



DAILY EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

TOPIC

**INDIA'S NUCLEAR DOCTRINE:
REVIEW WITHOUT UNNECESSARY
REVISION**

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INDIA'S NUCLEAR DOCTRINE: REVIEW WITHOUT UNNECESSARY REVISION

Context

- India's nuclear doctrine is again under discussion as China expands its nuclear capabilities, Pakistan develops tactical nuclear options, and new technologies alter the stability of nuclear deterrence.

About India's Nuclear Doctrine

- India's nuclear doctrine emerged from the strategic circumstances of the late 1990s.
- The **Pokhran-II tests of May 1998**, followed by the **Kargil conflict of 1999**, demonstrated that nuclear weapons could deter large-scale escalation without necessarily preventing conventional conflict.
- The **Draft Nuclear Doctrine of 1999** provided the broad framework, and **its key elements** were subsequently given an official operational framework through the **Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) in 2003**.
- The framework primarily focuses on **credible minimum deterrence (CMD), No First Use (NFU), survivable nuclear forces and civilian control**.
- Its purpose is to maintain sufficient capability to deter a nuclear attack while avoiding an open-ended arms race.

Key Features of the Doctrine

- Credible Minimum Deterrence:** India does not seek numerical parity with other nuclear powers.
 - The objective is to maintain a **credible minimum capability** sufficient to deter nuclear coercion and ensure retaliation.
- No First Use:** India has declared that it will **not be the first to use nuclear weapons**.
 - However, the **CCS statement (2003)** included that India reserved the **option of nuclear retaliation** against a **major biological or chemical attack** on India or Indian forces.
- Massive Retaliation:** The 2003 formulation stated that a nuclear attack against India or its forces would invite **massive retaliation designed to inflict unacceptable damage**.
 - It was intended **to reinforce deterrence** by creating uncertainty about the consequences of crossing the nuclear threshold.
- Survivable Second Strike:** NFU is meaningful only when India can survive an initial attack and retain the ability to retaliate.
 - Hence, survivability and the development of a **nuclear triad** are central to the credibility of the doctrine.
- Civilian Control:** India's nuclear weapons remain under **civilian political authority**, reflecting the country's emphasis on responsible nuclear stewardship.

Why Does India Need to Review Its Doctrine?

- Changing China-Pakistan Dynamics:** The strategic environment of the early 2000s has changed significantly.
 - SIPRI's 2026 assessment places China's nuclear inventory at over 600 warheads**, reflecting the rapid expansion of its arsenal.
 - Pakistan has developed a more diverse nuclear posture, including **short-range systems associated with its tactical nuclear capability**.
 - These developments create a more complicated deterrence environment for India, particularly because a crisis involving Pakistan could have wider implications for India's relationship with China.
- Disruptive Technologies:** Technological change is another major challenge. **Artificial intelligence, cyber capabilities, space-based surveillance, hypersonic weapons and ballistic-missile defence** can affect nuclear stability in several ways.

- ♦ They may shorten decision-making timelines, threaten command-and-control networks and create uncertainty about the survivability of nuclear forces.
- ♦ Therefore, the **credibility of deterrence** depends on the resilience of the systems supporting them along with on the number of weapons.
- **More Multipolar Strategic Environment:** Nuclear competition is also no longer purely bilateral.
 - ♦ **US-China strategic rivalry, closer China-Russia coordination and India's expanding partnerships in the Indo-Pacific** have added new layers to the regional security environment.
 - ♦ Consequently, **India's nuclear policy** needs to account for a wider strategic setting while continuing to focus on its immediate security challenges.

Reviewing and Strengthening Implementation

- A review of the doctrine does **not necessarily mean abandoning NFU or credible minimum deterrence**.
- The **first priority** should be to examine whether India's existing declarations remain adequately supported by operational capabilities. It requires assessment of:
 - ♦ command, control and communications;
 - ♦ early-warning and intelligence systems;
 - ♦ cyber and space resilience;
 - ♦ survivability of nuclear assets;
 - ♦ second-strike capability; and
 - ♦ the credibility of the nuclear triad.
- The concept of **massive retaliation** deserves careful examination in the context of Pakistan's tactical nuclear capabilities.
 - ♦ The objective should be greater clarity about deterrence without unnecessarily creating ambiguity in India's overall nuclear posture.

Building Capability Behind the Doctrine

- Recent assessments of India's arsenal indicate that the country continues to maintain and modernise its nuclear capability.
 - ♦ **SIPRI's 2026 estimates put India's total nuclear inventory at roughly 190 warheads**, up from the estimate used in the previous year's assessment.
- Such figures should not be interpreted as evidence that India has abandoned credible minimum deterrence.
 - ♦ Warhead numbers are only one component of deterrence; **survivability, delivery systems, readiness, command-and-control and assured retaliation** are equally important.
- India therefore needs to strengthen secure communications, intelligence and surveillance, survivable delivery systems and sea-based deterrence.
 - ♦ The continued development of the **nuclear triad**, particularly a credible sea-based second-strike capability, supports the basic logic of NFU.
- At the same time, capability development should remain consistent with **credible minimum deterrence**, rather than becoming an open-ended arms competition.

Way Forward: Review Without Unnecessary Revision

- India's nuclear doctrine has provided considerable **continuity and predictability** for more than two decades.
 - ♦ Its commitment to restraint has also been an important part of India's image as a responsible nuclear-weapon state.

- However, strategic doctrines cannot be treated as permanently frozen. India should therefore undertake a **periodic review of its nuclear doctrine**, particularly in light of technological changes, the China-Pakistan strategic relationship and the growing importance of cyber and space domains.
- The objective should be **reviewed without unnecessary revision**. India **can reaffirm the logic of NFU and credible minimum deterrence** while **strengthening the capabilities** that make these commitments credible.

Conclusion

- The central challenge before India is not whether to choose between continuity and change. It is to ensure that an established doctrine remains credible in a changing strategic environment.
- A review of the doctrine should therefore strengthen its capabilities, clarify its assumptions and preserve its essential commitment to deterrence, restraint and civilian control.

Daily Mains Practice Question

[Q] **Examine whether India needs a fundamental revision of its nuclear doctrine or merely a periodic review and strengthening of its implementation.**

Source: TH

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