

Yet even here, the value of a nuclear deterrent is far from clear. While the sheer destructiveness of nuclear weapons and a clearly enunciated doctrine governing their employment may serve to impose a certain degree of caution and restraint on the military actions of both sides, the capacity of a minimum deterrent to prevent limited conflict from occurring is unlikely – particularly given a declaratory doctrine of NFU.¹¹

Furthermore, even a well-constructed deterrent may ultimately fail to instill the caution necessary to avoid escalation. What may be considered rational conduct in an atmosphere of calm may be less so during an intense crisis or in the “fog of war.” In fact, under such circumstances, the need to delegate authority to commanders in the field, rapidly shifting tactical situations, and organizational biases could all combine to instill a different calculus in decision makers – one which may heighten the prospects for further conventional escalation and even nuclear employment.

Nor do the potential nuclear dangers raised by sub-state actors and terrorist groups offer a particularly convincing rationale for a nuclear deterrent. While such threats cannot be entirely dismissed¹² – it is difficult to envisage precisely which groups would seek to undertake nuclear action against India much less be in a position to do so. Beyond this, it is even more difficult to see how a nuclear arsenal could effectively deal with such an event were it to occur. Retaliation against sub-state or sub-national groups can be difficult. And consideration of a nuclear response would doubtless raise a myriad of serious political and moral problems – most notably vis-a-vis the state or states on whose territory such groups were suspected of residing.

Alternatives

The fact that most of the threats which a nuclear arsenal is intended to address are either “non-deterrable” or highly problematic from the standpoint of deterrence tends to weaken the NSAB rationale for a minimum deterrent.

Yet such an indictment would not prove fatal were viable alternatives to a nuclear arsenal absent. In fact, NSAB contentions that the NWS have “virtually abandoned” the disarmament cause strongly suggest that effective alternatives for meeting nuclear threats are unavailable.

Once again however, the Advisory Board’s assertions appear overly simplistic. While recent years have indeed witnessed slower progress on the disarmament front and a general unwillingness on the part of some NWS to forsake preferred nuclear options – commitment to the process itself remains high. International pressure for a fundamental reevaluation of offensive nuclear doctrines

¹¹ For instance, it is difficult to foresee how a nuclear capability would deter a conflict such as what has occurred in Kashmir or Kargil.

¹² Ongoing concern over the safety and integrity of the Russian nuclear arsenal has insured that such threats continue to command considerable attention.