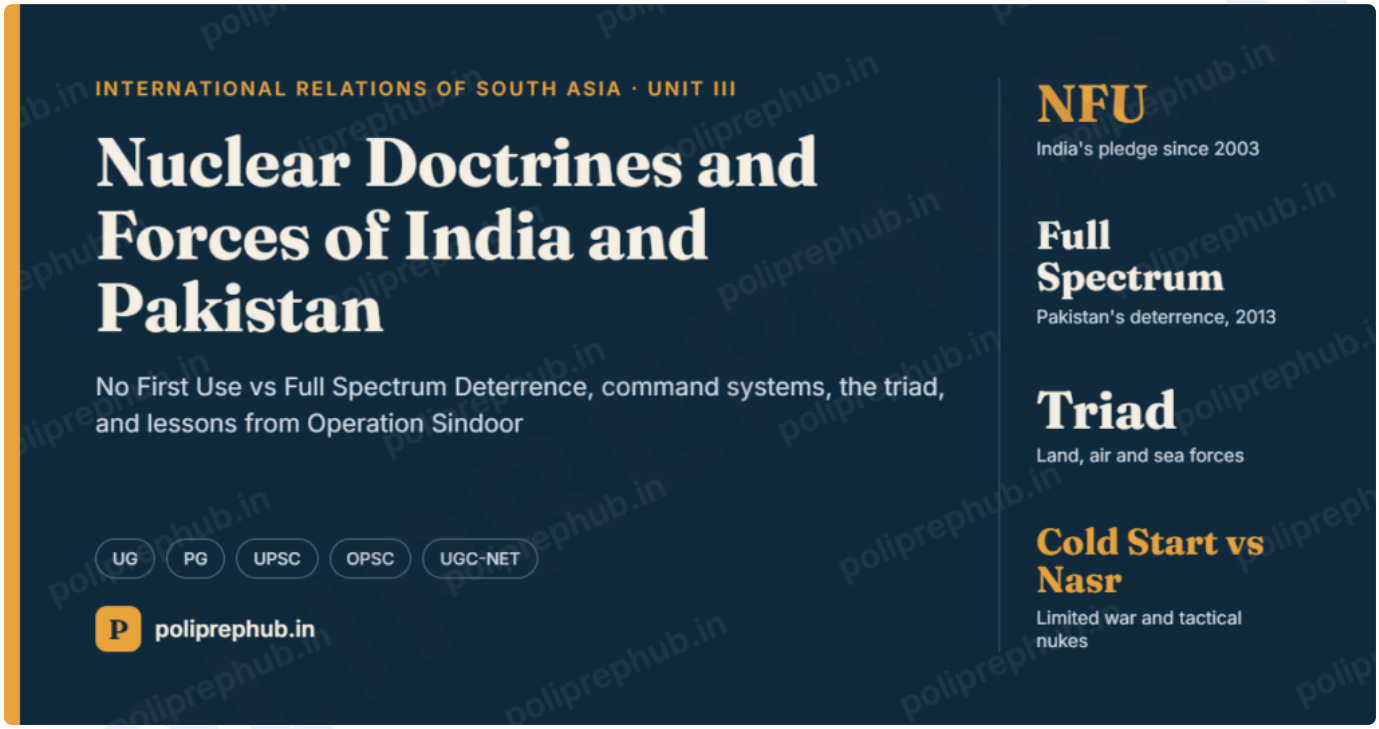
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS OF SOUTH ASIA

Nuclear Doctrines and Forces of India and Pakistan

By **Brajabandhu Mahanta** • November 17, 2026 • 13 min read



After the 1998 tests, India and Pakistan had to decide **how** their nuclear weapons would deter: under what conditions they would be used, who would control them, and what forces were needed. These choices are expressed in their **nuclear doctrines** and **force postures**.

- **Nuclear doctrine**: the official set of principles about the purpose of nuclear weapons, conditions for their use, targeting and command.
- **Nuclear posture**: the actual capabilities, deployment, readiness and command arrangements that put the doctrine into practice.

- **Declaratory policy** (what a state says) can differ from **operational policy** (what it actually plans).

