

**India in Nuclear Asia: Evolution of Regional Forces,
Perceptions and Policies** by Yogesh Joshi and Frank O'Donnell,
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*S. Samuel C. Rajiv**

In *India in Nuclear Asia*, authors Yogesh Joshi and Frank O'Donnell do a rigorous job of unpacking the layers that have constituted India's nuclear journey, especially since going overtly nuclear in May 1998. They distil the key aspects pertaining to India's nuclear force developments, the evolution and challenges facing its nuclear doctrine and the key rationales as they see underpinning New Delhi's non-proliferation policies. The fundamental burden of the book relates to the need for the government to promulgate a strategic defence review (SDR) to clearly enunciate the role that nuclear weapons will play in the country's grand strategy. This is especially so since, in their view, there seems to be a chasm that has developed between the country's professed doctrine as enunciated in 2003 and the subsequent basket of developments relating to technological growth of India's nuclear arsenal as well as the challenges that Pakistani and Chinese nuclear arsenals pose to India's nuclear policy. They especially flag such developments as Pakistan's seeming adoption of a 'full-spectrum deterrence' doctrine combined with the negative implications for deterrence stability arising out of the supposed operationalisation of delivery systems like the Nasr missile.

They further highlight the blurring of the line between the conventional and the nuclear in India's regional neighbourhood due to

* The reviewer is Associate Fellow, Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), New Delhi. He can be contacted at samuelrajiv@gmail.com.



the fielding of dual-use (conventional/nuclear) assets (like DF-21 ballistic missiles by China, Type 041 submarines that Pakistan has contracted to buy from China or the Brahmos and the Prahaar missiles by India). They lay open the possibility that Pakistan could in fact be incentivised to resort to naval nuclear brinkmanship as and when 'nuclear-capable' assets like the Type 041 submarines are ready for deployment, especially in the context of the 'intentions of all three states to extend their naval spheres of influence' (p. 236). They note that such moves could lead to 'inadvertent escalation' if patrol routes are not clarified in advance, among other scenarios.

Placing India, Pakistan and China in the same basket as states that are involved in extending their respective 'naval spheres of influence' seems odd. Such a description is more than apt for China, given the combination of its activities ranging from forays in the Indian Ocean and port-building activities in the region. And it is not clarified what spheres of influence Pakistan potentially seeks to operate in, either in the Arabian Sea or in the Indian Ocean.

Apart from pleading for the promulgation of an SDR to clarify India's nuclear intentions, they also urge India to take the lead and initiate a trilateral nuclear dialogue with its two stubborn regional nuclear rivals. They note that the near absence of regional strategic dialogue could lead to 'accidental escalation' due to misperceptions held by each other's political leadership. Unfortunately however, dialogue cannot be a one-way street; in this particular policy domain, it has to invariably be a three-way street. Pakistan has shown a dogged determination in rejecting India's confidence-building initiatives like a no-first use (NFU) pledge, while China does not even care to formally recognise India's nuclear status. Joshi and O'Donnell though flag Chinese activities specifically intended for possible India-specific missions (like short-range ballistic missile tests in early 2016 in north-west China in conditions similar to those obtained in Tibet), among others.

The call for an SDR is unexceptional. Joshi and O'Donnell's emphatic insistence, however, that such a review should establish a 'clear understanding that nuclear forces attain relevance only in situations where national survival is at risk' (p. 187) is problematic. Such an exposition would do little to alleviate nuclear India's primary strategic problem of the past two decades—how to effectively counter Pakistani use of the terror card under the nuclear overhang.

Further, the challenges that the Pakistani and Chinese nuclear postures and developments pose to India, which Joshi and O'Donnell flag in the book admirably, do not threaten India's 'national survival'. India does not face an 'existential threat' problem from the Pakistani or Chinese nuclear weapons, as, for instance, Israel insists it faces from an Iranian nuclear arsenal, especially so since the Iranian military and political leaders have threatened to wipe the 'Zionist entity' off the face of the earth!

While unpacking India's nuclear doctrinal evolution, Joshi and O'Donnell call for a public enunciation of an 'assured retaliation' posture—as against a 'war-fighting posture'—which would place 'political limits on force size'. Again, issues such as force size are not just contingent upon an enunciation of the role that nuclear weapons are assigned by the political leadership but equally or more so on the constantly evolving perceptions generated by enemy activities and intentions.

The debate relating to the dangerous implications for deterrence stability posed by assets like the Nasr invariably leads to calls by most analysts for India to clarify its nuclear intentions and force posture. Joshi and O'Donnell carry the legacy forward by noting that India's threat of counter-force strikes (with Shiv Shankar Menon in 2010 not ruling out such options as part of India's NFU) complicates Pakistan's threat perceptions, 'further escalating its nuclear force production' and 'encourages Chinese counter-force-strikes in strategic planning' (p. 235).

The Pakistani use of the terror card—which has fed India's 'Cold Start' doctrine in the first place and in turn led to the prioritisation of assets like Nasr by Pakistan to possibly deter such conventional eventualities—is taken as an unchanging constant by most analysts. Not many, inter alia, urge Pakistan to give it up, or China and Pakistan to moderate their strategic cooperation, for sake of regional deterrence stability! India has its work cut out therefore as it continues on the task to strengthen its nuclear force profile vis-à-vis its two pesky regional nuclear rivals. The first deterrence patrol of *INS Aribant* in November 2018 was an essential step in this direction.

Given the headwinds the US-Russia arms control measures have encountered in the recent past, coupled with the modernisation and diversification of nuclear force profiles across the board, requiring India to be more open and forthright about its onward nuclear journey sounds

off key. The book's value though is in placing in context several of the key doctrinal and regional nuclear policy issues enveloping India's post-Pokhran II nuclear journey, for the benefit of experts as well as the informed public.