

In Tribute: Recalling The ‘Sundarji Doctrine’

Colonel Ali Ahmed

Given the ‘flamboyance’ of his personality, any reference to General Sundarji arouses disparate responses. Happily the most widely subscribed to description of the late General is ‘cerebral’.¹ To him must indeed be credited the yardstick for quality of engagement with doctrinal questions. This is irrefutably true in terms of the mechanisation of the Army and induction of manoeuvre warfare thinking. However, it can retrospectively be said that General Sundarji would have preferred to be known to history, and more than likely would be known to the future, more through his contribution to thinking on the issue of nuclear deterrence.

While mechanization of the Army was an inevitable evolutionary step, only midwifed by Sundarji, it is his place in the pantheon of early nuclear theorists in India that is a true measure of his contribution to national security. An independent writer on strategy retired Vice Admiral Koithara credits him with the first serious study of a nuclear strategy for India; a view concurred with by Brigadier Gurmeet Kanwal.² His uniqueness lies in his input being made primarily in an era when political control of the nuclear agenda dictated a distancing of the Services from the nuclear question. However, the General’s untimely departure prevented his ideas from impacting the final shape of the nuclear doctrine that India has progressively arrived at. It can be said that his ideas on the nuclear issue were in character - trifle ahead of the times, which, curiously, they still remain as this article goes on to reveal. The article dwells on Sundarji’s place in history by dissecting his refreshingly original perspective on nuclear deterrence.

General Sundarji made an early mark in the nuclear field in publishing the proceedings of a seminar at the College of Combat, of which he was then the Commandant.³ This was perhaps the second articulation of a soldier-scholar on nuclear issues, with Major General Som Dutt having the distinction of being the pioneer in the mid-sixties with his Adelphi Paper at the distinguished London think tank, International Institute of Strategic Studies. General Som Dutt, in wake of the Chinese nuclear explosion of 1964, had made a cost estimate of the nuclear route, without ultimately advocating the capability for India. This is representative of the period, in that even Sam Bahadur was not then enamoured with the Bomb. Perhaps the first time the issue was broached officially by the Army was in General Krishna Rao recommending acquisition of nuclear weapons to the Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi. Rao had earlier headed the committee on restructuring the Army formed in 1975, that had Lieutenant General Sundarji as member. It is also surmised that General Sundarji, as Chief in 1986, communicated the Army’s position to the government.⁴

Sundarji was a perspicacious graduate of the DSSC, Wellington and the US Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth. In the US during the heady days of 1967, he was no doubt witness to the introspection within the American Army on its experience in Vietnam.⁵ This culminated in the formation of its TRADOC (Training and Doctrine Command) which had innovative, and influential, output on Air Land battle concepts under its first two heads, Don Starry and DePuy. However, Sundarji, aware of the differences in the nuclear dimension of the cold war situation from the one in South Asia, prompted the first thinking on war in conditions of nuclear asymmetry. The postal seminar he organised as head of the College of Combat in 1980, referred to earlier, recorded the majority opinion that nuclear asymmetry compelled nuclearisation. Indian impetus to mechanisation under Sundarji can be said to have been influenced by these doctrinal outpourings. There is thus a link between Sundarji’s twin initiatives since manoeuvre warfare was the only answer in a situation of nuclear asymmetry.

With the US looking the other way, Pakistan had acquired the nuclear capability. The role of mechanised pincers in conventional war rehearsed in Exercise Brasstacks was mindful of the emerging situation.⁶ However, the threat of nuclear use posed problems for concentration of conventional forces of the disadvantaged side. This, *inter alia*, convinced him in favour of the nuclear option.⁷ He recommended nuclearisation as head of a nuclear planning group constituted by Rajiv Gandhi in Nov 1985. In his view, a minimum credible deterrence was not cost-prohibitive, working out to an affordable Rs. 7000 crores over ten years. He went on to outline his perspective on a putative nuclear-doctrine for a Small Nuclear Power in his famous paper for Trishul, Journal of the Defence Services Staff College.⁸ His motivation was that professionals have an obligation to go ahead in evolving a doctrine of nuclear deterrence, even if the forces were not in the policy loop at the time.

