

## Book Review

# South Asia in the Second Nuclear Age

Jaideep Chanda

*India in Nuclear Asia: Evolution of Regional Forces, Perceptions, and Policies*  
Yogesh Joshi & Frank O'Donnell  
Orient Black Swan, Delhi

Two decades separate India's five nuclear tests in Pokhran in 1998 and the publication of this book in 2018. The authors have undertaken a thorough review of the Indian and global perspectives to map the evolution of the Indian nuclear force posture as an expression of its foreign policy, during this period. In the pursuit of this goal, they have analysed those aspects of the regional nuclear environment which have a bearing on India's nuclear policy. They also identify the drivers which may trigger inadvertent and accidental nuclear escalation.

The authors introduce four facets which, according to them, influence India's nuclear policy. First, post-1998 Asia entered the Second Nuclear Age characterised by more institutional and legislative components and neo-nuclear nations Pakistan and North Korea. Both nations are prone to brinkmanship as a foreign policy strategy but overall Asia in the Second Nuclear Age is less likely to play by the conventional 'Cold War' rules of deterrence. Second, they zero in on India's geopolitical position between two nuclear nations with a history of hostility – China and Pakistan. They correctly identify that India has unique deterrent requirements vis-à-vis the two neighbours which directly impact the force structuring and policies. Third, they take into account the improvement in the vector profile across the triad on account of operationalization of the nuclear-powered submarine, improvement of ICBM capabilities and development of the BMD programme. Finally, India has carved for itself a unique place in the global nuclear regime without signing the NPT, through the India-US Civilian Nuclear Agreement of 2008. How all these four factors have shaped Indian nuclear policy is the crux of the book.

---

Jaideep Chanda, Senior Fellow, Vivekananda International Foundation.

They go on to identify three factors which could lead to conditions of inadvertent nuclear escalation in South Asia. The first is the triad arms race with increasing numbers of nuclear submarines, whose custodians feel they '*will necessarily learn about their operation partly through trial and error*'.<sup>1</sup> The authors conclude that with negligible regional dialogue on management of local contact between the naval vessels, the risks of inadvertent nuclear escalation is high. Second, the Chinese penchant for dual use platforms, i.e., same delivery platform for both conventional and nuclear warheads, for example in the DF-21 missile systems, and the lack of clarity on the Indian *Prahaar*, *Brahmos* and *Nirbhay* missile systems adds to risk. Third, the stated intentions of all the three countries to use missile strikes on enemy territory to seize initiative has been identified as another risk escalator. It also spotlights the lack of strategic dialogue between India and Pakistan as a source for accidental nuclear escalation (as against inadvertent escalation).

In the first chapter, which looks at *Indian Nuclear Force Development in 2018*, the authors betray a traditional mind set when they query '*the existence of political limits guiding the programme*'<sup>2</sup> and suggest that the force developments lead away from the stated postures of credible minimum deterrence and assured retaliation. They argue that the emerging force structure reveals an unstated nuclear ambition beyond the immediate geopolitical location, i.e., beyond Pakistan and China. One cannot fault this thought process based on the excellent mapping of the nuclear developments in India in this chapter. However, where this hypothesis stumbles is when applied contextually. Thus, the authors seem to have come to the aforementioned conclusion based on unilaterally mapping the nuclear developments in India. The nuclear developments in the neighbourhood; the proliferation of other lethal non-contact technologies and India's own growing security needs and external role and sense of belief, seem to have been given less weightage. Qualitative and quantitative upgrades would only be natural in the geopolitical environment surrounding India. To question the basics of Indian nuclear policy based on these natural upgrades seems to stem from Western insecurities and assumptions.

## **Pakistan**

In Chapter Two, the authors look at *Pakistan's Nuclear Thought and Posture: Implications for India*. It is a comprehensive coverage of the country's nuclear capabilities. They postulate two trends in the nuclear triangle between India-Pakistan-China. One, the enhanced use of dual-use vectors, which can lead to nuclear escalation based on wrong assumptions, is worrisome. These vectors, when used with intent towards brinkmanship by encouraging the wrong assumption, significantly enhance risk of nuclear escalation. They also flag the increasing trend of development of the naval deterrence which they feel

increases the chance of contact and encounters in the oceans. The authors recommend enhanced surveillance and intelligence capabilities be developed to offset this ambiguity and to develop a naval dialogue mechanism to avoid accidental clashes and to de-escalate naval situations. While the suggestions are valid, they need a bare minimum threshold of trust, to be a success. This is effectively missing in South Asia, especially in the context of India and Pakistan.

