



# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

## EVOLUTION OF INDIA'S NUCLEAR POLICY: A PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS

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### Abstract

This paper explores the complex terrain of India's nuclear decision-making, drawing from an extensive body of literature that emphasizes the ad hoc nature of India's nuclear choices. The nation's nuclear program, evolving gradually, initially aimed at economic development, playing a crucial role in India's technological advancement. The perceived threats from nuclear-armed China and Pakistan's covert activities significantly influenced India's nuclear trajectory. In the late 1990s, India chose to keep its nuclear option open, refraining from signing the NPT and CTBT due to perceived discrimination. The turning point came in 1998 when India conducted nuclear tests, marking a departure from its earlier developmental focus and signalling a strategic evolution shaped by a hostile security environment and the pursuit of a distinct nuclear identity. This transformation positioned India as a global player, shifting from a regional actor and challenging its traditional role as a non-proliferation target. Diplomatically, India's acknowledgment as a nuclear-armed state in the Indo-US nuclear deal of 2008 underscored its responsible nuclear posture, a stark contrast to nations like Pakistan, Iran, and North Korea labelled as 'rogue states.' India's strategic restraint and commitment to non-proliferation norms contribute to its unique standing as a responsible nuclear power in the global context.

Key words: India, Foreign Policy, Nuclear Policy, Diplomacy, China, Pakistan.

### Introduction

In recent years, a substantial body of literature, comprising both extensive books and rigorous scholarly essays, has surfaced with the primary aim of unravelling the intricacies surrounding India's nuclear decision-making process. A prevailing consensus within these academic contributions underscores a foundational premise: India's decisions in the nuclear realm have predominantly exhibited an ad hoc nature, shaped by a complex interplay of domestic and security factors.

The evolution of India's nuclear program has been a gradual process, rooted in the nation's self-perception and its understanding of the global order. Initially conceived as a means of fostering economic development, the Indian nuclear program assumed a pivotal role in the technological advancement and modernization of the country. However, the perceived threat from nuclear-armed China and Pakistan's covert nuclear activities emerged as decisive factors influencing India's nuclear trajectory. In the late 1990s, India opted for a policy of maintaining its nuclear option open, a stance reinforced by its refusal to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) on grounds of perceived discrimination.

The pivotal moment in India's nuclear narrative occurred in 1998 when the country conducted nuclear tests, proclaiming itself a nuclear weapon state. This marked a significant departure from its earlier stance of pursuing nuclear weapons for developmental purposes only, representing a logical culmination of a decade-long strategic evolution. This evolution was shaped by an increasingly hostile security environment, perceived biases in the nuclear regime, and India's pursuit of a distinct nuclear identity.

India, viewing itself as destined to be a major player in international politics, underwent a transformative shift from a non-nuclear weapon state to one with advanced nuclear capabilities. This transformation redefined India's identity from a regional actor to a global player. While India was traditionally viewed as a target of non-proliferation efforts, the acknowledgment of its nuclear-armed status by the United States through nuclear cooperation agreements, such as the Indo-US nuclear deal in 2008, signified a significant diplomatic achievement. This agreement was the culmination of years of strategic diplomacy aimed at establishing India as a responsible possessor of nuclear weapons.

India's strategic approach, characterized by restraint and adherence to non-proliferation norms, stands in contrast to other nations with similar nuclear ambitions, such as Pakistan, Iran, and North Korea, which have been labelled as 'rogue states.' India's unique status as a responsible nuclear power reflects a nuanced and carefully crafted approach that sets it apart in the global nuclear landscape.

## Review of Literature

The literature pertaining to India's Nuclear Policy can be broadly classified into two categories: (a) Evolution of India's Nuclear Politics and Policy, and (b) Applicability of the constructivist approach to India's nuclear policy.

