

Missing the Essence of Deterrence

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Escalation Control and the Nuclear Option in South Asia Edited by Michael Krepon, Rodney W. Jones, and Ziad Haider The Henry L. Stimson Center, Washington DC, 2004, pp. 166

India was a principal target of the non-proliferation regime between 1974 and 2005. When Islamabad acquired nuclear weapons capability in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the sub-continent became the target of non-proliferation *ayatollahs*. Their focus on the nuclear situation in the sub-continent became inevitable due to the end of the Cold War and the near-simultaneous onset of a period of crises in India-Pakistan relations, triggered by the outbreak of the Islamabad-supported insurgency and related terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir. Unconventional warfare in the sub-continent under the nuclear shadow and fears of imminent catastrophe received a fillip in the wake of US claims about Pakistan's preparations for the use of nuclear weapons in 1990. This was a 'lo and behold' moment for the prophets of doom and they promptly zeroed in on those aspects of nuclear thinking developed during the Cold War which could best serve their purpose of highlighting potential dangers in the India-Pakistan context. Among the Cold War nuclear concepts that received their special attention were the 'Stability-Instability Paradox' (SIP), problems of escalation control and the dangers associated with the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons. Consequently, much of the writing in this genre is prone to the 'crying wolf!' syndrome, highly speculative and contrived. The book under review is a product of such thinking.

Escalation Control and the Nuclear Option in South Asia is a collection of essays aimed at influencing opinion both in India and Pakistan. It analyses the operation of SIP, problems of escalation control in various conflict scenarios, dilemmas associated with deploying tactical nuclear weapons, the prospects for expansion of the Indian nuclear arsenal and issues connected with nuclear signalling.

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Identified in the early years of the Cold War, SIP posited that offsetting and secure second-strike nuclear capabilities would induce caution in decision-makers and thus prevent war; and would help avoid escalation if a conflict were to break out. At the same time, competition would be channelled into lower levels of conflict. As Robert Jervis observed, while the military balance would remain stable at the level of all-out nuclear war, it would become less stable at lower levels of violence. While the logical sequence of the above construct is that lower levels of violence occur because all-out war is smothered by the fear of nuclear catastrophe, Krepon oddly concludes that only the second of these propositions (lower levels of conflict) holds true in the sub-continent and that one cannot be as yet sure whether the first tenet (the prevention/avoidance of major war) would hold. This is not a simple case of curate's egg syndrome or an example of deterrence pessimism outrunning logic, but also cherry picking of ideas that suits a particular point of view.

Krepon's contributions are consequently a catalogue of problems that come in the way of the operation of the SIP, especially in the early stages of offsetting nuclear capabilities. The first of these relate to the absence of secure second-strike capabilities, which could provide an incentive for a pre-emptive decapitating nuclear attack against the national command authority in India and in the case of Pakistan against its nuclear arsenal. Krepon, however, hastens to add that India has decided to construct two command bunkers and that Pakistan's vulnerability will not come about until New Delhi decides to deploy a ready-to-use arsenal. What he forgets to add, or rather discounts, is India's commitment to a no-first-use policy as well as the recognition and acknowledgement that nuclear weapons are not weapons of war. It is inconceivable that New Delhi will initiate a pre-emptive nuclear attack.

Next comes the problem of opacity of the deterrent in terms of size and disposition. While opacity is considered essential to reinforce uncertainty and thus induce caution, it can also potentially lead to under-estimation and consequent decision to throw caution to the wind. Misestimates are especially likely in the India-Pakistan context, given that neither country has adequate technical intelligence capabilities. Moreover, this, in Krepon's view, is the stage when reliable communications and management procedures are generally absent. Krepon is indeed correct in his argument about the need to upgrade communications and crisis management procedures as well as the necessity of India and Pakistan

practising the Ten Commandments of nuclear risk reduction evolved during the Cold War. He, however, does not explain how or why technical intelligence is superior in arriving at reasonably correct estimates, a surprising gap given that the main criticism levelled against US intelligence in the wake of the Iraq WMD fiasco is its excessive reliance on technical capabilities.

