
Book Review

Studies in Indian Politics

4(1) 1–2

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Study of Developing Societies

SAGE Publications

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DOI: 10.1177/2321023016634966

<http://inp.sagepub.com>



A. Vinod Kumar, *India and the Nuclear Non-proliferation Regime: The Perennial Outlier*. New Delhi: Cambridge University Press. 2014. 233 pages. ₹795.

This is an admirable contribution to both the literature on nuclear non-proliferation and India's relationship with regime types. At present, it is the only complete account of what scholars like to call 'counter-proliferation' and India. This book provides an easily readable narrative of how India sought to develop strategies of action to deal with non-proliferation norms embedded in the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). Yet, this book is not just about telling a story of Indian efforts. It is as much about establishing a conceptual framework through which these terms of debate can be better understood. The central argument is clear from the outset: that India's relationship with 'instruments of non-proliferation' has in turn shaped and informed its approach to nuclear policy. In many ways, this is an obvious point. However, there are few works that focus on this relationship itself. Prestige, according to Latha Varadarajan and a whole range of constructivists, serves as one of the primary drivers explaining India's acquisition of nuclear weapons. Security, as realists would argue, is the all-important driver. Finally, domestic politics, historians suggest, play some role in the causal relationship between India's desire for weapons and its possession of the same. Few, if any, have placed India's quest for weapons in a framework of analysis that traces the 'tumultuous transformations' in the relationship between the state—in this case India—and regimes such as the NPT.

This work is path breaking as it advances alternative causal explanations that finally led to the 1998 tests and after and does so, uniquely, with the ease of an historian's pen using a whole range of official and secondary sources. This work is not just about India and the NPT. Rather, it makes room for theories associated with the very concept of non-proliferation. The framework provided in the first two chapters could well be used to explain how other states sought to work with, and around, the NPT in their quest for nuclear weapons. Those working on Brazil and South Africa, for instance, will find this immediately useful. The following two chapters are specifically on India, the NPT and disarmament. They provide a detailed account of how India dealt with both the spirit of, and regulations within, the NPT. It discusses everything from nuclear terrorism to the role played by the ubiquitous A.Q. Khan and their impact on Indian decision-making in the 1980s and 1990s. It also makes clear why a 'universalization' agenda as it stands has little appeal for India, one of the 'Problem-3 states' along with Pakistan and Israel. Of course, while Israel has not admitted to the possession of nuclear weapons, and given the proliferation track record of Pakistan, as led by Khan, India is left in a unique place. It is the only non-NPT member state among these three to have considered cooperation and integration with the regime at different points of time.

The last section of the book looks specifically at counter-proliferation and 'the quest for an Indian strategy'. For those more interested in the contemporary history of India, this section is a treat. It offers a nuanced and balanced account of India's engagement with the 'new nuclear order', that is, since

US president George W. Bush introduced pre-emption as doctrine in 2001, which in turn focused on counter-proliferation initiatives. The aim, as the author recounts, was to redefine ‘the global approach towards proliferation threats’. Ironically, and unknown to Bush at the time, his administration would spearhead a process that in the end would leave India as the only non-NPT state with rights to trade in global civilian nuclear commerce. This section of the book recounts the changes in both discourse and actions since 2001. It traces India’s engagement with the key facets of the ‘new nuclear order’ more evident since the fall of the Soviet Union. The author makes persuasive observations with regard to ballistic missile proliferation, details around the Global Nuclear Energy Partnership (GNEP) and how in many ways—although not always clearly outlined in the book—India sought to engage with both US-led initiatives while developing strategies accordingly. The connection between the two, although clear, is not always explicitly argued.

This seems key. In fact, the history of the last decade makes it clear that engagement with the US has mattered more than engaging with the NPT regime. The US, in some ways, served the role of a gatekeeper. It is 10 years since Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and President Bush read out the US–India joint statement in the East Room of the White House. Any objective observer would find it relatively convenient to conclude that that moment jettisoned a process that then allowed India to negotiate a nuclear deal to its advantage. This is the one part of the book that could have been developed further, looking into the potential role of ‘mavericks’, as one senior Indian official negotiating the deal often called Bush, in changing both the non-proliferation and the counter-proliferation story as commonly understood.

No doubt, this narrative is moot, given ‘India’s participation in the Proliferation Security Initiative’ (PSI)—the title of the excellent penultimate chapter of the book. The PSI was an American initiative. Hence, engagement with America, as the chapter shows, was as important as the dialogue with an advance that could be read as what the author calls a ““forward policy” against proliferation’. This is probably the best chapter in the book, and does well to explain why it is imperative that the ‘Indian policy establishment should step out of Cold War era mindsets and NPT-related apprehensions by applying fresh perspectives on global initiatives’. Cultural change, according to the author, is essential. It is only then, as the last chapter that looks beyond the nuclear deal with the US suggests, that India can actively undertake a global role in the proliferation debate. In sum, this detailed and lucidly written book is essential reading, belonging on the shelves of academics, journalists, commentators and pundits working on both India in the twenty-first century as well as those working in the broad area of non-proliferation.

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