

Beyond this, Indian reassurances concerning likely reactions to an “ideal” minimum deterrent tend to ignore the fact that at present, such a force is nowhere near implementation and would take years to develop. They avoid any discussion of the likelihood that such an ideal could ever be achieved. And they ignore the manner in which other states could react during the period under which such a force is being constructed.

Consideration of such issues suggests that in the near-to-medium term, the implications of a nuclear deterrent are far from reassuring. The requirements associated with such a force are numerous and many have yet to be tackled in a sustained and serious manner. Questions of system deployment, command responsibility, integration of the armed forces with nuclear planning, lines of delegation and succession, and a myriad of other issues require resolution. And the past offers little assurance concerning the capacity of Indian officials to resolve such questions effectively. To the extent that such issues remain unresolved, concerns about deterrent credibility, nuclear accidents, and inadvertent escalation during crises can only linger and generate instabilities in and around the region itself.

In fact, given the numerous issues that still require resolution, it is difficult to see how even a no-first-use pledge could automatically be assumed to have the stabilizing effect which Subrahmanyam and other Indian analysts claim for it. In fact, it is not clear that pledges of no-first-use would be trusted. Here, New Delhi's early justification of its arsenal on the basis of a “China threat” is suggestive. The fact that a similar pledge from a state with an established arsenal is regarded as insufficiently convincing to India strongly suggests that the credibility of its own pledge would be suspect – particularly given its current lack of experience in matters of nuclear doctrine.²⁸

Perhaps not surprisingly, the majority of observers suggest that further moves toward a nuclear deterrent will generate a range of arms race and crisis instabilities. India's pursuit of a nuclear arsenal has already led to a slight deterioration in its relationship with Beijing. And lingering requirements for a credible second-strike capability against China will require deployments which are likely to be vulnerable and potentially destabilizing in the short term. Such moves could well create pressures on Beijing to counter Indian deployments with its own nuclear missile build-up. The end result could be growing tension between states, and ultimately, less security on both sides.

The impact of New Delhi's nuclear ambitions on the Indo-Pakistan relationship are equally if not more troubling. Beyond its obvious role in exacerbating political tensions with Islamabad and triggering moves toward overt Pakistani nuclearization, an Indian arsenal could generate nuclear doctrines, war plans and deployments in its Islamic neighbour which are particularly destabilizing.

²⁸ Against this backdrop, the NSAB suggestion that the arsenal feature a capacity for a “swift movement to a nuclear-ready capability” when under attack is somewhat unsettling. It is difficult to imagine any nation – much less a “new nuclear” state – absorbing continuous strikes before launching if it possesses sufficient intelligence that such an attack will occur.