Vipin Narang's typology of regional nuclear postures

In *Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era: Regional Powers and International Conflict* (2014), **Vipin Narang** identified three postures used by regional nuclear powers:

Posture	Meaning	Example
Catalytic	Using an ambiguous nuclear capability to draw in a great power's help in a crisis	Pakistan in the 1980s–1990s; Israel; South Africa
Assured retaliation	Secure second-strike forces for retaliation only, usually with No First Use	India; China
Asymmetric escalation	Threatening early, first use of nuclear weapons against conventional attack	Pakistan since 1998; France and NATO during the Cold War

Narang argued that **asymmetric escalation** deters conventional attack most effectively but carries the **greatest risks** of accidents and escalation, while **assured retaliation** is more stable but does not deter sub-conventional attacks.

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India’s Nuclear Doctrine

Evolution

- **Draft Nuclear Doctrine (17 August 1999)**: prepared by the **National Security Advisory Board (NSAB)**, headed by **K. Subrahmanyam**. It proposed credible minimum deterrence, No First Use and a triad.
- **Official doctrine (4 January 2003)**: released by the **Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS)** under Prime Minister Vajpayee. It remains the official doctrine.

Main points of the 2003 doctrine

1. **Credible Minimum Deterrence (CMD)**: building and maintaining a deterrent that is sufficient and survivable, not matching others weapon for weapon.
2. **No First Use (NFU)**: nuclear weapons will be used only in retaliation against a nuclear attack on Indian territory or on Indian forces anywhere.
3. **Massive retaliation**: nuclear retaliation to a first strike will be **massive** and designed to inflict **unacceptable damage**.
4. **Civilian control**: nuclear retaliation can only be authorised by the **civilian political leadership** through the **Nuclear Command Authority**.
5. **Non-use against non-nuclear states**: nuclear weapons will not be used against non-nuclear-weapon states.
6. **Exception**: in the event of a **major attack with biological or chemical weapons** against India or Indian forces anywhere, India **retains the option** of nuclear retaliation.
7. **Export controls**: strict controls on nuclear and missile-related materials and technology.
8. **Arms control commitments**: participation in Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT) negotiations, continued **moratorium on nuclear tests**, and commitment to the goal of a **nuclear-weapon-free world** through global, verifiable and non-discriminatory disarmament.

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Command and control

- **Nuclear Command Authority (NCA)**:
  - **Political Council**, chaired by the **Prime Minister**: the only body that can authorise nuclear use.
  - **Executive Council**, chaired by the **National Security Advisor**: gives advice and executes decisions.
- **Strategic Forces Command (SFC)**, set up in **2003**, manages and administers the nuclear forces. Since 2019, it works with the Chief of Defence Staff.
- India traditionally kept warheads **separate (de-mated)** from delivery systems, with components held by different agencies, which reduced the risk of accidents but slowed response. **Canisterised** missiles (like the Agni-V) and submarine patrols have moved India towards greater readiness, and SIPRI now counts some Indian warheads as deployed in peacetime.

Debates on India’s Nuclear Doctrine

India’s doctrine has been officially unchanged since 2003, but it is widely debated. Recent commentary notes that the doctrine is facing renewed pressure to be **revisited without being completely overhauled**.

The No First Use debate

Arguments for keeping NFU

- It reflects India’s image as a **responsible** nuclear power and helped win the **2008 NSG waiver** and civil nuclear deals.
- It **reduces pressure** to keep forces on hair-trigger alert, lowering costs and risks of accidents.
- It fits India’s **assured retaliation** posture and its main aim of deterring nuclear use, not fighting nuclear war.
- It places the **moral and political burden** of starting nuclear war on the adversary.

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Arguments for revising NFU

- Pakistan's **first-use doctrine** and **tactical nuclear weapons** may make a threat of "massive retaliation" against a small tactical strike **not credible**.
- India may need flexibility against a combined **China–Pakistan** threat.
- Some argue for **conditional NFU** or deliberate **ambiguity** to strengthen deterrence.

