

## India's Nuclear Policy in Growing Tactical Nuclear Threats in the Current Scenario: An Overview

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### Abstract

The contemporary international security environment is witnessing a significant transformation due to the emergence and growing prominence of Tactical Nuclear Weapons (TNWs). Unlike strategic nuclear weapons, tactical nuclear weapons are designed for limited battlefield use and are often perceived as instruments for achieving military objectives without triggering full-scale nuclear war. The increasing emphasis on such weapons, particularly in regions marked by geopolitical rivalries and security dilemmas, has raised serious concerns regarding strategic stability, deterrence credibility, and escalation risks. For India, the growing tactical nuclear threat is particularly relevant in the context of South Asia, where regional security dynamics continue to be shaped by nuclear deterrence and military competition.

India's nuclear policy has traditionally been guided by the principles of Credible Minimum Deterrence and No First Use (NFU), reflecting a restrained and responsible approach to nuclear weapons. However, the evolving nature of nuclear threats, including the deployment of tactical nuclear capabilities by neighboring adversaries, has generated debates regarding the adequacy and adaptability of India's existing nuclear doctrine. The challenge lies in maintaining deterrence credibility while avoiding destabilizing arms races and preserving strategic stability in the region.

In the broader context of international relations, the resurgence of great-power competition, the modernization of nuclear arsenals by major powers, the ongoing conflict dynamics involving nuclear-armed states, and the weakening of traditional arms control mechanisms have renewed global concerns about nuclear escalation. These developments have direct implications for India's security environment and strategic calculations. Consequently, India's nuclear policy must continuously adapt to emerging threats while remaining committed to responsible nuclear stewardship and international non-proliferation objectives.

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This study evaluates India's nuclear policy in the context of growing tactical nuclear threats and examines its relevance in the contemporary security environment. It analyses the strategic rationale behind India's nuclear doctrine, assesses the challenges posed by tactical nuclear weapons, and explores the policy options available to India for strengthening deterrence, ensuring national security, and contributing to regional and global strategic stability. The study argues that while India's existing nuclear framework remains broadly effective, evolving geopolitical and technological developments necessitate periodic reassessment to address emerging security challenges and maintain a credible deterrence posture in the twenty-first century.

**Keywords:** India's Nuclear Policy, Tactical Nuclear Weapons, Nuclear Deterrence, No First Use (NFU), Strategic Stability.

### Introduction

The contemporary global security environment is undergoing profound transformations driven by shifting power dynamics, technological advancements, and emerging strategic challenges. Among these developments, nuclear weapons continue to occupy a central position in national security policies and international strategic calculations. Despite expectations that the significance of nuclear weapons would diminish after the end of the Cold War, recent geopolitical developments suggest otherwise. Nuclear capabilities remain critical instruments of deterrence, strategic influence, and national prestige in an increasingly uncertain international system.

In recent years, growing attention has been directed toward Tactical Nuclear Weapons (TNWs), which are designed for limited military use in battlefield environments. Unlike strategic nuclear weapons, which are primarily intended to deter large-scale attacks against a state's vital interests, tactical nuclear weapons are often perceived as tools for achieving specific military objectives during conventional conflicts. Their existence has generated extensive debate among strategic thinkers because the perceived usability of such weapons may lower the threshold for nuclear escalation. Consequently, the expansion of tactical nuclear capabilities has emerged as a significant concern for policymakers, military planners, and scholars of international relations.<sup>1</sup>

The relevance of this issue has increased considerably in the contemporary security landscape. The resurgence of great-power competition, the modernization of nuclear arsenals, and the erosion of traditional arms control frameworks have contributed to a more complex strategic environment. Major powers are investing heavily in advanced military technologies and next-generation nuclear systems, while regional rivalries continue to intensify in several parts of the world. Simultaneously, developments in cyber warfare, artificial intelligence, missile defence systems, and hypersonic technologies are reshaping established deterrence relationships and creating new strategic uncertainties. For India, these evolving realities have important implications. As a responsible nuclear-armed state and an emerging global power, India faces the challenge of safeguarding its national security while contributing to regional and international stability. India's nuclear posture has evolved in response to its unique strategic circumstances and security concerns. Since demonstrating its nuclear capability, India has sought to maintain a balanced approach that emphasizes deterrence, restraint, and responsible nuclear behaviour. This approach has enabled