With respect to escalation control in a possible future conflict scenario, Krepon points to India's growing conventional military superiority, especially in the air. Given that air power is the quickest and most accurate means for deep strikes against both conventional and nuclear targets, India attaining command of the air even in a limited war could constitute the crossing of Pakistan's nuclear threshold. Krepon, as expected, does not take into account the restraint exercised by India and Pakistan during the Kargil conflict. Not only did New Delhi not escalate the conflict horizontally, Indian forces did not even cross the Line of Control. For its part, Pakistan did not escalate the conflict when it faced military defeat, giving lie to the fantastic claim that the losing side has no choice but to escalate. Rodney Jones too focuses upon India's growing conventional military superiority and claims that this will provide India the ability to destroy Pakistan's conventional military capability and deprive it of political independence, an eventuality that is bound to result in Islamabad resorting to the use of nuclear weapons. Such a scenario, in his view, is entirely feasible given India's military mobilisation and threat of war in the wake of the terrorist attack on its Parliament in December 2001. He, not surprisingly, dismisses the notion that India practiced coercive diplomacy through 'Operation Parakram' as a fashionable post hoc rationalisation, without realising that the very first published articulation in this regard was made on December 31, 2001, by Raja Mohan in *The Hindu* even before the Indian military mobilisation was complete.

The other aspect that Krepon focuses upon with respect to escalation control is the articulation of a policy of massive retaliation by both India and Pakistan. He believes that this could be a "severe impediment" because of its stress on the effectiveness of a first strike rather than on the credibility of the second strike. It is strange that Krepon should confuse the US policy of massive retaliation with what India has articulated. When the US announced a policy of massive retaliation in 1954, it was meant to deter conventional or sub-conventional Soviet aggression against Western interests. In contrast, the Indian articulation is an attempt to demonstrate

resolve and a statement of intent that the use of nuclear weapons by an adversary would result in certain retaliation. This is how deterrence worked during the Cold War – through mutual threat of certain retaliation and vulnerability. In his blind belief that deterrence is likely to fail in the sub-continent, Krepon misses its very essence.

Krepon teams up with Ziad Haider and Charles Thornton to provide an excellent overview of the dilemmas and problems associated with the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons. First, any detonation during a conflict or a severe crisis will throw up the time-urgent dilemma of determining the event's provenance and responding to it suitably. Moreover, any use of nuclear weapons on the battlefield will pose a 'use or lose' dilemma for national command authorities. Second, forward-based weapons will be vulnerable to seizure, precision strikes, sabotage, and being overrun. Third is the issue of breakdown of command and control. The more ready tactical nuclear weapons are for prompt use, the greater will be the potential for a breakdown of command and control. And conversely, the more controls placed on their use for reasons of safety and security, the less ready they will be for use when needed. In addition, any pre-delegation of authority to use tactical nuclear weapons during combat will risk uncontrolled escalation. The authors acknowledge that both India and Pakistan have expressed disinterest in tactical nuclear weapons and point to factors that are bound to reinforce restraint in this regard – social linkages, their determination to avoid collateral damage and indiscriminate suffering during previous wars, and also the fact that battles are likely to occur in close proximity to population centres.

That the fears expressed about escalation are exaggerated is demonstrated by Rajesh Basrur's essay 'India's Escalation-Resistant Nuclear Posture', which characterises India's nuclear posture as 'escalation-resistant.' Basrur traces this to four main features of Indian thinking about nuclear weapons: (1) nuclear weapons are not central to national security; (2) a large, ready-to-use nuclear arsenal is not necessary for deterrence; (3) apparent imbalances in nuclear capabilities are tolerable; and (4) confidence-building measures (CBMs) and arms control are necessary for deterrence stability. Aware, however, that India's proclaimed nuclear doctrine can be interpreted as open-ended and seeking a range of capabilities in the long run, Basrur explores the domestic and external compulsions that can force change. To begin with, there is no operational pressure for deployment and force expansion, given that the military does not have a say in these

matters. Though the need for longer-range delivery systems to deter China and for a triad is recognised, there is no visible sense of urgency. Basrur attributes this to a hedging strategy, which is not “driven by a desire to get anywhere quickly.” He concludes that there are no internally driven shifts in doctrine or practice. On the external plane, barring a serious negative turn in ties with Pakistan and China, or the emergence of a new threat, the pace of India’s nuclear evolution will remain ‘glacial.’