The works relevant to the evolution of Nuclear Policy in India include Abraham Itty's "The Making of The Indian Atomic Bomb" (1998), Bharat Karnad's "India's Nuclear Policy" (2008), George Perkovich's "India's Nuclear Bomb: The Impact on Global Proliferation" (1999), Jaswant Singh's "A Call to Honour: In Service of Emergent India" (2006), Jain, J.P.'s "Nuclear India" (1974), Mohammed B. Alam's "India's Nuclear Policy" (1988), Raja Mohan's "Crossing the Rubicon" (2005), S.N. Yadav's "India's Nuclear Policy: Compulsions, Commitments and Constraints" (2009), Raj Chengappa's "Weapons of Peace" (2000), Scott Sagan's "Inside Nuclear South Asia," Shyam Bhatia's "India's Nuclear Bomb" (1979), Strobe Talbott's "Engaging India: Diplomacy, Democracy and the Bomb" (2007), Sumit Ganguly, and S. Paul Kapur's "Nuclear Proliferation in South Asia: Crisis Behaviour and the Bomb" (2009), T.T. Poulouse's "Perspectives of India's Nuclear Policy," among others. These works collectively offer readers a postmodern and discursive approach to India's nuclear program, delving into the gradual development of nuclear weapons and the evolutionary history of India's nuclear policy.

The second category focuses on the review of the Indian nuclear doctrine and strategy, attracting attention from both Indian and international scholars. Notable contributions in this realm include Alam B. Mohammad's "India's Nuclear Doctrine: Context and Constraints" (2002), Dilip Lahari's "Formalizing Restraint: The Case of South Asia" (1999), Gurmeet Kanwal's "Safety and Security of India's Nuclear Weapons" (2001), Jyotirmoy Banerjee's "Bomb and Strategy: The Nuclear Dilemmas in South Asia" (2000), K. Subrahmanyam's "Vajpayee Propounds Nuclear Doctrine" (1998), Kelsey De Venport's "India Moves

Closer to Nuclear Traid" (2012), Lawrence Freedman's "Deterrence" (2004), M. Hans Kristensen & R. Morris's "India's Nuclear Force" (2015), P.M Kamath's "Indian Nuclear Strategy: A Perspective for 2020" (1999), Sanjay B. Maharaj's "India's Nuclear Arsenal" (2002), Uday Bhaskar's "India's Nuclear Posture at the Turn of the Century" (1999), and V.N Khanna's "India's Nuclear Doctrine." These works extensively address key issues related to the Indian nuclear doctrine and strategic options, focusing on aspects such as 'No-First-Use' in the Indian context, the credibility of deterrence, survivability concerns after the first strike, infrastructure limitations, and safety and security apprehensions surrounding nuclear assets.

Despite the abundance of literature on India's nuclear policy, a significant observation emerges: the majority of these works do not delve into how India has constructed its nuclear identity. Consequently, there is a crucial need to redirect scholarly attention towards understanding India's nuclear policy from the perspective of its constructed nuclear identity.

## Objectives of Study

This study aims to achieve the following objectives:

- 1) Analyse the discourses surrounding India's nuclear development.
- 2) Examine security perceptions concerning China and Pakistan as influential factors in shaping India's nuclear decision-making.
- 3) Provide a historical contextualization of India's nuclear trajectory, emphasizing the transformative evolution of India's nuclear identity and its impact on the global nuclear landscape.
- 4) Investigate the factors contributing to India's recognition as a nuclear weapon power and explore its integration within the global nuclear order.

## Research Questions

In light of the literature review revealing a distinct research gap regarding India's nuclear discourse analysed this study is designed to address the following research questions in alignment with its objectives:

1. What are the principal factors that have influenced the discourse surrounding India's nuclear policy from 1947 to 1998?
2. To what extent do security considerations impact India's nuclear development? How has the perception of threats from China and Pakistan influenced India's nuclear policy?
3. In what ways has India's nuclear behaviour contributed to the construction of its identity as a nuclear power?
4. What factors have led the international community to view India as a unique case, refraining from categorizing it as a target of non-proliferation? How has this perception facilitated India's integration into the nuclear world order?

