

Nuclear Instability in South Asia: Is Someone Shaping the Narrative?

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Introduction

The 2017 Carnegie International Nuclear Policy Conference took place on March 20 and 21, 2017. On the agenda was a plenary session on the topic, “What are the most likely scenarios for the first use of nuclear weapons in the next five years on the NATO-Russia periphery, in South Asia, and in Northeast Asia?”¹ Dr Vipin Narang, author and Mitsui Career Development Associate Professor of Political Science at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and a member of MIT’s Security Studies Programme, set the cat among the pigeons by suggesting that India’s nuclear strategy, if not the doctrine, might be undergoing some significant changes by suggesting that, “there is increasing evidence that India will not allow Pakistan to go first; and that India’s opening salvo may not be conventional strikes trying to pick off just Nasr batteries in the theatre, but a full ‘comprehensive counterforce strike’ that attempts to completely disarm Pakistan of its nuclear weapons”.² Ironically, Narang’s assessment, that India plans to junk the No First Use (NFU), throws out of the window his own analysis of India’s nuclear posturing – that of ‘Assured Retaliation’ based on his ‘theory of optimisation’ so eloquently articulated in his much acclaimed book, “Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era”.

Narang’s analytical U-turn is not an isolated one-off observation. Earlier in January, Hannah Haegeland, in her piece, “*The Terrifying Geography of Nuclear and Radiological Insecurity in South Asia*”³ built a case to suggest that, contrary to conventional wisdom, it is India’s nuclear facilities that are more vulnerable to terrorists and non-state actors, than those of Pakistan. They say that the devil lies in the detail. However, this idiom gets an entirely new meaning when statistics and figures are used to prove a point, howsoever out of context; for example, India is estimated to have 57,443 medical X-ray units and more than 12,000 devices that use radioactive materials for industrial and medical applications and these are all vulnerable to low probability but extremely high-risk threat of nuclear and radiological terror. The same figures could well be utilised by the World Health Organisation to reflect the dismal state of healthcare facilities in the world’s second most populated country. No wonder Evan Esar believed that statistics is the science of producing unreliable facts from reliable figures!

The Stimson Centre, too, has recently launched its ‘Off the Ramps Project’ aimed at generation of creative ideas that can help ameliorate and decelerate this dangerous triangular nuclear competition between China-India-Pakistan. In his inaugural article titled, “*Launching an Expanded Missile Flight-Test Notification Regime*”, Frank O’Donnell posits that, “China, India and Pakistan are engaged in a nuclear competition of growing intensity”.⁴ What is the message that is intended to be conveyed and is it justified?

Is NFU of Nuclear Weapons Still the Best Choice for India?

Let’s return to Narang’s observations which are primarily premised on the statements of India’s former Raksha Mantri (RM), Shri Manohar Parikar in response to a question on nuclear defence, some articles questioning the robustness of India’s Nuclear Doctrine by Lieutenant General BS Nagal, PVSM, AVSM, SM (Retd) former Commander-in-Chief Strategic Forces Command (SFC) and most importantly the

writings of Ambassador Shiv Shankar Menon, former National Security Adviser (NSA) of India in his book, *'Choices – Inside the Making of India's Foreign Policy'*.

Firstly, Menon's essay titled, 'Why India Pledges NFU of Nuclear Weapons' is a detailed and informed articulation of rational possibilities in the Indo-Pak nuclear scenario to prove a moot point that resorting to NFU remains the best choice for India in current circumstances. As is expected from any balanced analysis, this too describes scenarios which stray away from what is common wisdom by suggesting various alternatives and that is where Vipin Narang seems to have a problem, particularly with two paragraphs. Menon writes, *"Circumstances are conceivable in which India might find it useful to strike first, for instance, against a Nuclear Weapon State (NWS) that had declared it would certainly use its weapons, and if India were certain that adversary's launch was imminent. But India's present public doctrine is silent on this scenario"* and *"If Pakistan were to use tactical nuclear weapons against India, even against Indian forces in Pakistan, it would effectively be opening the door to a massive Indian first strike, having crossed India's declared red lines. There would be little incentive, once Pakistan had taken hostilities to the nuclear level, for India to limit its response, since that would only invite further escalation by Pakistan... In other words, Pakistani tactical nuclear weapon use would effectively free India to undertake a comprehensive first strike against Pakistan."*⁵ When read in isolation, these can be suggestive of a policy drift away from NFU, however, that is not true in case of the above two paragraphs if appreciated in context. The former, is preceded by a preamble that states, *"What are the alternatives to first use?.....a first strike doctrine is surely destabilising, and does not further our primary purpose of our weapons deterring....."* - unambiguously bringing out the true perspective. As regards the second paragraph, notwithstanding the terminology used, it is a reaffirmation of India's declared stance – a first strike by Pakistan, regardless of yield and location, would invite massive retaliation by India.