India to preserve strategic credibility while projecting itself as a constructive stakeholder in the global nuclear order.<sup>2</sup>

The strategic environment of South Asia further enhances the importance of examining India's nuclear policy. The region is characterized by enduring political disputes, periodic military crises, and the presence of multiple nuclear-armed actors. In such a setting, the introduction and expansion of tactical nuclear capabilities have the potential to alter existing deterrence dynamics and complicate crisis management mechanisms. The possibility of rapid escalation during periods of tension raises important questions regarding the effectiveness of existing doctrines and the future of strategic stability in the region. Furthermore, contemporary international relations are witnessing increasing interconnectedness between regional conflicts and global power politics. Security developments in one region often produce consequences that extend beyond national boundaries.

As a result, nuclear policy can no longer be viewed solely through a domestic or bilateral lens. Instead, it must be understood within a broader framework that incorporates geopolitical competition, technological innovation, evolving military doctrines, and international norms. Against this backdrop, an assessment of India's nuclear policy in the context of growing tactical nuclear threats becomes both timely and significant. Understanding how India responds to emerging challenges is essential for evaluating the future of deterrence, strategic stability, and security in South Asia. This study seeks to examine the changing nature of tactical nuclear threats, analyse their implications for India's nuclear doctrine, and evaluate the policy options available to India in an increasingly complex security environment. By doing so, it contributes to the broader discourse on nuclear strategy and international security in the twenty-first century.<sup>3</sup>

### **India's Nuclear Policy**

India's nuclear policy represents a carefully structured framework that seeks to balance national security requirements with the broader objective of maintaining peace and stability. The evolution of this policy has been influenced by historical experiences, regional security challenges, technological developments, and changes in the international strategic environment. Since the emergence of India as a nuclear-weapon state, policymakers have consistently emphasized that nuclear weapons are political instruments intended to prevent aggression rather than instruments for war-fighting.<sup>4</sup>

The foundation of India's nuclear policy was formally articulated after the nuclear tests conducted in 1998. These tests marked a significant turning point in India's strategic thinking and led to the formulation of a doctrine that defined the country's approach toward nuclear deterrence. The doctrine was designed to ensure that India possessed sufficient capability to respond effectively to any nuclear attack while avoiding an unnecessary arms race. This approach distinguished India's nuclear posture from strategies that rely on large stockpiles or aggressive deployment patterns.<sup>5</sup>

One of the most significant elements of India's nuclear policy is the concept of Credible Minimum Deterrence. This principle reflects the belief that national security does not require the accumulation of an unlimited number of nuclear weapons. Instead, India seeks to maintain a force structure that is adequate to deter potential adversaries from contemplating nuclear aggression. The emphasis is placed on credibility, survivability, and the ability to impose unacceptable costs on an attacker. As a result,

India's deterrence strategy focuses on quality, reliability, and operational effectiveness rather than numerical superiority. Another defining feature of India's nuclear policy is the No First Use (NFU) commitment. According to this principle, India will not initiate the use of nuclear weapons but reserves the right to respond decisively if subjected to a nuclear attack. This commitment has contributed to India's image as a responsible nuclear power and has strengthened its diplomatic standing in international forums. The NFU policy also reflects India's long-standing preference for strategic restraint and defensive security measures. Nevertheless, evolving security conditions have generated debates among scholars and strategic analysts regarding the future relevance and flexibility of this doctrine.

The credibility of any nuclear policy depends largely on the ability to survive an adversary's first strike and retain the capacity to respond effectively. Recognizing this requirement, India has invested in strengthening its second-strike capability through the development of a diversified nuclear force structure. The establishment of a nuclear triad, comprising land-based missiles, aircraft-delivered weapons, and sea-based platforms, has enhanced the survivability of India's deterrent forces. The sea-based component is particularly significant because it provides a secure retaliatory capability even during periods of intense conflict.<sup>6</sup>

