

Review Essay

Coping with the Nuclear Shadow

Arvind Gupta

Prakash Menon

The Strategic Trap: India and Pakistan under the Nuclear Shadow
New Delhi, Wisdom Tree, 2018

Yogesh Joshi and Frank O'Donnell

India in Nuclear Asia: Evolution of Regional Forces, Perceptions, and Policies
Hyderabad, Orient Black Swan, 2018.

The two books under review are written from very different perspectives and styles but, taken together, they provide the reader good insights into India's nuclear doctrine and its contemporary relevance.

Prakash Menon's book is about the conventional war under the nuclear shadow. It emerges out of the author's experiences in the military and the National Security Council Secretariat. The book offers useful insights into the India-Pakistan dynamics after both the countries became nuclear in 1998. Several knotty questions have been raised: Has nuclear deterrence led to stability or instability in India-Pakistan dynamic? Is nuclear deterrence robust? Is conventional war possible under the nuclear overhang? Related questions are: How robust is India's nuclear doctrine? How is deterrence affected by the possibility of nuclear weapons falling into the hands of the terrorists? How should India respond to Pakistan quest for Tactical Nuclear Weapons? Are effective nuclear Confidence Building Measures (CBMs)

Dr. Arvind Gupta is Director, Vivekananda International Foundation and former Deputy National Security Advisor.

possible between India and Pakistan whose overall relationship is otherwise so strained? How has India-Pakistan's military equation changed after the 1998 test?

Prakash Menon deals with these questions in a clinical fashion. Based on his knowledge of nuclear issues, his experience in the government system, Menon provides a dispassionate analysis of the India-Pakistan nuclear conundrum. The key argument of the book is that Pakistan and India have an entirely different understanding of deterrence. This allows for future conflicts. Pakistan has concluded that nuclear weapons have deterred India from initiating a military attack against it while India believes that there is space for limited conventional war.

Menon says, quite correctly, that deterrence is context specific. In India-Pakistan context the continuing proxy war and ISI nexus with terrorism and militants complicate deterrence further. The two countries have a different perception of escalation ladder based upon their own assumption and appreciation of risk. In the absence of a dialogue mechanism, India and Pakistan dynamic is a fraught risk. Further, "the Indo-Pakistan pursuit of space for force application under the nuclear shadow...is a road to nowhere".

Menon points out that the concept of limited war is an Indian construct which has not been tested. But this is not entirely correct. The Kargil military conflict proves that limited war can be fought in the space below the nuclear threshold. In 2002, 2008 and subsequent crises India did not resort to limited war. In 2016, a surgical strike was carried out but no limited war took place. In Menon's view, India-Pakistan deterrence is fragile and beset with stability-instability paradox as well as a security-insecurity dilemma. Both conventional and nuclear deterrence are unreliable (p. 214).

He notes the absence of nuclear signaling between India and Pakistan. Whatever signaling takes place happens in political statements and through media. He is correct in saying that there is a great risk of misunderstanding as political statements cannot be a substitute for professional discussions.

In the recent debate surrounding India's nuclear doctrine, several questions have been raised about the utility of NFU, the credibility of "massive retaliation" and "unacceptable damage" against Pakistan TNW attack, whether there is a need for a strategy of flexible response, use of nuclear weapon against a chemical or biological attack. The book has an entire chapter on India's nuclear doctrine. Menon gives cogent arguments in favour of the retention of nuclear doctrine. He says "the idea

that any use of nuclear weapons could be tactical in effect is grossly misplaced". Further, "there is one factor on which there is no ambiguity whatsoever – India will undoubtedly retaliate, for to not do so could increase the possibility of suffering greater damage". He adds, "the doctrinal guidance is to plan for retaliation in a manner that would cause unacceptable damage which could also seek to neutralize the adversary reaction capacity...use of TNW by Pakistan provides India with an option of striking second but without having experience in substantive first strike with a nuclear arsenal intact.

The centerpiece of the book is the examination of the doctrine of a limited war under the nuclear shadow. He says Pakistan strategy of bleeding India by thousand cuts is juxtaposed against India's strategy of limited war. Both countries find themselves trapped in their own strategies. Menon favours a 'new paradigm' and 'out of the box strategy' to escape the trap. Both sides should rethink their notion about the utility of force. "Statesmanship of either side... (affords) the greatest hope for peace under the shadow of twin revolution", he says. Despite his skepticism about nuclear deterrence between the two countries, Menon concedes on page 182 that "nuclear deterrence has contained conflicts within the manageable limit and both nations have acted cautiously despite indulging in a rhetoric threat in times of crises and limited hostilities".

The two countries have limited contact with each other. Every year they exchange a list of their respective nuclear facility. Surely, more CBMs on nuclear issues would be desirable. But, given Pakistan's reluctance to give up the use of terrorism as an instrument of its India policy, it is unlikely that any serious dialogue between the two countries is possible. India must continue to signal that its nuclear doctrine of no-first-use and massive retaliation is credible.