Signals of debate

- In **2016**, Defence Minister **Manohar Parrikar** said in a personal capacity that India need not bind itself to NFU.
- In **August 2019**, Defence Minister **Rajnath Singh** said India had strictly followed NFU, but what happens in the future "depends on the circumstances".
- Former NSA **Shivshankar Menon** (*Choices*, 2016) wrote that there could be circumstances in which India might strike first against a nuclear adversary that was about to launch. Scholars like **Vipin Narang** have argued India may be considering **counterforce** options.
- After **Operation Sindoor (2025)**, the debate on whether India should revisit NFU revived in strategic circles; the official position remains NFU.

The "massive retaliation" debate

- Critics ask whether India would really launch massive retaliation in response to a **small tactical nuclear strike** on its troops inside Pakistan; if not, the threat lacks credibility.
- Supporters argue that massive retaliation deters Pakistan from crossing the nuclear threshold **at all**, because no use is "small".
- Some suggest replacing "massive" with "**punitive**" or "unacceptable damage" language for greater credibility.

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India’s Nuclear Forces

India has built a **triad** of land, air and sea delivery systems. SIPRI estimates about **190 warheads** (January 2026), with 12 counted as deployed.

Leg	Main systems	Notes
Land	**Agni** series: Agni-I (about 700 km), Agni-II (about 2,000 km), Agni-III (about 3,000 km), Agni-IV (about 3,500 km), **Agni-V** (over 5,000 km), **Agni-Prime** (new-generation, canisterised); Prithvi-II (short range)	Agni-V can reach most of China; **Mission Divyastra** (March 2024) tested Agni-V with **multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicles (MIRV)**
Air	Mirage 2000H, Jaguar, **Rafale**, Su-30MKI (possible role)	Oldest leg of the triad
Sea	**INS Arihant** (commissioned 2016; first deterrence patrol 2018), **INS Arighaat** (2024); further SSBNs under construction; **K-15** and **K-4** submarine-launched ballistic missiles	Provides a **survivable second-strike** capability, completing the triad

Trends

- Longer ranges aimed mainly at **China**, as SIPRI notes.
- **Canisterisation** (missiles stored with warheads in sealed tubes) and **MIRV** technology increase readiness and flexibility.
- **Ballistic missile defence (BMD)** programme for Delhi and Mumbai.
- The sea-based leg is still developing: longer-range **K-5/K-6** missiles and larger submarines are needed to target all of China from Indian waters.

Pakistan’s Nuclear Doctrine

Pakistan has **never published an official nuclear doctrine**. Its policy is known from statements by officials, especially **Lt. Gen. (retd) Khalid Kidwai**, long-time head of the **Strategic Plans Division (SPD)**. It deliberately keeps **strategic ambiguity** about when it

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would use nuclear weapons.

Core features

1. **India-specific**: the arsenal exists to deter **India**, especially its conventional superiority.
2. **First-use option**: Pakistan **rejects No First Use**. It may use nuclear weapons first to stop a conventional Indian attack that threatens its survival.
3. **Calculated ambiguity**: red lines are not precisely defined, to keep India uncertain.
4. **From credible minimum deterrence to "full spectrum deterrence"**: initially, Pakistan spoke of **credible minimum deterrence**. Since **2013** (a National Command Authority statement), it has described its policy as **Full Spectrum Deterrence (FSD)**: having nuclear options at **strategic, operational and tactical** levels to deter all forms of Indian aggression, including limited conventional attacks.
5. **"Quid pro quo plus"**: a response doctrine stated after the 2019 Balakot crisis, meaning Pakistan would respond to any Indian attack with a **stronger** counter-attack.

Kidwai's four thresholds (2001–02)

In an interview with Italian researchers (the Landau Network), Kidwai indicated that nuclear weapons could be used if:

1. **Spatial threshold**: India attacks Pakistan and conquers a **large part of its territory**.
2. **Military threshold**: India **destroys a large part** of Pakistan's land or air forces.
3. **Economic threshold**: India tries to **economically strangle** Pakistan (for example, a naval blockade or cutting off river waters).
4. **Political threshold**: India pushes Pakistan into **political destabilisation** or large-scale internal subversion.

These thresholds remain the most quoted indication of Pakistan's red lines. Analysts at ORF note that Pakistan's broad red lines (territorial, military, economic and domestic destabilisation) lack clear "when, where and how" details.