Though kept out of the closed circle, the military position in favour of nuclearisation could be taken for granted. The reason advanced by Perkovich – noted for his magnum opus on the India’s nuclear endeavour – for this marginalisation of the military of the period is that the scientist-politician-bureaucrat combine preferred a minimal capability, being more sensitive to the political and psychological dimensions of a nuclear capability.⁹ They were unwilling to let the Armed Forces in on the decision-making, fearing that their preoccupation with war-fighting would queer the ‘minimal’ in the ‘minimum credible deterrent’ being fashioned for India.¹⁰

The Army’s contention, nevertheless, was that, being the eventual users, it needed to undertake the prior preparation to including doctrinal assimilation. Prominent Indian-origin India observer, Ashley Tellis, informs that the Army’s assimilation of the changed conditions was desultory at best.¹¹ In this respect the Air Force has been more proactive, being in prior possession of delivery system in the form of aircraft. By the late-eighties, it had begun perfecting toss-bombing techniques. With the temporary acquisition of the INS Chakra, the Navy was also in the run for the ultimate in deterrence - survivable, submersible, delivery platforms.¹² That the forces are now a part of the decision making and implementing process, in the form of a joint Strategic Forces Command, owes to a ‘one step at a time’ approach of the government that can be best appreciated only in retrospect.

During the period when developments were less visible, Sundarji was understandably a mild critic of the position

of nuclear ambiguity adopted by India all through his intellectual engagement with the issue after his retirement.¹³ Sundarji memorably termed the seemingly oblivious approach of the Government as a 'lotus eating approach',¹⁴ though retrospectively it is known that work was ongoing on all facets of the deterrent. The Government was very much in a position to test as early as 1995, when it was dissuaded by the US, but, retrospectively justified, foregrounding of economic reforms in its grand strategic thinking had restrained its hand. Nevertheless, his output of the period was on par, and in sync, with K Subrahmanyam in its direction and influence.¹⁵ His affable accessibility and seminal interventions guided the debate through the Nineties - a period in which strategic studies became virtually a cottage industry; with discussions on the Islamic Bomb, India's Option and CTBT driving the debate.

He was mindful of the impact of nuclear weapons as guarantors against coercion in the early post-cold war years of unipolarity. Most importantly, he understood the stalling impact of Pakistani nuclear capability on the method of war-fighting developed by him in the eighties; of the converging of armoured division-based pincers in Pakistani depth.¹⁶ In 1993, he wrote the epitaph on the conventional doctrine that was his own creation: "Even if India were foolish enough to create a large conventional edge, it would be unusable for undoing Pakistan, because of the near certainty that Pakistan would then use its nuclear weapons in extremis,"¹⁷ Koithara notes that this did not prevent Sundarji from foreclosing the military option in the form of a 'limited war';¹⁸ presaging the development of today of the Cold Start doctrine.

Tracing the relationship between the growing nuclear capabilities of the two states and the impact on India's conventional and nuclear doctrine brings us to the Cold Start doctrine. Kanwal does so in his book Nuclear Defence noting that it would be to play into Pakistani hands were Indian conventional superiority to be restricted by the nuclear threat. In his perspective, after a decade of proxy war and provocations by Pakistan, the national mood changed to one in which Indian public opinion would accept nothing short of dismemberment of Pakistan in case of Pakistani nuclear use. This he maintains should be the response even if Pakistan has struck in face of Indian strike corps offensive operations for quick strategic gains-, a hark back to Sundarji's days. He thinks calling 'Pakistan's bluff' is militarily possible with a declaratory policy favouring a massive counter value and counter force strike even if Indian soldiers deep inside enemy territory invite a Pakistani first use.¹⁹ In the event, India's conventional doctrine through Cold Start has apparently moved away from the Sundarji era and Kanwal's advocacy of deep penetration towards the logic of 'limited war'; while the nuclear doctrine, officially declared in Jan 2003, endorses Kanwal's position in its adoption of 'massive retaliation' for 'deterrence by punishment'. This brief recapitulation of developments is necessary to situate Sundarji's version of the nuclear doctrine which is at variance with India's declared nuclear doctrine on a crucial aspect we shall come to subsequently.