That there has been selective and unfair citing of an article to push a particular hypothesis by Narang is further proven if one turns the pages to Chapter 3 of Menon's book, "Restraint or Riposte?" where after analysing the decision to not militarily respond to the 26/11 attack on Mumbai, Menon argues that the then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh made the right decision by concluding, *"Pakistan's steady slide into incoherence, its disintegration into multiple power centers, and the diminishing writ of the State also means that support for cross-border terrorism could actually grow in the future,"* he writes. *"Indian policymakers and diplomats must be prepared for the long struggle to continue without decisive military solutions, and set ourselves modest political goals in this struggle. Temporary silencing the cross-border terrorists is the best we can hope for..."*⁶ Wouldn't he be fundamentally contradicting himself by suggesting a nuclear first strike against the same belligerent Pakistan in a later chapter of the same book?

Therefore, selectively picking out these paragraphs to give an alarmist hue to an impartial and balanced analysis is something that merits an explanation. In this background, Michael Krepon in his article, *"The Counterforce Compulsion in South Asia"*, presents a more realistic interpretation of Menon's views, while continuing to reinforce the West's scepticism about India's NFU.⁷

Secondly, as regards the statement of Shri Manohar Parrikar, the same was an off the cuff answer to an isolated question and that too expressly qualified to be in his 'personal capacity'. Too much credence is not justified, especially when the same has not been backed by any official statement. Further, is it wise to selectively prop up the former RM's personal remark while playing down the then Prime Ministerial candidate, Shri Narendra Modi's commitment to NFU in Apr 2014? *"It is necessary to be powerful - not to suppress anyone, but for our own protection,"* Modi had said in an interview with the ANI television service. *"No first use was a great initiative of Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee - there is no compromise on that. We are very clear."*

No first use is a reflection of our cultural inheritance,” Modi told ANI when questioned on the BJP’s manifesto which pledged to review the nuclear doctrine, whose two main pillars were a NFU commitment and building a credible but minimum nuclear arsenal.⁸

Similar analogy applies to General Nagal’s writings, which too seem to have been referred to out of context. Narang cites the General questioning the morality of the NFU, an input he believes adds credence to his hypothesis. While he may have picked up these views from some article or statement by the ex-SFC Chief, the context of these beliefs is difficult to ascertain in absence of specific citations. In order to arrive at a balanced view, it would not be out of place to quote a paragraph from an article published in the Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS) Journal, Winter 2015 edition by General Nagal where he unambiguously states, *“Whilst theorists may deliberate on the escalation ladder and thresholds when nuclear weapons will be used, practitioners of nuclear strategy will not lower the threshold unless the very existence of the state is in danger. If a state wishes to lower the threshold knowing fully well the implications of the adversary’s policy, it may be an act of brinkmanship or miscalculation. Any nation which wants/considers use of nuclear weapons at low levels of war, is probably not aware of the dangers that the initiating country is being exposed to by such an action. Hence, there will be no confidence in the future rationality of that leadership”*⁹

Why selectively pick out one of Nagal’s articles when so many Indian scholars have steadfastly defended the robustness of NFU, to cite just a few – Brigadier Gurmeet Kanwal, Late Air Cmdre Jasjit Singh, Dr Manpreet Sethi, Dr Roshan Khanijo et al.

Having analysed the arguments put across by Vipin Narang, how credible is his rather ‘over-the-top’ hypothesis that India plans to discard NFU of nuclear weapons as a policy?