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Command and control

- **National Command Authority (NCA)**, set up in **February 2000** (formalised by law in 2010), chaired by the **Prime Minister**, with two committees:
  - **Employment Control Committee** (decisions on use);
  - **Development Control Committee** (development of weapons and delivery systems).
- **Strategic Plans Division (SPD)**: the NCA's secretariat, managing planning, security and operations.
- **Strategic Forces Commands** of the Army, Air Force and Navy (**Naval Strategic Force Command**, 2012).
- **The army's dominant role**: in practice, the army controls the nuclear programme. The **27th Constitutional Amendment (November 2025)** further strengthened this: the new Chief of Defence Forces (the Army Chief) appoints the head of the National Strategic Command, who must come from the army.
- **Army Rocket Force Command (August 2025)**: announced by Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif after the May 2025 conflict, to control **conventional** missiles separately from the nuclear-focused Army Strategic Forces Command. It is reportedly inspired by China's PLA Rocket Force.

Pakistan's Nuclear Forces

SIPRI estimates Pakistan has about **170 warheads** (January 2026), mostly based on **highly enriched uranium**, with growing plutonium production at **Khushab**.

Leg	Main systems	Notes
Land (ballistic)	**Nasr** / Hatf-IX (about 60–70 km, tactical); Ghaznavi and Abdali (short range); **Shaheen-I, II, III** (Shaheen-III about 2,750 km, covering all of India and beyond); **Ghauri** (about 1,300 km); **Ababeel** (MIRV, first tested 2017)	Nasr is the main tactical nuclear weapon, designed against Cold Start

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Land and sea (cruise)	**Babur** ground-launched cruise missile; **Babur-3** submarine-launched cruise missile (tested 2017)	Babur-3 aims at a sea-based second strike
Air	F-16 and Mirage aircraft; **Ra'ad** air-launched cruise missile	

Trends

- Development of a **sea-based second-strike** capability on diesel-electric submarines.
- **MIRV** development (Ababeel) in response to India's ballistic missile defence.
- Separation of conventional missiles (new **Fatah** series rockets and missiles under the Army Rocket Force Command) from nuclear forces, though many missiles remain **dual-capable**, which creates ambiguity in crises.

Comparing the Two Doctrines

Feature	India	Pakistan
Official document	Yes: Draft 1999, official 2003	No published doctrine
Basic principle	Credible Minimum Deterrence	Full Spectrum Deterrence (earlier credible minimum deterrence)
First use	No First Use (with chemical/biological exception)	First-use option retained
Response	Massive retaliation causing unacceptable damage	Calculated ambiguity; "quid pro quo plus"
Main adversary	Primarily China, also Pakistan	India only
Narang's posture type	Assured retaliation	Asymmetric escalation
Command	Civilian: Political Council chaired by the Prime Minister	NCA chaired by the Prime Minister, but army-dominated in practice
Tactical nuclear weapons	None declared	Nasr and other short-range systems
Sea-based leg	SSBNs with ballistic missiles (Arihant class)	Submarine-launched cruise missiles (Babur-3) under development

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Estimated warheads (SIPRI, January 2026)	About 190	About 170

Cold Start vs Tactical Nuclear Weapons

- **Cold Start doctrine** (from around **2004**, after the slow mobilisation of Operation Parakram in 2001–02): the Indian Army's concept of rapid, limited offensives by "Integrated Battle Groups" into Pakistan, quick enough to punish Pakistan **before** international pressure or nuclear thresholds come into play. India officially played down its existence for years; a former Army chief acknowledged it in 2017.
- **Pakistan's response**: the **Nasr** tactical nuclear missile (first tested **2011**) and Full Spectrum Deterrence, threatening to use small nuclear weapons against Indian forces on Pakistani soil, which would **lower the nuclear threshold**.
- **India's counter**: "massive retaliation" for any nuclear use, including tactical.
- **Result**: an **escalation dilemma**. Critics say tactical nuclear weapons increase the risk of early nuclear use, accidents and loss of control in battle (Sagan's concerns).

Operation Sindoor (May 2025) as a Test of Doctrine

The May 2025 conflict was the most serious test of both doctrines since 1998.

