

Revisiting Nuclear India: Strategic Culture and (In) Security Imaginary, by Runa Das, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2015, pp. 329, Rs 1195

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Following a critical social constructivist approach, Runa Das affirms in *Revisiting Nuclear India* that India's nuclear decisions are a product of the state's strategic culture, which is generated by its 'security community' not only as a response to 'real politics' but also are articulated and re-interpreted within an 'political-ideological-cultural space' carved out by the discursive practices of the security community. For Das, strategic cultures are not culturally-conditioned or historically determined but socially constructed. She uses the critical constructivist concept of 'security imaginary' as defined by Himadeep Muppidi to whom the term denotes a 'field of meanings and social power' providing an 'organised set of interpretations for making sense of a complex international system' and which produces 'distinctive social identities' (p. 10).

Das affirms that while traditional strategic culture studies assumes states and their strategic environments as two distinct entities, critical constructivists on the other hand believe that these two share a 'mutually constitutive relationship where the state through certain discourses not only constructs its insecurity but the construction of this insecurity (expressive of the state's strategic thinking) reinforces the identity of the (threatened) state requiring a certain security policy' (p. 19).

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She traces the Indian nuclear journey through the viewpoints as espoused by its security community—as evidenced in government statements, writings of defence analysts, political party representatives, and scientific community members, among others—which prescribed or proscribed nuclear policy choices based on their interpretation of its '(in)security imaginaries' flowing out of the country's international relations (primarily vis-à-vis the United States, China and Pakistan) and its nationalist identity. What follows is a rich examination of the multiple sources of literature dealing with the strategic, domestic, scientific, bureaucratic-institutional context of India's nuclear policy choices.

Das states that the 'age-long essence of India's strategic thinking as a combination of real politic and *dharmā* [spiritual morality] has retained significance in contemporary political India' (p. 31). She points out that colonial India's strategic culture was 'simultaneously secular, Hinduicized, modern, traditional, Gandhian, militant and aggressive' (p. 55). She notes that India's historically grounded strategic cultural thinking has been 'continuously re-interpreted by the state to define notions of national security and foreign policy perception' (p. 64).

Das characterises the Nehruvian period from 1947 till 1964 as one of political/scientific idealism which came under increasing strain post 1962. The period from 1964-1991 saw the emergence of an 'aggressive, militaristic orientation' in India's strategic thinking riding on nuclear nationalism (for example, rejection of the NPT in June 1968), growing perceptions of military prowess (post the Bangladesh war in 1971), pro-US affinity (in terms of scientific and technical collaborations) among others (p. 91). The author states that there was a 'militaristic re-orientation' of India's atomic policy under Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri in the aftermath of the Chinese nuclear test of October 1964 and the rejection by the US of nuclear security guarantees sought by Shastri (p. 93). She does note though that there was absence of unanimity on the nature of the Chinese threat among India's security community (Ibid). While the discourses of the government continued to show 'nuclear ambivalence', there was simultaneously an active expansion of the country's nuclear and missile capabilities (p. 122). India for instance started the missile development programme in 1983 and imported 100 kg of beryllium, which is used for increasing nuclear weapons yield, from Germany in 1984 (p. 133).

More pertinently, the author notes that the focus of India's nuclear threat shifted from China (during the Shastri years) to Pakistan (under

Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi) in the light of the Pakistan-China strategic collaboration and advances being made by Pakistan in its nuclear weapons programme, as exemplified by the testing of non-nuclear triggering packages in 1985 (p. 129). During 1991-1998, Das flags an increased 'nuclear aggressiveness' in the security community's discourses in the backdrop of further consolidation of a pro-US shift, liberalising economic drive and an effort to stabilise relations with its neighbours, as exemplified by the Gujral Doctrine. She notes the 'bureaucratic and scientific momentum' calling for an open nuclear deterrent for India, even as non-proliferation (CTBT) and technology-related insecurities continued (pp. 141, 146).

Das draws attention to the BJP Manifesto of November 1995 which criticised the Congress party as a 'weak, moralising power' and stated that if elected, it would 'act decisively and display India's strength and scientific prowess...' (p. 157). 'Nuclear hawks' criticised Prime Minister Narasimha Rao's decision to call off a scheduled nuclear test in December 1995 due to US pressure. In the run-up to and the aftermath of India's rejection of the CTBT in June 1996, she notes the 'deep consolidation of India's perception of nuclear hierarchy stemming from international nuclear politics' (p. 163).

The author states that in tandem with real politics, the BJP-led coalition government drew from its culturally-grounded Hindutva ideology to sustain/justify aggressive strategic thinking while the pro-US orientation was strengthened post 9/11 (p. 170). India's Pakistan-centric nuclear insecurity continued even as there was renewed confidence among India's security community vis-à-vis China in the aftermath of 1998 (p. 185). Post 1998, the identity of a militarising, nuclear India was reinforced. Post 2004 discourses, meanwhile, highlighted strategic autonomy aspects as well as the ascendance of neo-liberalism and the Congress's ideological acceptance of US pre-eminence (p. 215).

The July 2005 Indo-US Joint Statement, the 2008 nuclear deal and enhanced defence collaboration were prominent symbols of engagement with the US under the UPA government. These were nevertheless significant arenas of contention domestically, with anti-colonial/anti-Western scepticism being aired by critics. The author notes that equally strong calls for an alliance with the US to counter the threat from China and Pakistan were aired by analysts like K. Subrahmanyam (p. 252). Das points out that the Congress-led UPA coalition constructed a 'security-basis' and 'democratic/we' identity communality with the US to justify

neo-liberal strategic/security collaborations (p. 260). This was significant given that the US was traditionally perceived as 'hierarchically situated, adversarial and Western player' (Ibid).

Given that India's nuclear policy choices flow out of its strategic culture which is 'socially constructed', the author holds out the prospect of such discursive practices creating conditions for altering the 'ideational perceptions vis-à-vis identities of adversaries, insecurities, and nuclear brinkmanship' (p. 273). However, throughout the book, Das makes provision for the crucial role of structural real political factors driving nuclear insecurities though her effort is to show that these insecurities are interpreted and reinforced by the discursive practises of the security community. It is not clear therefore how adversarial perceptions can be muted or reinterpreted in the absence of any discernible change in the threat environment from its two nuclear neighbours.

Das, moreover, argues that the Indian security community's discourses vis-à-vis Pakistan 'ignore the vibrant movements within the Pakistani polity that led by Pakistani progressives and liberals have for long continued to demand a democratic Pakistani state' (p. 247). She does not, however, draw attention to the relative strength or lack of it of such voices when it comes to determining the Pakistani state's security policies. The author's drive to provide a 'rich' explanation for India's nuclear security choices further makes her wrestle with a wide plethora of reasons—all seemingly equally important—spanning the domestic, bureaucratic-institutional, real-political, scientific among others across a pre-determined spatial and temporal framework.

The book in part makes for heavy reading given the unusually long sentences sometimes spilling over to nearly 10 lines, coupled with 'postmodern jargon'—'codes of intelligibilities', 'meaning-producing discourses', among others in many instances. Das has the same explanation citing the same source in almost every chapter and sometimes more than once in a single chapter to drive home her contention that '(in)security imaginary is an 'act of cultural creation' and hence cannot be empirically scrutinised. Further, she repeatedly refers to IDSA wrongly as the Institute for Defence and Strategic Analysis, despite dealing significantly with the writings of analysts from the Institute, which she terms 'India's prestigious think tank' (p. 190).