As regards the ‘discernible shift in India’s NFU stance’, while there has been, and continues to be considerable debate within the Indian security establishment regarding the need to review, there seems to be no apparent change in policy. It is important to understand why. The answers perhaps lie in India’s decisions to not only go overtly nuclear in 1998, but also become the only country to put out officially, in writing, a formal nuclear doctrine in Jan 2003. India assured the world that *nuclear weapons are political instruments for deterrence, not for warfighting – a belief which it stands by even today*. India’s nuclear doctrine has four crucial aspects namely, “building and maintaining a credible minimum deterrent”; “a posture of ‘No First Use’ (NFU); “nuclear weapons will only be used in retaliation against a nuclear attack on Indian territory or on Indian forces anywhere”; and, finally, “nuclear retaliation to a first strike will be massive and designed to inflict unacceptable damage”¹⁰ As Shivshankar Menon concludes in his now famous Chapter, ‘*Why India Pledges No First Use of Nuclear Weapons*’ this is the only doctrine that makes sense for India. Nuclear weapons, he points out, *“are primarily political weapons, the currency of power in the nuclear age, rather than effective war-fighting weapons.”* India’s nuclear arsenal exists to ensure the country is not blackmailed by another nuclear actor, and not to give itself blackmailing abilities. *“Assured retaliation combined with a NFU policy also means that it is not the number of nuclear weapons that India or its adversaries possess that matters. What matters is India’s ability to inflict unacceptable damage in retaliatory strike or strikes.”*¹¹ He summarises it in one line: *first strike equals aggression, no-first-use equals deterrence*.

Further, even if we assume for a moment that the argument is true and India has taken the decision to junk the NFU – what next? How, with what resources, on what targets and in what time frame does India intend to strike first into Pakistan? And having done so, does she expect that Pakistan will not retaliate – what are the mechanisms to absorb the retaliation? Surprisingly, there are no explanations or even plausible theories on offer. Analysts may argue it is not

necessary for the Government to officially announce a change, however, it would be reasonable to assume that some definite indicators would accompany such a major shift in policy. Are there any such indicators? Are there any compelling reasons for this policy shift? Is there a change in how India views nuclear weapons – from instruments of political deterrence to those of war-fighting? Has there been a spurt in India's defence spending? Are there reports of any out of the ordinary trends in India's strategic programme or civil nuclear establishment? Are there any indications of a policy shift in India's response to Pakistan sponsored terrorist attacks which point towards nuclear overtures? The answer to all the above questions is a firm No – implying that NFU with massive retaliation remains the backbone of Indian doctrinal thinking regarding use of nuclear weapons.

It would suffice to say that major changes in national nuclear doctrines or strategic concepts are not based on views expressed in isolated writings or off the cuff interviews or statements. On the contrary, they are a consequence of protracted deliberations and serious debates, especially in responsible democracies like India whose nuclear behaviour and non-proliferation credentials can put to shame the actions of some nuclear powers who are even signatories to the NPT.

A Hidden Narrative?

Though it does not question India's approach to nuclear weapons use, an analysis of Hannah Haegeland's article is also important as it represents views and perceptions shared by many Western think tanks which provide essential inputs in shaping opinion of international bodies such as the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG). The article cites a number of thesis and papers to establish a case that India's fissile material is unsafe because, (a) India has not separated its civilian and military nuclear activities, (b) there have been number of instances of lapses (though minor) of security of fissile material (incidentally the source being quoted is an internal audit report by Indian agencies responsible) and (c) the expanding threat environment in South Asia. While their anxieties are appreciated, it would be reasonable to accept that despite all the concerns, there has been no major incident so far which adds credence to these. Further, India's strategic partnership with the US – now famous as the 123 Agreement and its subsequent clearance by consensus by 46 members (2005) of the NSG stand testimony to the nation's commitment to non-proliferation as well as highest standards of nuclear safety and security. It is also reasonable to accept that matters pertaining to strategic weapons, force structuring, procedures and protocols fall under highly classified matters and there is a limit to what can be put out in the open domain.

Suffice to say that if the Western Powers who are responsible for exposing the world to these dangers can be trusted with their respective strategic programmes, there is no reason to doubt the credibility of similar programmes by responsible nations like India with a proven track record.

Having discussed the credibility of claims by the scholars and think tanks cited above, let's come to the consequences of the message being conveyed. While it is fair for a nation's policies and security strategies to be subjected to healthy scrutiny and criticism, selective nit-picking to shape a loaded narrative is something that needs to be guarded against. In the current instance, the moot point is not whether India's Nuclear Doctrine and NFU stance merit a relook or that India needs to tighten its procedures and handling of nuclear material - but that a seemingly alarmist twist is being accorded to an otherwise desirable evolution of security strategy by a nation with exemplary credentials and commitment to global peace.