- **India's approach**: after the Pahalgam attack, India struck targets deep inside Pakistan with missiles and drones (7–10 May 2025), including strikes near Rawalpindi on 9 May. Indian analysts describe a **doctrine of calibrated retaliation designed to operate below the nuclear threshold**. Prime Minister Modi said India would not tolerate **"nuclear blackmail"** and would treat terror attacks as acts of war.
- **Pakistan's response**: Pakistan launched **Operation Bunyan al-Marsoos** with missile attacks against Indian targets. Before the conflict, a Pakistani minister openly threatened the use of Ghauri, Shaheen and Ghaznavi missiles; during the crisis, reports of a meeting of the National Command Authority (later denied) were read as nuclear signalling.

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- **No nuclear use**: Pakistan did not use tactical nuclear weapons. Indian commentators argue this was due partly to the dominance of Indian air strikes; they also note that Pakistan's **dual-use** long-range missiles meant any launch raised nuclear fears.
- **Lessons drawn**:
  - **Indian view**: Pakistan's first-use threat is **less credible** than claimed; India can conduct deep conventional strikes without triggering nuclear use. ORF analysts argue that the conflict exposed Pakistan's over-reliance on a first-use posture.
  - **Pakistani view**: Pakistan's conventional response deterred further escalation; it created the **Army Rocket Force Command** (August 2025) to strengthen conventional missile options.
  - **Critical view**: both sides took serious **escalation risks**; the stability-instability paradox is sharper than ever (Topic 4).

China's Doctrine and Triangular Deterrence

- **China** has maintained an unconditional **No First Use** policy since **1964**, plus a pledge not to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states.
- It is expanding its arsenal faster than any other country (SIPRI: about **620 warheads** in January 2026), with new silos, missiles and submarines.
- **India's doctrine and forces** are increasingly shaped by China: longer-range Agni missiles, SSBNs and MIRVs.
- **Pakistan** responds to India's China-driven build-up, creating a **chain reaction** or **security trilemma**: China → India → Pakistan.
- This makes South Asian deterrence **triangular** rather than bilateral, complicating arms control: India will not accept limits that ignore China, and Pakistan will not accept limits that ignore India.

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Conclusion

India and Pakistan have adopted **contrasting nuclear doctrines** that reflect their different strategic situations. **India**, larger and focused on China as well as Pakistan, follows **credible minimum deterrence, No First Use and massive retaliation** under firm civilian control, and has built a land-air-sea triad. **Pakistan**, smaller and facing India's conventional superiority, keeps a **first-use option**, **calculated ambiguity** and **full spectrum deterrence**, including tactical nuclear weapons, with the army in charge. These doctrines create a dangerous interaction: India's limited conventional responses to terrorism (from Cold Start to Operation Sindoor) meet Pakistan's lowered nuclear threshold. The 2025 crisis showed that both sides are testing the space **below the nuclear threshold**, raising questions about **deterrence stability**, which is the subject of the next topic.

Quick Revision

Item	Key fact
India's Draft Nuclear Doctrine	17 August 1999, NSAB (K. Subrahmanyam)
India's official doctrine	4 January 2003, Cabinet Committee on Security
India's Strategic Forces Command	2003
INS Arihant / INS Arighaat	Commissioned 2016 / 2024
Mission Divyastra	Agni-V MIRV test, March 2024
Pakistan's National Command Authority	February 2000
Kidwai's four thresholds	Spatial, military, economic, political (2001–02)
Full Spectrum Deterrence	Announced 2013
Nasr first tested	2011
Ababeel and Babur-3 tested	2017
Cold Start	Around 2004
Pakistan's Army Rocket Force Command	Announced 13–14 August 2025

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SIPRI estimates (January 2026)	India ~190, Pakistan ~170, China ~620

One-line memory aids

- **India's doctrine** = CMD + NFU + massive retaliation + civilian control.
- **Pakistan's doctrine** = first use + ambiguity + full spectrum deterrence + army control.
- **Narang**: India = assured retaliation; Pakistan = asymmetric escalation.