Yogesh Joshi and Frank O'Donnell's book is well-researched and surveys the development impacting India's nuclear policies including the impact of Pakistan nuclear thinking on India. The book will serve as a good reference book I on the evolutions of India's nuclear thinking since 1998. Research is meticulous and covers in various chapters India's nuclear doctrine, force development as well as Pakistani and Chinese nuclear postures. In chapter 5 the author captures the recent public debate on India's nuclear doctrine. It is one of the few books which examining in detail the India -Pakistan -China nuclear trilateral in a holistic fashion. The key argument of the book is that due to fundamental changes in the political and security environment,

the modernisation of the nuclear arsenal, the introduction of new missiles and delivery system of the three countries, the situation in the region is becoming more unstable and is vulnerable to inadvertent and accidental escalation.

The authors recommend that India, China and Pakistan should initiate a nuclear and naval dialogue to clarify their nuclear doctrine as well as share information about their intentions. This will help reduce the risk of inadvertent escalation. The authors also recommend that India should conduct a public official defence review to inform the public about its conventional and nuclear force planning. The recent public debate on the Indian nuclear doctrine is well covered in the book. The author takes note that the policy of credible minimum deterrence is undergoing a change.

Many analysts have questioned the usefulness of the NFU and sought changes in the doctrine. In the opinion of some analysts, Pakistan's TNW threat has made the doctrine of "massive retaliation" against low yield Pakistan nuclear attack less credible. Therefore, India should develop its own TNWs and go for a flexible response.

The book takes note of the ongoing debate on TNWs and points out that the government response has been to stay the course: namely, the nuclear weapons are a political instrument to deter nuclear blackmail and their use, rather than being the tools of warfighting. Further, the government believes that the NFU continues to serve the national interest well and that India does not distinguish between low yield and high yield weapons. The author feels that India needs a review of its defence planning to remove doctrinal and posturing. However, some of the suggestions in the book are not tenable. India's nuclear doctrine has stood the test of time and served the national interest. It must be understood that India's nuclear doctrine is guided by the philosophy of deterring nuclear blackmail and the use of nuclear weapons. In Indian nuclear philosophy, nuclear war fighting is not an option. If India drops the principle of NFU or opts for tactical nuclear weapons, it will have to change its nuclear doctrine and incorporate the concept of nuclear war fighting and flexible response. This is not the current thinking as far as I know.

Pakistan should know that the use of TNW on Indian forces even on Pakistan territory will be tantamount to crossing the threshold and starting the nuclear war. India needs to make clear at the highest level, through a statement in the Parliament perhaps, that India would not distinguish a tactical nuclear weapon from a higher

yield weapon. The nuclear doctrine provides for massive retaliation and unacceptable damage to the adversary. This will be India's response if anyone uses tactical nuclear weapons against India or Indian Armed Forces. The use of a tactical nuclear weapon is akin to the start of a nuclear war. Deterrence would have failed if Pakistan uses a tactical nuke. India would be free to choose its response. It must be appreciated that the decision to use a nuclear weapon, how to use it, where to use it would be with the civilian authority of the time. In order to deal with the imminent threat of nuclear weapon, the civilian authority will take appropriate action.

As for the suggestion that India, China, Pakistan should enter into a dialogue on the nuclear issues, this is unlikely in the near future. India has reiterated several times that talks and terror do not go hand in hand. In so far as China is concerned, there has been no discussion between India and China on nuclear issues. Even in the 2017 Sino-Indian military standoff in Doklam, there was no focus on the nuclear aspects. Maybe, in future India and China may begin to talk about nuclear issues but there are no indications as yet. After the Wuhan informal Summit in 2017, India-China relations have improved and the trajectory is positive. But there is no doubt that the appearance of Chinese SSBNs in the Indian Ocean would be a matter of concern for India and the two countries could clarify their intentions. What is needed is a broad-based security dialogue between India and China. Nuclear can be one aspect of such a dialogue.

The suggestion for a public review of India's defence planning to clarify the nuclear and conventional postures is unrealistic. India is the only country which has shown transparency and made public its nuclear doctrine. To make public its conventional and nuclear plans is asking for too much. The Indian Armed Forces have already come out with their respective military doctrines. Last year India's navy published a maritime security doctrine. The three forces have made public a joint military doctrine. Therefore, there is enough transparency in the system. To go beyond that will be akin to revealing actual military plans, which is not likely.

There has been a pressure on the government to reveal its national security strategy. The government has not come up with a public national-security strategy although there are enough documents in the public domain from which a reasonable surmise of India's national-security strategy can be made. Defence minister's operational directives, which is an internal document of the Ministry of Defence, is

revised from time to time. The military planners derive their operational strategies from this document.

On the whole, the book is relevant and shows fresh thinking. However, it tends to paint a picture which is alarmist. No doubt the scenarios of accidental or inadvertent escalation are plausible, but it must be recognised that for the past 20 years, deterrence has worked. But this is not to say that the postures, doctrines, command, and control should not be improved in keeping with future developments. The book alerts the reader to the fact that the situation is highly dynamic and one should not rely upon the old methods of thinking. The book will sharpen the ongoing debate on India's nuclear doctrine.