The command and control architecture associated with India's nuclear policy is another important aspect of its strategic framework. India has established institutional mechanisms to ensure civilian oversight, centralized decision-making, and strict control over nuclear assets. These arrangements are intended to minimize the risks of unauthorized use, accidental escalation, and command failures during crises. Effective command structures contribute significantly to deterrence credibility and strategic stability. In the contemporary international environment, India's nuclear policy has acquired renewed importance. The modernization of nuclear arsenals by major powers, the emergence of advanced missile technologies, and the growing integration of cyber and space capabilities into military planning have altered traditional security calculations. Simultaneously, regional developments in Asia continue to influence India's strategic priorities. These changes require continuous assessment of deterrence requirements while preserving the fundamental principles that have guided India's nuclear posture for decades.<sup>7</sup>

From an international relations perspective, India's nuclear policy serves multiple functions. It protects national sovereignty, reinforces strategic autonomy, and enhances India's ability to engage with major powers from a position of strength. Moreover, India's responsible nuclear conduct has contributed to its growing acceptance within global non-proliferation and export-control regimes. As India seeks a larger role in global governance institutions, the credibility of its nuclear policy remains closely linked to its international reputation and strategic influence. Overall, India's nuclear policy reflects a combination of deterrence, restraint, and responsibility. While the security environment continues to evolve, the core objective of preventing coercion and safeguarding national interests remains unchanged. The effectiveness of this policy will depend on India's ability to adapt to emerging technological and geopolitical challenges while maintaining strategic stability at both the regional and global levels.<sup>8</sup>

#### **India's Nuclear Policy in Growing Tactical Nuclear Threats**

The emergence of tactical nuclear weapons has significantly altered contemporary debates on nuclear deterrence and strategic stability. Unlike long-range strategic systems that are primarily associated with national survival, tactical nuclear weapons are often integrated into battlefield planning and limited military operations. Their increasing prominence has generated concerns regarding crisis escalation, miscalculation, and the possibility of nuclear use during conventional conflicts.<sup>9</sup>

These concerns are particularly relevant for India because the South Asian security environment is characterized by recurring military tensions, unresolved political disputes, and the presence of multiple nuclear-armed states. India's response to this evolving challenge has been shaped by a broader understanding of deterrence rather than by direct competition in tactical nuclear capabilities. Indian strategic thinking has traditionally emphasized the prevention of nuclear conflict through the certainty of retaliation. Consequently, the credibility of India's nuclear posture is not derived from matching every category of weapon possessed by an adversary but from maintaining the capability to impose unacceptable consequences following any nuclear aggression. This approach seeks to discourage attempts to create distinctions between "limited" and "large-scale" nuclear use.<sup>10</sup>

A significant challenge posed by tactical nuclear weapons is their potential impact on decision-making during crises. The deployment of low-yield nuclear systems may create an illusion that nuclear weapons can be employed in a controlled manner without triggering a broader conflict. However, strategic analysts frequently argue that once the nuclear threshold is crossed, escalation becomes extremely difficult to manage. For India, this reality reinforces the importance of maintaining a doctrine that communicates clarity, predictability, and determination. A credible retaliatory posture reduces the likelihood that adversaries will perceive tactical nuclear weapons as effective tools for coercion. The growing relevance of tactical nuclear threats has also encouraged India to focus on survivability and operational readiness. In the modern era, deterrence depends not only on the possession of nuclear weapons but also on the resilience of command structures, communication networks, intelligence systems, and delivery platforms. The ability to preserve decision-making capacity during a crisis has become as important as the weapons themselves. Consequently, investments in secure communication systems, advanced surveillance capabilities, and integrated strategic planning contribute indirectly to strengthening India's nuclear deterrent.<sup>11</sup>

From the perspective of international relations, India's nuclear policy operates within a rapidly changing geopolitical environment. The ongoing strategic competition among major powers, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region, has intensified concerns regarding military modernization and regional security alignments. Simultaneously, the weakening of traditional arms-control arrangements has reduced the predictability that once characterized nuclear relations among major states. In such circumstances, middle and emerging powers are increasingly required to adapt their security strategies to a more uncertain international order.<sup>12</sup>

Technological transformation further complicates the nuclear landscape. Artificial intelligence, cyber operations, autonomous systems, and hypersonic weapons are reshaping military doctrines across the world. These innovations have the potential to affect early-warning mechanisms, command-and-control networks, and strategic calculations. For India, addressing tactical nuclear threats therefore involves not only

responding to existing military capabilities but also preparing for future forms of competition that may influence deterrence dynamics. Strategic adaptability has become an essential component of nuclear policy in the twenty-first century. Another important dimension is the diplomatic aspect of India's nuclear strategy.