Feroze Hassan Khan’s essay on the use of ballistic missiles by India and Pakistan for nuclear signalling demonstrates that Western fears about the imminence of a Pakistani nuclear attack on several occasions since 1990 have been the result of an inability to distinguish between offensive and defensive missile movements. He contends that Pakistan’s missile movements during the various crises must be seen as a “precautionary operational compulsion” employed for the purposes of dispersal, concealment and security. Deployment status for nuclear weapons and delivery systems in the sub-continent actually change in an evolutionary fashion “from peacetime, recessed conditions to various degrees of alert during crises.” In the case of ballistic missiles, at least three major steps and sequential activities are required in the event of a crisis—preparations for mating warheads and missiles, checking fuel systems or initiating fuelling procedures, and actual mating of warheads with missiles and their launchers at an operational site. There is a big difference between moving ballistic missiles for dispersal and deployment. Moreover, terms like ‘activation’ and ‘deployment’ are often used loosely in the sub-continent and have different connotations. ‘Activation’ might simply mean that a missile regiment has been ordered to be operationally prepared, not that nuclear warheads have been transferred to it. ‘Deployment’ in Pakistani usage implies the mating of warheads with delivery systems. There is also a difference between transferring nuclear weapons to a military unit for custodial purposes and their actual mating with delivery systems. Khan contends that “Pakistani officials have taken pains to stop short of deployment in previous crises”, including during the Kargil mini-war and the 2002 India-Pakistan crises, and that strategic missiles and weapon components may have only been moved to different locations for defensive purposes.

Nuclear signalling is also the focus of Rahul Roychaudhury’s essay ‘Nuclear Doctrine, Declaratory Policy and Escalation Control’, which analyses the confrontation between India and Pakistan that began in

December 2001. A significant aspect of this episode was that nuclear signals were not clear and easily discernible but appeared confusing and ambiguous. He draws some lessons from this experience. One, the other side does not always read a signal as intended, which has worrying implications for stability. Two, a non-signal can also be perceived as a signal. Three, the involvement of a large number of actors results in confusion, especially if the signals are at cross-purposes with one another. Contradictory signals also weaken the other side's ability to understand them. These are lessons that Indian and Pakistani decision-makers will do well to learn.

Apprehensions underlying some of the articulations in the book are indeed genuine, and remind us of what can go wrong and importantly to take precautionary measures. But what is surprising is its outright dismissal of rationality as a factor in decision-making. Non-proliferation *ayatollahs*, like blinkered ideologues everywhere, do not seem to have learnt the lessons of history and cannot seem to comprehend the truth even if it punches them in the face. Nuclear weapons are not weapons of war, and one bomb over one city is unacceptable damage. War is the pursuit of politics by other means, not a game of mass slaughter. Fears of nuclear catastrophe automatically introduce an element of abundant caution in the minds of decision-makers. Though the First World War is frequently cited as an example of 'blundering into disaster,' the fact remains, as Henry Kissinger has pointed out, European leaders would not have embarked upon that murderous journey if they had an inkling of the catastrophe they faced. In that fateful August, everyone thought that the war would finish quickly and that troops would be home for Christmas. Today, we know the catastrophic power that nuclear weapons possess and it is inconceivable that any decision-maker would contemplate letting loose this dog of war. As Winston Churchill eloquently put it, safety in the nuclear age "is the sturdy child of terror and survival the twin brother of annihilation." It is this essence of deterrence that the book under review misses out.

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