## Research Method

This study adopts an analytical, exploratory, and qualitative approach to examine the evolution of India's nuclear policy. A combination of primary and secondary sources is employed to ensure a comprehensive analysis. Primary sources encompass a range of materials, such as Annual Reports from the Ministry of Defence and External Affairs, Annual reports of the Department of Atomic Energy, IAEA Annual Reports, UN Reports, National Security Council Reports, working papers, research reports, White Papers, official government announcements, Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha Debates, declarations, speeches, Foreign Affairs Record, Congressional Research Services (CRS) Records, and reports from think tanks such as Rand Corporation, Carnegie International Peace Endowment, and IDSA. Additionally, US declassified nuclear documents available on relevant websites contribute significantly to the study.

Secondary sources, including selected books, articles, internet resources, yearbooks, and newspaper clippings, are also utilized to supplement and enhance the depth of the research. This combination of diverse sources ensures a robust and thorough examination of the evolution of India's nuclear policy.

## India's Nuclear Policy: A Historical Overview

Since gaining independence, India's foreign policy has been guided by the dual objectives of promoting global peace and safeguarding national interests. The evolution of India's nuclear policy has been intricately woven into the fabric of the international environment. Placed amidst a world divided into power blocs during the era of decolonization and the rise of national states in the third world, India formulated its nuclear policy to address fundamental national challenges.

India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, perceived nuclear power as vital for a nascent, economically and industrially weak India. Driven by an eagerness to harness the benefits of nuclear science and technology, the Atomic Energy Research Board convened within twelve days of India gaining independence.

The historical trajectory of India's nuclear journey can be delineated into four distinctive phases.

- ❖ Phase I, spanning from the establishment of the Atomic Energy Commission in 1948 to 1964, coincided with Nehru's leadership until China conducted its first nuclear test.
- ❖ Phase II, from 1964 to 1974, witnessed India conducting the Peaceful Nuclear Explosive (PNE) tests, marking the gradual acquisition of materials, know-how, and requisite technology by the nuclear establishment.
- ❖ Phase III, spanning 1974 to 1995, was characterized by a hiatus in nuclear tests amid multiple changes in government.
- ❖ Phase IV, from 1995 to 1998, culminated in India's decision to conduct nuclear tests in 1998.

India's nuclear program evolved incrementally, shaped by its self-perception and the global order. Initially conceived as a tool for economic development, nuclear science played a pivotal role in India's technological advancement and modernization. India pursued a policy of keeping its nuclear option open by abstaining from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT). The decision to conduct nuclear tests in 1998 marked a significant historical transition, driven not solely by domestic political considerations but as a logical culmination of a decade-long strategic evolution. This evolution was influenced by a complex and hostile security environment, geopolitical shifts, and India's pursuit of status and identity.

The remarkable restraint demonstrated by India in the two and a half decades between its first nuclear explosion in 1974 and the second in 1998 serves as an exceptional example. This period of nuclear restraint, coupled with India's peaceful image, played a crucial role in shaping a positive perception of its nuclear history. The Indo-US civil nuclear deal further underscored India's transformation from a nuclear outlier to a responsible nuclear partner, demonstrating India's adept use of its historical trajectory in navigating its nuclear journey.

## India's Nuclear Doctrine

Following India's demonstration of its nuclear capabilities in May 1998, the National Security Advisory Board (NSAB) swiftly presented the Draft Nuclear Doctrine (DND) to Prime Minister Vajpayee and the cabinet on August 17, 1999. Subsequently, National Security Advisor Brajesh Mishra released the draft for public debate, constituting a significant step towards elucidating India's nuclear stance, although it had not yet received parliamentary approval. Notably, the Draft Nuclear Doctrine of India stands out as a consensus document, crafted even before the establishment of an operational Indian nuclear force. The Indian government adopted a pragmatic approach, selecting the nuclear strategy outlined in the draft doctrine before planning the development of capabilities mentioned in the document. This strategic approach emphasizes that the choice of strategy should precede technological development, a departure from the common practice where nuclear weapon states often developed their capabilities in secrecy before articulating their nuclear doctrines.