India's reputation as a responsible nuclear power has enabled it to expand strategic partnerships with leading global actors while maintaining an independent foreign policy. In an era marked by geopolitical polarization, India seeks to balance deterrence requirements with support for international stability and responsible state behaviour. This approach strengthens India's position in global security discussions and enhances its role as a stakeholder in shaping future norms related to nuclear governance.<sup>13</sup>

The issue of tactical nuclear weapons also highlights the relationship between conventional military capabilities and nuclear deterrence. Strong conventional forces, effective missile defence mechanisms, and advanced surveillance systems can reduce the incentives for nuclear escalation. Therefore, India's security strategy increasingly reflects a comprehensive approach in which nuclear deterrence functions alongside broader military and technological capabilities rather than in isolation. In conclusion, the rise of tactical nuclear threats presents complex strategic challenges that extend beyond the traditional framework of nuclear competition. India's policy response is centred on deterrence credibility, strategic resilience, technological preparedness, and responsible nuclear conduct. As global power politics become increasingly volatile and technological change accelerates, India's ability to maintain an effective and adaptable nuclear posture will remain a critical factor in preserving regional stability, protecting national interests, and contributing to a secure international order.<sup>14</sup>

### **Current Scenario and International Relevance**

The international security landscape of the twenty-first century is increasingly shaped by geopolitical uncertainty, strategic competition, and rapid technological transformation. Unlike the relatively predictable security environment that characterized certain periods of the post-Cold War era, contemporary global politics is witnessing the return of power rivalry among major states, the emergence of new security actors, and the growing significance of advanced military capabilities. These developments have renewed attention toward nuclear strategy and its role in maintaining stability within an evolving international order. One of the most notable features of the current security environment is the increasing integration of nuclear considerations into broader geopolitical calculations. Military modernization programs, the development of advanced missile systems, and the pursuit of strategic influence have become central components of national security policies across several regions. As a result, the nuclear dimension has once again emerged as a key factor in shaping interstate relations, alliance structures, and regional security architectures.<sup>15</sup>

The Indo-Pacific region has become one of the most strategically significant theatres in contemporary international politics. Growing competition for influence, maritime security concerns, and shifting regional alignments have transformed the area into a focal point of global strategic interaction. For India, these developments carry profound implications because its security interests are closely connected with developments across the wider Indo-Pacific. Consequently, India's strategic calculations increasingly extend beyond its immediate neighbourhood and encompass broader regional and global dynamics. Another defining characteristic of the present era is the unprecedented pace of technological innovation.

Artificial intelligence, quantum computing, cyber capabilities, autonomous military systems, and space-based assets are reshaping the character of warfare and deterrence. These technologies have introduced new dimensions of uncertainty into strategic planning. Decision-making processes that were once based primarily on conventional military assessments must now account for cyber vulnerabilities, information warfare, and the possibility of technological disruptions affecting critical security infrastructure. The contemporary strategic environment is also marked by the growing interaction between conventional and non-conventional security challenges. Economic competition, energy security, supply-chain resilience, technological dependence, and information dominance have become closely linked with traditional military concerns. This interconnectedness has expanded the scope of national security and has compelled states to adopt more comprehensive approaches to strategic planning. In this context, nuclear policy can no longer be viewed as an isolated component of defence strategy; rather, it functions within a broader framework of political, economic, technological, and diplomatic considerations.<sup>16</sup>

An equally important trend is the transformation of global governance mechanisms. International institutions responsible for arms control, confidence-building measures, and conflict management face increasing pressure from geopolitical polarization and competing national interests. The weakening effectiveness of several traditional security arrangements has raised concerns regarding the future of strategic predictability. This situation has encouraged states to place greater emphasis on self-reliance, strategic preparedness, and the diversification of security partnerships. For India, the current scenario presents both opportunities and challenges. On one hand, the country has emerged as a major stakeholder in global governance and an increasingly influential actor in international affairs. On the other hand, it must navigate a security environment characterized by rapid change and multiple sources of uncertainty. India's expanding diplomatic engagement, growing economic influence, and enhanced defense capabilities have elevated its strategic profile, making its security choices relevant not only at the regional level but also within the wider international system.<sup>17</sup>

