

Revisiting India's national defence doctrines

Two recent books emphasize, in different ways, the need to undertake a thorough national defence review, one that involves releasing an updated nuclear doctrine

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This month, 19 years ago, the then national security adviser Brajesh Mishra released India's draft nuclear doctrine prepared by the National Security Advisory Board. The draft was not endorsed by the government of India, but it became the basis for the official doctrine whose summarized version was released in 2003. In 2018, the nuclear doctrine is facing a full-blown crisis, almost entirely of India's own making. On the one hand, serving and retired policy-makers at the highest levels of nuclear decision-making and defence establishment have gone about questioning the key pillars of the doctrine. On the other, despite major changes in the strategic environment, the onward march of the technological forces and the questions raised about the continued relevance of the concepts outlined in the doctrine, the government has refused to undertake a review of the doctrine.

Two recent books help us situate the problem in a wider perspective. *India In Nuclear Asia: Evolution Of Regional Forces, Perceptions, And Policies* (Orient BlackSwan, 2018) is a timely effort by two young authors—Yogesh Joshi and Frank O'Donnell—to apprise readers about the trends in nuclear decision-making in India, Pakistan and China. There are three major trends they want us to pay close attention to. One, the rapid rise in the employment of dual-use platforms and delivery vehicles. This is common to all the three countries where missiles, aircraft and submarines can be assigned both conventional and nuclear missions. This elevates the risk of escalation based on a single misperception. Two, the increasing relevance of seaborne deterrence in all the three countries. Juxtaposed with the first trend, this introduces new complexities into naval engagements.

The third one is probably the most significant: the changes in nuclear doctrines in all the three countries. Pakistan has moved from "credible minimum deterrence" to "full spectrum deterrence", marked by acquisition of tactical nuclear weapons. In India's case, loose political oversight of defence and scientific institutions and the changing strategic environment leading to experts and former officials arguing for moving to a more aggressive doctrine has led to the "credible" part undercutting the "minimum" part of the stated "credible minimum deterrence". China is also witnessing a debate between traditional advocates of a "minimum deterrence" and new arguments for a more flexible "limited deterrence". The latter envisages counterforce operations and supports building nuclear war-fighting capabilities, including a greater and diverse arsenal.

While O'Donnell and Joshi do well to survey the landscape of the nuclear force, command and control structures, and evolution of doctrines, what they don't cover adequately is done by Lt Gen (retired) Prakash Menon in his *The Strategy Trap: India And Pakistan Under The Nuclear Shadow* (Wisdom Tree, 2018). Menon's book is more about India and Pakistan, but has a chapter on the nuclear doctrine of China (and one on France too). Menon brings his diverse array of experience as a soldier, a military adviser to the government in different capacities and a scholar—Menon holds a PhD in defence studies from Madras University—to present a complete picture of war-fighting in South Asia under the nuclear shadow.

Menon's key contribution is to bring forth the tension between military arguments that veer towards concepts such as "limited deterrence", "limited war", "escalation dominance" and "counterforce", and the political objectives that can be achieved with operationalization of such ideas. The Indian military strategy has revolved around the objective of defending territorial integrity. In so far as capturing the adversary's territory was a goal, it was meant to be used as a bargaining tool in post-war negotiations. This strategy has little utility when the war is likely to be triggered by a sub-conventional attack. Menon rightly suggests that India should shift from the approach of capturing territory to one of "firepower-based destruction". Such radical rethinking is also necessitated by the fact that New Delhi is finding it increasingly unviable, because of escalating costs for salaries and pensions that have cannibalized resources for defence acquisitions, to field large Armed Forces that are anyway built to fight yesterday's wars.



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The realism embedded in Menon's recommendation, however, quickly recedes and quixotic ideas take over. He goes on to advise India to support moderates in Pakistan in their fight against religious extremists. He argues that an Indian military strike "would serve to unite all the jihadi forces in Pakistan and, in the long term, strengthen the very forces that are required to be weakened". India's support to moderates and democratic forces in Pakistan however, too, can end up uniting and bolstering the fundamentalists. What India can do is to change its own military doctrines and alter its political objectives. Any strategy based on false hopes of strengthening democrats in Pakistan is more than likely to fail.

In the recommendations column, Joshi and O'Donnell suggest bilateral and trilateral nuclear dialogue between India, Pakistan and China. While bilateral nuclear dialogue, one with Pakistan and China each, will indeed help avoid misperceptions and introduce stabilizing protocols in confrontation scenarios, it is unclear what a trilateral dialogue will achieve. In absence of any persuasive logic, the Indian government is likely to look at such an idea with a high degree of scepticism.

Menon's book could have been edited into a much more polished product, and Joshi and O'Donnell should have left out their dated and half-hearted analysis of India's approach to global non-proliferation issues, especially with respect to Iran, North Korea and Syria. Some of these foibles notwithstanding, policymakers and field experts should definitely read both these books to understand the trends in nuclear force development and the debates over military and nuclear doctrines in these three countries. Most importantly, as both the books emphasize in different ways, Indian policymakers need to undertake a thorough national defence review, one that involves releasing an updated nuclear doctrine.

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