the event of a major attack against India, or Indian forces anywhere, by biological or chemical weapons, India will retain the option of retaliating with nuclear weapons;
- vii. A continuance of strict controls on the export of nuclear and missile-related materials and technologies, participation in the Fissile Material Cutoff Treaty negotiations, and continued observance of the moratorium on nuclear tests.
- viii. Continued commitment to the goal of a nuclear-weapon-free world, through global, verifiable, and non-discriminatory nuclear disarmament. (Ministry of External Affairs, 1999)

One of the major areas of contention among academicians and policymakers has been India's commitment to No First Use of Nuclear Weapons (NFU). The NFU doctrine was advocated by General Sundarji K. Subramanyam as well as Raja Ramanna, the nuclear physicist. Raja Ramanna viewed the development of the bomb and India going nuclear as an enabler, facilitator, and equaliser. Ramanna thought that nuclear weapons would serve the purpose of creating an equilibrium in the security

architecture. (Perkovich, George; Dalton, Toby, 2016) The views of Sundarji, Raja Ramanna, and K Subramanyam were acceptable to the political leadership during the 1990s, especially since Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee has always been a long-time advocate of nuclear weapons to maintain peace and stability in South Asia. According to Ashley Tellis, the views presented by both General K Sundarji and K Subramanyam emphasised the political rather than the military and warfighting capabilities that would be generated due to the nuclear arsenal.

A paramount objective of India's nuclear doctrine is the provision that in case of an attack on India, India would engage in 'massive retaliation' and not 'punitive retaliation'. The change in terminology from punitive to massive is noteworthy. This change in terminology indicates that in the event of any major attack, be it even a chemical or biological attack would entail a strong and massive retaliation from India and not just a punitive retaliation. Through this, India gave itself the right to strike back. (Bernard, 1978) It is to be noted that India retains the option of using nuclear weapons even in case of a chemical or biological attack and not necessarily a nuclear attack.

The 2003 nuclear doctrine is more realistic and pragmatic. In my understanding, the incorporation of these terms and the modifications are extremely crucial to safeguard not only India's territorial sovereignty. India's nuclear policy is based on the premise that nuclear weapons will act as a deterrent against threats and blackmail, and will prevent any future nuclear threat. The doctrine entails that in case of a threat or nuclear attack against India, India would retaliate and resort to a nuclear weapons attack on the adversary. (Rajagopalan, 2008) (Abhyankar, 2018) This position of India is described as a policy of Credible Minimum Deterrence. This reinforces the doctrine of Assured Retaliation which, when combined with the no-first-use policy, demonstrates India's ability to engage in retaliatory strikes.

Thus, India's nuclear posture is determined not by the number of nuclear weapons that India possesses or its adversaries do, but by the ability of India to inflict damage and strike back in case of a threat or attack. Instead of stockpiling weapons, India's strategy was not to stockpile numerous nuclear weapons, as these weapons can seldom be militarily useful. Furthermore, India's achievements are exemplary in the building up of a nuclear triad – land, air, and sea, which has proved to be a deterrent against both Pakistan and China. The Pokhran II test, however, attracted huge international criticism from across the world. Indian diplomats, Ambassadors, and the scientific community played a crucial role in diplomatically dealing with every other country and convincing them about India being a responsible nuclear power. (Abhyankar, 2018) The test was followed by heavy economic sanctions imposed against India; however, the negotiations between the USA and India resumed soon due to the efforts of Strobe Talbott and Jaswant Singh, who very soon described the India-US relationship as that which has transcended from Estrangement to Engagement. (Pant, 2008)

This facilitated the Civil Nuclear Deal with the United States, granting India many concessions as far as trade in nuclear technology is concerned. The signing of the 2008 Civil nuclear deal proved to be very beneficial for India as it ended the economic sanctions imposed on India as well as gave India the necessary means to carry out trade with the rest of the world. (Mohan & Agarwal, 2019) Moreover, it is pertinent to understand that the dual-use nuclear program of India had two important objectives: to

ensure that India becomes a nuclear state as well as to attain the ability to produce nuclear energy for peaceful purposes.

In conclusion, it would be right to assert that India was able to fulfil the strategic objective of developing nuclear weapons, i.e. to safeguard itself from external crisis. It is now essential to understand that the nuclear capabilities have to be utilised to fulfil the energy objective as well. The amount of electricity generated by nuclear means in India constitutes less than 2% of the total electricity generation. (NITI Aayog, 2017) It is imperative to remember that Nehru had envisaged that the dual-use program would not only safeguard the country from external attacks but would also ensure that India becomes self-dependent in terms of energy production. However, the reality is that India needs to invest much more in terms of energy generation with the help of nuclear energy.

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