In contrast to the clandestine approaches of other nuclear weapon states, India's draft nuclear doctrine has been subject to diverse responses within the country, the region, and globally. Despite certain interpretative challenges, a closer examination reveals that the doctrine represents a novel perspective on nuclear weapons, advocating for their devaluation, delegitimization, and eventual elimination. India is unique as the first and only nuclear-armed state to make its doctrine publicly available for debate. Unlike other nuclear states, including France, which has engaged in public discussions on the peaceful use of nuclear energy but not on its nuclear weapons, India's "nuclear option" underwent extensive public discourse from 1964 to 1998, marking an unparalleled commitment to transparency and public engagement on this crucial subject.

### **Salient Features of India's Nuclear Doctrine**

The key features of India's nuclear doctrine encompass the commitment to building and maintaining a "credible minimum deterrent." This underscores the policy of "No First Use" (NFU), signifying that nuclear weapons will only be employed in retaliation against a nuclear attack on Indian territory or forces anywhere. In the event of a first strike by an adversary, India's nuclear retaliation is stipulated to be "massive" and designed to inflict "unacceptable damage." The authorization for nuclear retaliatory attacks is vested exclusively in the "civilian political leadership" through the Nuclear Command Authority.

The doctrine explicitly declares the "non-use" of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapon states. Furthermore, India retains the option of "retaliating with nuclear weapons" in response to a major attack involving "biological or chemical weapons." The commitment to a "continuance of strict controls" on the export of nuclear and missile-related materials, participation in Fissile Material Cutoff Treaty negotiations, and a continued moratorium on nuclear tests are integral components of the doctrine.

The overarching rationale behind India's nuclear weapon capability is to resist nuclear coercion or blackmail, emphasizing its utility solely for self-defence. Accordingly, India's nuclear doctrine underscores the political role of deterrence, attributing to the NFU posture. It asserts that nuclear weapons serve as political instruments, not for war-fighting, but solely to deter adversaries, reflecting the essence of Indian strategic culture.

India's nuclear policies are not exclusive to any specific country but are shaped by the strategic culture of the nation. The NFU policy signals India's intent to maintain strategic stability in the region and encourages nuclear-armed neighbours to exercise restraint. However, in the event of an adversary using nuclear weapons against India, the doctrine provides for "massive retaliation to inflict unacceptable damage." Thus, India's nuclear doctrine seeks to establish a credible nuclear deterrence contingent upon the survivability of its arsenal to "inflict unacceptable damage."

The operational nuclear strategy derived from India's nuclear doctrine prioritizes the least-risk option in situations involving the presence of nuclear weapons. India's nuclear deterrence relies on a small nuclear stockpile not on hair-trigger alert, minimizing the risk of accidental use or miscalculation. The commitment to NFU and punitive retaliation aims to limit the odds of nuclear use, assuming a shared core value of the survival of the nation by both parties. This assumption relies on the rationality of states not willing to risk their extinction or endure catastrophic destruction, making a cost-benefit analysis of behaviour. However, if these preconditions are absent, especially with non-state actors, classical deterrence may not hold. Nevertheless, as long as national leadership remains unwilling to jeopardize the survival of the state, nuclear deterrence remains applicable.

### **India's Security Perceptions Regarding Nuclear China and Pakistan**

The assessment of threat perception plays a pivotal role in shaping the security dynamics of any state, particularly one surrounded by nuclear-armed neighbours. India, having engaged in conventional conflicts with its nuclear-armed neighbours, China and Pakistan, emphasizes the importance of understanding the security landscape. Facing overt nuclear capabilities from China and covert capabilities from Pakistan, both with shared interests in deterring India, India's security considerations are intricately tied to this geopolitical

reality. The 1998 nuclear tests conducted by India, resulting in its self-declaration as a nuclear weapon state, were motivated in part by the perceived threats from China, accentuated by alleged Sino-Pakistan strategic nuclear and missile collaborations.