What is most startling is that these analysts seek to publicise, rather dramatise issues which are in the conceptual domain and represent their own illusion of events which may occur

in the future (past trends of threshold maintenance in a seven decades old conflict notwithstanding), while conveniently disregarding the events which are unfolding in full view of the world – unjustified ramping up of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal, persistent attempts to lower the nuclear threshold by inducting and deploying Tactical Nuclear Weapons, brandishing the nuclear bogey to fuel the proxy war against India and continued Chinese support to Pakistan's nuclear programme. While the incumbent hue and cry may bring instant fame and attention to the concerned analysts for their ostensive ability to read between the lines, it is not without attendant consequences of simulating crisis like situations when there are none. For a nation like India which is facing multiple conventional and sub-conventional threats on multiple fronts, such articles are most damaging. Not only do these contribute towards India being viewed by the West through the same prism as Pakistan, they are perfect ingredients for the hysteria so desperately sought by the confrontational adversary who is perpetually in search for excuses to ramp up its arsenal vis-a-vis India. As a result, peace and stability remain a distance dream in the Indian sub-continent.

While there is and has been tension along the Line of Control (LoC) between India and Pakistan, the conflict has remained largely localised and controlled over the last seventy years. Is it fair to brand nuclearisation of the sub-continent as the proverbial whipping boy in an age where unsuspecting innocent civilians face a much greater threat from horrific terror attacks on the streets of Paris, Manchester or New York? And if one considers the events of the past year in due fairness, the actions of the new administration in the US as well as activities of Russia and China have not helped the cause of global peace and stability. So why is it that South Asia in general and India in particular are being selectively singled out as threats to global security when there are far more serious concerns – the Islamic State, Al Qaida, Taliban and belligerent North Korea being a few of them. Viewed from the Indian perspective, the reasons could be interesting, but not entirely surprising.

The first reason is perhaps, the perceived indispensability of Pakistan as a geo-political pivot for the security needs of the West. Despite its near failed state status with an overbearing military control (an understatement of sorts) as also the fountainhead of global terror, Pakistan remains a state which is not easy to let go off. It is not only its utility as a rentier state with an important geo-strategic location, but also as a counter balance to the two growing Asian powers, China and India. Also, there is a valid morbid fear of a disintegrated Pakistan – implying that it is better off in its present form and any move to isolate and abandon it may have disastrous consequences. Therefore, a favourable edge to India in the Indo-Pak equilibrium would be a threat to Pakistan in its present form and seen as inimical to western interests – hence, the need for effective counterbalances.

The second reason is the emergence of India as growing power. The rise of China has not been easy to digest and if there is one country that has similar potential, it is India. The West would never want to allow this shift in the global order and no matter what, the 'strategic apartheid' is here to stay. India has time and again displayed its resurgent capabilities, be its nuclear programme despite sanctions post 1974 or 1998, its handling of East Pakistan crisis in 1971 or the economic revival of 1990s and is now well on its trajectory of overall growth despite pressures and conflicts of internal chaos associated with its third world status. What has perhaps raised hackles in the West is the emergence of a majority regime which has shown a determined resolve to break the *status quo*, not only in hitherto-fore lethargy towards domestic reforms but also travel the extra mile in dealing with matters of foreign policy and national security. The decision to go in for surgical strikes on terror launch pads across the LoC, large scale demonetisation and initiatives to curb the black economy, the Prime Minister's personal push towards foreign policy initiatives across the globe and the recent passing of the Finance Bill, all point towards the will of the government with a passion, alacrity and perseverance not

seen in Delhi for decades. The fact, this has the backing of the hugely diverse Indian populace (as proved by recent elections) further substantiates that the drift is here to stay and is not just a passing phase.

Therefore, the trends in writings, themes and agendas of various Western think tanks highlighted above seem to be in sync with a narrative being shaped to place the Indian security establishment on a back foot. This is not to suggest that the security concerns being expressed should be totally ignored. However, while the powers that be must take cognisance of the loopholes and vulnerabilities to plug the gaps wherever required, the underlying agenda to shape the narrative needs to be countered on facts and logic.

The Road Ahead

This trend is also particularly significant in view of the upcoming Summit on 'Countering WMD Terrorism' to be hosted by India in 2018, wherein these issues are likely to be raked up.¹² The stakes are high for India given the security scenario in the subcontinent, our rising clout and influence in the world order and our endeavours towards entry to the United Nations Security Council, the NSG, the Australia Group and the Wassenaar Arrangement. At a time when India is facing stiff resistance by the China-Pak combine to block the above initiatives, a resurgent hybrid war in a nuclear backdrop by Pakistan and sustained efforts by China to gain strategic footholds in the Indian subcontinent – be it through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), One Belt One Road (OBOR) or heightened PLA naval outreach in the Indian Ocean, it is important that we not only prepare adequately to counter the narrative being built up, but also carefully select leitmotifs and agenda for such summits.