But first, a threading together of Sundarji's thinking on the nuclear question scattered through his various works. The General was cognizant of the Chinese threat but considered it remote believing that counter value targeting was enough to deter it, as against an expansionist megatonnage-based approach. He coined the phrase 'Nuclear Reaction Threshold' - the tipping point triggering a nuclear reaction compelled by a conventional push. The NRT is the much debated phantom nuclear 'redline'. His writings now constitute the baseline for thinking on de-mated and dispersed deployment profile; disfavour of strategic defences; a non-edgy command and control system; and communications backbone. That weapons of the Hiroshima category could be put to either tactical or strategic use, brought about his opinion that against a small nuclear power an arsenal of about 20 weapons was enough; while a bigger power would require about 50 to deter. He saw no necessity for diversifying the arsenal to include tritium or hydrogen bombs. There is much convergence in his views on No First Use and Minimal Nuclear Deterrence with the national nuclear doctrine.

However, according to this writer, the most consequential part of his legacy is his view on the response to nuclear use. Presently the declared nuclear doctrine in retaining the earlier formulation of the Draft Nuclear Doctrine has it that "nuclear retaliation to a first strike will be massive and designed to inflict unacceptable damage".²⁰ Since any quantum of retaliation would virtually result in unacceptable damage, there is no call to reflexively interpret this formulation as expansive and amounting to 'massive retaliation'. Nevertheless, it precludes inclusion as one of 'graduated response'. This has to be read in the context of professed utility India seeks from nuclear weapons. India, seeking political utility solely for deterrence of first use by the adversary, has resorted to punitive retaliation of a higher order than envisaged in other conceptualisations, such as that of Sundarji.

Sundarji had articulated his position in his article for Trishul thus:

"The resulting philosophy may therefore be one of minimum response, even if it stayed below the received level. It could be a quid pro quo response equated to the received strike. It could be a quid pro quo plus response, to incorporate the element of threat...Finally, it could be a spasmic reaction that aims at the drastic reduction in the adversary's retaliatory capability and will. ...",²¹

His guidelines for operationalising this philosophy in relation to Pakistan as an example is encapsulated below:-²²

- (a)** aim to avoid to the extent possible any action that might lead to hostilities;
- (b)** permit Pakistan the option of compromising without loss of face;
- (c)** modulate offensives in scope and depth of ingress to stop before Pakistani resort to nuclear weapons;
- (d)** avoid political rigidity through a policy of nuclear transparency in respect of keeping citizens informed of choices made and options avoided;
- (e)** no first use of nuclear weapons be made;
- (f)** finally, and most importantly, make every effort at war termination short of nuclear weapon use, failing which terminate hostilities at the lowest possible level of (nuclear) use, with honorable concessions

offered to end the conflict.

His definition of minimum credible deterrence can be derived from his premise: 'That there is neither need nor meaning in attempting to match any adversary in the number of weapons; nor of achieving superiority; as long as there is an assured capability of second strike that can inflict unacceptable damage, with unacceptable damage defined sensibly'.²³ The contention here is that this phrase, in conjunction with 'terminate hostilities at the lowest possible level of use', quoted earlier, is his defining contribution to nuclear thinking. Unfortunately, it has not got the attention it deserves in strategic literature, and consequently its influence on nuclear targeting philosophy in practice can only be feared to be limited.

General Sundarji lived to see fulfillment to his dream of India as a nuclear power. However, his illness in the run up to his death did not permit him to actively engage with the doctrinal effervescence in India in the wake of Pokhran and Kargil.²⁴ Thus his singular contribution, that could have lent a pronounced humane and politically sensitive turn to the doctrine, could not be ventured. However, any doctrine, if it is to stay viable, is a live concept in terms of growing through iterations of learning and revision. Therefore, there is scope yet for making the 'Sundarji doctrine' inspiration for an updating of the national nuclear doctrine.

.Colonel Ali Ahmed commanded 4 marathali. Presently he is posted at Headquarters Army Training Command. Journal of the United Service Institution of India, Vol. CXXXVIII, No. 571, January-March 2008.