Exam Practice

Long-answer questions

1. Examine the main features of India's nuclear doctrine. Should India revise its No First Use policy?
2. Discuss Pakistan's nuclear doctrine with reference to "full spectrum deterrence" and tactical nuclear weapons.
3. Compare the nuclear doctrines of India and Pakistan.
4. Explain the relationship between India's Cold Start doctrine and Pakistan's tactical nuclear weapons.
5. What lessons does Operation Sindoor (2025) offer about nuclear deterrence in South Asia?
6. Discuss the command and control systems of Indian and Pakistani nuclear forces.
7. How does China influence the nuclear postures of India and Pakistan?

Short-answer questions

1. Credible Minimum Deterrence
2. No First Use
3. Massive retaliation
4. Nuclear Command Authority (India)

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5. Kidwai’s thresholds
6. Full Spectrum Deterrence
7. Nasr missile
8. INS Arihant
9. Cold Start doctrine
10. Army Rocket Force Command

MCQs (UGC-NET / OPSC style)

1. India’s official nuclear doctrine was released in:
   - (a) 1998 (b) 1999 (c) 2003 (d) 2008
   - **Answer: (c)**

2. Who chaired the National Security Advisory Board that prepared India’s Draft Nuclear Doctrine (1999)?
   - (a) Brajesh Mishra (b) K. Subrahmanyam (c) Jaswant Singh (d) A.P.J. Abdul Kalam
   - **Answer: (b)**

3. In India’s Nuclear Command Authority, the Political Council is chaired by the:
   - (a) President (b) Prime Minister (c) National Security Advisor (d) Chief of Defence Staff
   - **Answer: (b)**

4. Which of the following is NOT one of Kidwai’s four thresholds?
   - (a) Spatial (b) Military (c) Economic (d) Religious
   - **Answer: (d)**

5. Pakistan’s short-range tactical nuclear missile is the:
   - (a) Shaheen-III (b) Nasr (c) Ghauri (d) Babur
   - **Answer: (b)**

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6. Vipin Narang describes Pakistan’s nuclear posture as:
    - (a) Catalytic (b) Assured retaliation (c) Asymmetric escalation (d) Minimum deterrence
    - **Answer: (c)**

7. Match the following:
    - A. Agni-V MIRV test – 1. 2011
    - B. Nasr first test – 2. 2024
    - C. Full Spectrum Deterrence announced – 3. 2013
    - D. Pakistan’s NCA set up – 4. 2000
    - **Answer: A-2, B-1, C-3, D-4**

8. Assertion (A): Pakistan rejects No First Use. Reason (R): It seeks to offset India’s conventional military superiority.
    - **Answer: Both A and R are true, and R is the correct explanation of A.**

9. India’s doctrine keeps the option of nuclear retaliation against a major attack with:
    - (a) Cyber weapons (b) Biological or chemical weapons (c) Conventional missiles (d) Terrorist attacks
    - **Answer: (b)**

10. Pakistan’s Army Rocket Force Command (2025) was created to control:
    - (a) Nuclear warheads (b) Conventional missiles and rockets (c) Naval nuclear forces (d) Air defence
    - **Answer: (b)**

Suggested readings

- Vipin Narang, *Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era*.
- Shivshankar Menon, *Choices: Inside the Making of India’s Foreign Policy* (chapter on NFU).
- Feroz Hassan Khan, *Eating Grass*.

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- Rajesh Basrur, *Minimum Deterrence and India's Nuclear Security*.
- Bharat Karnad, *India's Nuclear Policy*.
- Government of India, "Cabinet Committee on Security Reviews Operationalization of India's Nuclear Doctrine" (press release, 4 January 2003).

Sources for recent developments

- A year after Operation Sindoor: a new era of nuclear deterrence (The Week, May 2026)
- Aftermath of Op Sindoor: revisiting Pakistan's nuclear posture (ORF)
- The nuclear overhang: India–Pakistan escalation after Pahalgam (ORF)
- Deciphering India's No-First Use policy (CLAWS, June 2026)
- No war, no peace: India's limited war strategy (The Diplomat)
- New 'rocket force' to bolster strike capability (Dawn, August 2025)
- SIPRI Yearbook 2026 press release

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