Towards this, recently published articles, *"India's Nuclear Doctrine is Robust and Requires no Review"*¹³, *"Time to Nuke the Storm in the Teacup"*¹⁴ and *"India is not Changing its policy on No First Use of Nuclear Weapons"*¹⁵ are well timed and germane. However, we need to further carry this message and what better platform than the upcoming summit in 2018. While the agenda for the same may have already been formalised, there is certainly room for including a few themes so necessary to deal with the situation India seems to be confronting. Two such themes are suggested.

The first theme relates to *"Challenges of Nuclear Safety in the Era of Hybrid Warfare."* The aim of this theme is to bring to fore the difficulties and complexities of nuclear safety in a world increasingly engaged in non-traditional hybrid warfare - where the boundaries and limits of warfare as well as the protagonists - are progressively diminishing. Can the world afford to watch with impunity the stockpiling of nuclear arsenals, especially those meant for battlefield use in an environment where faceless non-state actors and terror outfits are gaining dominance and it is becoming almost impossible for even established players to ensure their safety and prevent misuse? Is there a need for the world to stand united in banning such weapons whose utility and cost effectiveness has already been established to be worthless post the Cold War? What are the measures which may be taken to put an end to development and deployment of such weapons with particular reference to the role expected to be played by Permanent Members of the Security Council?

The second suggested theme seeks to discuss and bring out a policy framework on the *"Needs, Role and Responsibilities of Regional Nuclear Powers towards Nuclear Disarmament and Non-Proliferation."* The nuclear weapons were a product of the Cold War and most postulates, theories and concepts are based on the dynamics of that war. Even the nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation initiatives are based on the experience of global powers viz., the USA and Russia. Today's reality is very different, as seven out of the nine nuclear weapon

states are regional powers - implying that success of any peace initiative involving nuclear weapons would yield credible results if and only if, these regional players are afforded a greater role in decision making. Fielding of such a theme, in the author's view would help bring to the table, greater accountability and responsibility among such players – especially China and India who are seen to be emerging as future global powers.

Discussions and deliberations on the above suggested themes would not only help the cause of disarmament, non-proliferation and contribution to overall global peace but also provide food for thought to analysts and think tanks to deliberate on some real contemporary issues rather than wasting their efforts on fabricated narratives!

Endnotes

¹ <http://carnegieendowment.org/2017/03/21/2017-carnegie-international-nuclear-policy-conference-event-5209>

² <http://www.livemint.com/Opinion/lvxg7a5QQL9jeEkpxFAiNO/Time-to-nuke-the-storm-in-the-teacup.html>. Complete text of his prepared remarks can be found at <https://southasianvoices.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Vipin-Narang-Remarks-Carnegie-Nukefest-2017.pdf>.

³ <https://www.stimson.org/content/terrifying-geography-nuclear-and-radiological-insecurity-south-asia>

⁴ <https://www.stimson.org/sites/default/files/Launching-Expanded-Missile-Flight-Test-Notification-Regime.pdf>

⁵ Shiv Shankar Menon, *Choices - Inside the Making of Indian Foreign Policy*, Penguin India 2016

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ <http://www.armscontrolwonk.com/archive/1203018/the-counterforce-compulsion-in-south-asia/>

⁸ <http://in.reuters.com/article/india-election-nuclear-weapon-idINKBN0D 20NA20140416>

⁹ Balraj Nagal, *India's Nuclear Strategy to Deter: Massive Retaliation to Cause Unacceptable Damage*, *CLAWS Journal*, Dec 2015

¹⁰ http://idsa.in/issuebrief/RevisitingIndiasNuclearDoctrine_schandra_300414

¹¹ Op cit, Shiv Shankar Menon

¹² <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/06/07/joint-statement-united-states-and-india-enduring-global-partners-21st>

¹³ <http://delhipolicygroup.org/publication/policy-notes/dpg-policy-note-vol-ii-issue-3-indias-nuclear-doctrine-is-robust-and-requires-no-review.html>

¹⁴ <http://www.livemint.com/Opinion/lvxg7a5QQL9jeEkpxFAiNO/Time-to-nuke-the-storm-in-the-teacup.html>

¹⁵ <https://warontherocks.com/2017/03/india-is-not-changing-its-policy-on-no-first-use-of-nuclear-weapons/>

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