## China

The chapter on *Chinese Nuclear Thought and Posture: Implications for India* highlights the differences in the India-China equation vis-à-vis India-Pakistan. It brings out that where India enjoys the ability to put the entire Pakistan at nuclear risk, China does the same to India. However, where China's nuclear perspective is focussed on deterring the USA, India is focussed on deterring China and Pakistan. However, Chinese nuclear developments, though aimed primarily at the USA, effectively impact India and thus have to be factored into Indian nuclear policy. The authors identify that effectively, India appears '*set to face a Chinese nuclear missile threat in the coming years that is increasingly road-mobile, MIRV-capable, precise and ambiguous in constitution, with growing potential for nuclear-capable ballistic missiles to be assigned conventional missions, and vice versa*'.<sup>3</sup> It also identifies a Chinese military strategy that prioritises '*conventional missile strikes upon adversaries, but that can potentially view a similar attack*' against its own forces, as '*nuclear first use*'. A reorganised Chinese conventional force to enable it to be better synchronised, and along with improved logistics capabilities near Indian borders and enhanced PLAAF presence, they pose a threat to India.

Chapter Four looks at *The Doctrinal Background* and lays the base for next part of the book which looks at new challenges for the doctrine. In this chapter the authors conclude that from Pokhran I (1974) to Pokhran II (1998) and the Kargil War (1999), India's nuclear approach was based on providing minimum deterrence and operationalization of this deterrence. This boiled down to working towards assured retaliation in case of a nuclear attack; restrained arsenal readiness and no-first-use. Thereafter, following the pressures of the Second Nuclear Age in Asia, they conclude that Indian decision makers began to enhance the degree of assured retaliation in response to a first strike. Thus the focus now was on providing credibility to the assurance of unacceptable retaliation to a first strike.

## Challenges for India

The last chapter looks at *New Challenges for the Indian Nuclear Doctrine; The Doctrinal Debate, 2003 – Present*. Conventionally, the Kargil War of 1999, is often touted as

the last conventional war between nuclear armed neighbours. Other examples of conflict between nuclearized belligerents include the Sino-Soviet Ussuri River Crisis (1969) and Cuban Missile Crisis (1962) though there was no actual military exchange or loss of life in the last one. The nuclear coming of age of India's nuclear weapon programme in 1998, followed by Pakistani tests in the same year and the Kargil War a year later led to the evolution of the Indian doctrine in 2003. In this chapter, the authors have analysed all aspects of the doctrine. Having established in the previous chapters, the changed strategic environment, and hence the need to revisit the doctrine, they dwell upon the *'remarkable continuity which underlines India's doctrinal journey'*<sup>4</sup> and find it perplexing. They arrive at certain reasons for the doctrinal conservatism. Firstly they attribute the Cold War thought process as having shaped the initial thinkers on the deterrent nature of nuclear weapons as against their utility as weapons for war fighting. Next, the authors identify a minimalistic outlook to the size of the arsenal as driven by historical origins of Indian nuclear thought. Thirdly and expectedly, they identify the lack of an Indian strategic culture and conclude that *'Decisions are not made until absolutely necessary. Strategic planning is always at a premium in a polity where immediate concerns are always more pressing, and require the time and attention of the political class much more than vague pressing requirements of strategy.'*<sup>5</sup> India's civil-military relations have been identified as the fourth reason why military concerns have always been *'filtered through the bureaucratic lens.'* The authors identify the Indian Administrative Service as the *'only gatekeeper'* in interactions between the political class and the military. The chapter concludes that to retain the tradition of restraint in Indian nuclear thought, given the pressures identified in the book, an official defence review is an inescapable requirement. It goes on to postulate that proceeding on the current path without course correction may lead to *'greater doctrinal and posturing incohesion'*.<sup>6</sup>

Overall the book fills a gap in the current available literature on nuclearized South Asia and provides a scholarly take on the inconsistencies in India's nuclear policy in the current nuclear and geostrategic environment. Today, in 2020, India's higher defence organisation has undergone a sea change, far in excess of what analysts had hoped for or expected, with the operationalization of the Chief of Defence Staff and the creation of the Department of Military Affairs. The new CDS has hit the ground running and the official defence review that the authors are alluding to, should be in the offing, sooner, if not later. The book provides a well-researched theoretical background for decision makers and should find a place in all institutional libraries.

## Endnotes

1. Joshi, Yogesh & O'Donnel, Frank. *India in Nuclear Asia: Evolution of Regional Forces, Perceptions, and Policies*. Orient BlackSwan, Delhi, 2018. Pp 5.
2. Ibid, Pp 16.
3. Ibid, Pp 108.
4. Ibid, Pp 184.
5. Ibid, Pp 185.
6. Ibid, Pp 187.