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## ***Is India's Minimum Deterrence Strategy Losing Its Moorings?***

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The Himalayas are the site for an on-going confrontation that has spurred India's nuclear expansion. Photo by Yogendra Singh on Unsplash.

### **SYNOPSIS**

*The growing expansion of India's nuclear arsenal, critics believe, has destabilising effects. A review of changes in India's nuclear-strategic doctrine and posture shows most minimalist features remain in place and stability is sustained, though resource wastage is still a problem.*

## COMMENTARY

India's prolonged border tension with China has propelled it to accelerate the development of its nuclear capabilities. In the past few months, a number of additions to its arsenal have been announced. In October 2021, the Agni V missile, with a range of 5,000 plus km, was tested successfully. In November, a new nuclear-armed submarine known as the S4, which is designed to carry a 3,500-km-range missile, was launched (though not yet formally commissioned). The following month, the Agni-P (for Prime) ballistic missile with a range of 1,000–2000 km was tested. Does India's nuclear expansion invite increased tension and the greater possibility of conflict, with security implications not only for itself and its immediate adversaries, but for the surrounding region and beyond?

### Confrontation and Risk

India has been embroiled in a number of crises with Pakistan (1999, 2001–02, 2016, 2019) and China (2017, 2020 and on-going) since it declared itself a nuclear power in 1998, but none of them has involved direct nuclear threats or active deployment of nuclear weapons, so these confrontations have exhibited a modicum of strategic stability. There has been nothing like the nuclear alerts and high risk levels of Cold War–era crises, when the possibility of a nuclear conflict was very real in face-offs involving the United States and the Soviet Union (Berlin, 1961; Cuba, 1962) and the Soviet Union and China (1969).

Nevertheless, experts have expressed [concern](#), not without reason, about India's apparent drift away from its initial minimalist approach to nuclear deterrence—a so-called nuclear minimalism, which rests on the principle that, to deter, it is enough to pose even a small risk of “unacceptable damage” by means of nuclear retaliation. Currently, India is adopting technologies that purportedly strengthen deterrence and engender stability, but may actually enhance risk. Two specific technologies being pursued by Indian weapons developers seem to point in that direction.

First, India's missile systems are undergoing a shift from liquid-fuelled to solid-fuelled cannisterised systems. This means that it is now possible to deploy missiles in a higher state of readiness since nuclear warheads can be kept “mated” to delivery systems. From this standpoint, the transition from peacetime to crisis/war-time deployment is faster (liquid-fuelled missiles take time to be fully prepared for launch). This in turn incentivises India's adversaries to strive for a higher state of readiness, and therefore ratchets up tensions, especially during a crisis.

Second, India is pursuing a technology that permits a single missile to carry multiple warheads, with the possible capability of independently attacking several targets. Multiple independently retargetable vehicle (MIRV) technology is already in China's possession and is being pursued by Pakistan. This again augurs higher regional tensions, arms racing and a quest for ever more sophisticated capabilities.

It is not at all clear that India's declared doctrine of “minimum credible deterrence” requires an ever-widening array of capabilities that shows signs of mimicking the major nuclear powers, albeit on a smaller scale, the maximalist approach espoused by the

United States and the Soviet Union/Russia, which requires certainty of retaliation aiming for large-scale destruction. India's doctrine and posture—like those of China and Pakistan—are clearly undergoing creeping expansion towards becoming like those of the big two, a perhaps unsurprising shift given the emphasis placed by all three Asian powers on “credibility” and “assured” retaliation, terms borrowed from the maximalist approach.

### **Assessing the Extent of the Shift**

Has India's commitment to nuclear minimalism loosened irrevocably? In terms of its original meaning, this is only partly true. The extent of the shift may be gauged by a systematic assessment of what minimum deterrence meant back in the early days after the 1998 tests and what its features are today.

**1. No testing.** Immediately after the tests, the Indian government committed itself to abjuring further nuclear testing. Though political leaders, military officials and scientists have occasionally questioned this commitment, there is no sign of a significant interest in renewed testing, which would be politically costly.

**2. No First Use (NFU).** The commitment never to strike first is the centrepiece of Indian strategy, though a minor shift did occur in 2003, when the government made it known that India held the right to respond with nuclear weapons to chemical and biological attacks. Periodic comments about the efficacy of NFU have certainly been made, but the official position remains unchanged.

**3. Politics in Command.** From the beginning, Indian decision makers have been unanimous in the understanding that the nuclear command and control system will remain under political control. Given that the armed forces have shown no sign of challenging political authority over the 75 years since independence, there is no reason to expect a change. The argument that delegation of command to the military may be necessitated by the deployment of nuclear weapons at sea is incorrect. All components of the arsenal are subject to electronic controls.

**4. Rejection of Nuclear Warfighting and Tactical Weapons.** Officially, India is committed to countervalue (in this context, counter-city) targeting and to eschewing the notion of counterforce targeting, which envisages striking adversary forces with tactical weapons and is more conducive to early crossing of the nuclear threshold. There is some space for change as India does possess short-range ballistic missiles (the Prithvi) and potential dual-use missiles currently classified as conventional, such as the BrahMos and the Pralay. However, despite stray expressions of interest in “tailored deterrence” and “flexible response”, there is no sign of a doctrinal shift, and “massive retaliation” remains central to India's deterrence doctrine.

**5. Disaggregated Weapons.** As noted above, India is shifting from a standard posture of non-deployed or unassembled weapons towards cannisterised systems, which facilitate greater readiness in the event of a crisis. The shift does appear to contract the time frame for decision-making and therefore to raise the risk of crossing the nuclear threshold more quickly. However, cannisterised systems are inherently more stable than liquid-fuelled systems, while decisions to launch are still under the technical control of the political leadership .

**6. Arms Racing.** This is one area of significant change. Elaborating on Indian nuclear doctrine in 1999, India's then Minister of External Affairs, Jaswant Singh, was clear that India did not need sophisticated capabilities or even sea-based weapons in order to attain adequate deterrence capability. India has moved well away from this position, expanding its arsenal by developing a triad of weapons systems and a wide range of missiles and capabilities — some of them listed above — designed for varying ranges and functions.

## **Implications**

India's deterrence doctrine and posture have not changed much. Of the six features of minimalist deterrence enumerated above, the first four remain unchanged. The fifth, on non-deployment, appears to have been dislodged by cannisterisation, which is said potentially to increase tensions, but the shift actually enhances stability. Only the sixth — expansion of the arsenal — is questionable. It is not at all clear that deterrence is enhanced by the agglomeration of capabilities.

Historically, most crises (barring India-Pakistan ones) have been face-offs between powers with apparently unbalanced capabilities, for instance, the United States versus the Soviet Union in 1961 and 1962, the Soviet Union versus China in 1969, and India versus China in 2017 and 2020–22. In every case, the state with a supposed quantitative and qualitative advantage has not prevailed. Arms build-ups do not produce favourable outcomes. The real cost of India's nuclear expansion is resource wastage: its limited resources could be better employed elsewhere.

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