Prime Minister Vajpayee's letter to President Bill Clinton following the nuclear tests explicitly cited the complexities of the deteriorating security environment, particularly the nuclear landscape faced by India. Vajpayee highlighted the compulsions arising from these circumstances, leading to the overt declaration of India's nuclear capabilities. Additionally, Defense Minister George Fernandes publicly identified China as India's "number one threat" and acknowledged it as a motivating factor behind India's pursuit of nuclear weapons. However, China has not acknowledged India as a nuclear state.

India's security concerns extend to Pakistan, with perceived threats emanating from various sources. Beyond the ongoing signs of Pakistan's expanding nuclear capabilities, India faced immediate concerns over alleged support by Pakistani intelligence agencies for the Sikh separatist Khalistan movement in Punjab. Tensions were further heightened by rumours of the United States providing nuclear support to Pakistan, akin to the atomic umbrella provided to NATO member countries. U.S Ambassador to Pakistan Dean Hinton's statement in October 1984 that the United States would be "responsive" if India attacked Pakistan intensified India's apprehensions. Indira Gandhi's address to Indian Army commanders in the same month underscored the qualitative change in India's security environment due to Pakistan's nuclear program and the continued U.S military support to Pakistan.

India's apprehensions deepened with reports of Western German court convicting a businessman for smuggling a uranium hexafluoride manufacturing plant to Pakistan and American ABC television network reporting Pakistan's successful "cold" implosion test. Despite overt nuclearization by both countries, India's threat perception persisted, fuelled by Pakistani-backed insurgency and terrorist attacks. Defense Minister Pranab Mukherjee labelled it as a "security deficit," highlighting India's unique position facing a full spectrum of threats, from low-intensity conflicts to an unfriendly, nuclearized neighbourhood.

Since the early days of independence, India initially favoured the peaceful use of atomic energy for development but expressed apprehensions about nuclear weapons for military purposes. However, the perceived nuclear threats from China and Pakistan compelled India to adopt a more active defense stance in support of its nuclear option. This nuanced security posture reflects India's complex and evolving approach to nuclear capabilities in response to regional geopolitical challenges.

## Findings and conclusion

- Ever since the emergence of independent India, India has laid emphasis on the values of peaceful co-existence, non-violence, and non-alignment and has been supporting and promoting these values.
- India favoured peaceful use of nuclear technology but was against military use.
- India advocated disarmament and non-proliferation, reflecting its commitment to these values.
- After the 1998 nuclear test, India voluntarily gave up nuclear testing.
- India's nuclear doctrine attributes to a no-first-use policy while maintaining credible deterrence.
- India's adherence to NPT despite not being a party to the treaty is embedded in its traditional values which have guided India's nuclear policy.
- The nuclear rivalry in South Asia consists of two dyads, India versus China and India versus Pakistan.
- India's nuclear status has not deterred China; in fact, a 'cold war' rivalry between the two nuclear neighbours continues to affect their relations.
- India's growing threat perception and security concern about China is evident.
- The prospect of nuclear exchange between India and China is dim as both have adopted the policy of minimum deterrence and No First Use (NFU).
- India's overt nuclearization has neutralized its conventional military strength against Pakistan.
- China-Pakistan alliance cannot be overlooked as its major purpose is to deter India.

- Trilateral nuclear risk negotiation is difficult in South Asia because China refuses to acknowledge India's nuclear status.
- The most significant acknowledgment of Indian responsible nuclear behaviour was a bilateral nuclear cooperation agreement between India and the US in 2008.
- India's non-proliferation record and adherence to NPT have changed the attitude of major nuclear countries and the international nuclear regime.
- India has constructively worked on her strategies and portrayed her image as a responsible nuclear power without jeopardizing her national and security interest.

Hence, it can be affirmed that the perceived threats from China, Pakistan, and the discriminatory international nuclear regimes have played a pivotal role in the decision for overt nuclearization. The nuclear weapons option evolved from a national discourse to a strategic alternative, acquiring new political meanings as India portrayed itself as a responsible nuclear power.

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