From an international relations perspective, India's role has acquired greater significance due to its ability to engage simultaneously with multiple centres of power while maintaining strategic autonomy. This position enables India to contribute to regional stability, support a rules-based international order, and participate actively in discussions concerning emerging security challenges. As geopolitical competition intensifies, India's strategic decisions are likely to influence broader debates on deterrence, security cooperation, and the future balance of power in Asia. In conclusion, the current global environment is characterized by complexity, uncertainty, and continuous transformation. Geopolitical rivalries, technological disruption, institutional challenges, and evolving security priorities are collectively reshaping the international system. Within this context, the strategic choices made by major regional powers such as India assume increasing importance. Understanding these developments is essential for assessing the future trajectory of international security and the evolving nature of global strategic stability.<sup>18</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The growing prominence of tactical nuclear weapons represents one of the most complex strategic challenges of the contemporary era. Their emergence has altered traditional assumptions regarding deterrence, escalation, and military decision-making, creating new uncertainties within both regional and global security environments. In this context, the significance of India's nuclear policy extends beyond the protection of national territory and enters the broader domain of strategic stability, responsible state

behaviour, and international security governance. A careful assessment of the contemporary strategic environment indicates that the principal challenge for India is not merely the existence of tactical nuclear capabilities in its neighbourhood, but the changing nature of security itself. Modern security threats are increasingly interconnected, combining conventional military competition with technological disruption, cyber vulnerabilities, information warfare, and geopolitical rivalry. Consequently, the effectiveness of a nuclear policy can no longer be measured solely by the size of an arsenal or the sophistication of delivery systems. Instead, its success depends upon adaptability, institutional resilience, technological preparedness, and strategic credibility.

India's approach demonstrates an important characteristic that distinguishes it from many nuclear powers: the emphasis on restraint combined with preparedness. This balance has enabled India to maintain a credible security posture while avoiding policies that could contribute to unnecessary instability. In an era where several states are investing heavily in military modernization and strategic competition, the Indian experience suggests that long-term security is best achieved not through limitless accumulation of capabilities but through carefully calibrated deterrence supported by responsible political decision-making. From the perspective of international relations, India's nuclear policy has acquired broader significance because of the country's expanding global role. As India's economic influence, diplomatic engagement, and strategic partnerships continue to grow, its security choices increasingly affect regional and international stability. The ability of India to maintain a stable deterrence framework while engaging constructively with diverse global actors strengthens its position as a responsible stakeholder in the international system. This role becomes particularly important at a time when existing mechanisms of arms control and strategic dialogue face increasing pressures.

Another important observation emerging from this study is that the future of deterrence will be shaped as much by technological innovation as by military doctrine. Developments in artificial intelligence, autonomous systems, cyber operations, space technologies, and advanced surveillance capabilities are transforming the strategic environment at an unprecedented pace. These changes require policymakers to move beyond traditional approaches and adopt a more comprehensive understanding of security. For India, this means integrating technological modernization with strategic planning while ensuring that emerging capabilities contribute to stability rather than escalation. In my view, one of the most important lessons of the current security environment is that tactical nuclear weapons do not necessarily make conflicts easier to control; rather, they may create a dangerous perception that limited nuclear use can remain limited. Such assumptions underestimate the unpredictable nature of military crises and the possibility of rapid escalation. Therefore, the most effective response is not simply the development of comparable capabilities but the maintenance of a deterrence framework that leaves no ambiguity regarding the consequences of nuclear aggression. Strategic clarity, therefore, remains as important as military capability itself.

Looking ahead, India's nuclear policy should continue to evolve in response to changing geopolitical realities while preserving its core objective of preventing coercion and protecting national interests. Greater emphasis on strategic

communication, technological resilience, crisis-management mechanisms, and international engagement will be essential for addressing future challenges. Simultaneously, India can play a constructive role in promoting dialogue on nuclear risk reduction, confidence-building measures, and responsible conduct among nuclear-armed states. In conclusion, the relevance of India's nuclear policy in the age of growing tactical nuclear threats lies not merely in its ability to deter adversaries but in its capacity to contribute to a stable and predictable security environment. The future international order will depend increasingly on how major states manage competition without allowing it to escalate into catastrophic confrontation. In this regard, India's continued commitment to strategic responsibility, balanced deterrence, and adaptive policymaking will remain crucial not only for its own security but also for the preservation of regional and global stability in the decades ahead.

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