



The Strategy Trap: India and Pakistan under the Nuclear Shadow- A Book Review

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Lt Gen Prakash Menon, *The Strategy Trap: India and Pakistan under the Nuclear Shadow* Wisdom Tree (2018) Pp 245; Rs. 895. ISBN 9788183285247

To put this book into perspective, I would like to congratulate the author for his brilliant book-length study involving painstaking research. Furthermore, this book is different from other writings. The author is a former senior military officer who has operational experience and has been exposed to the policy environment in his own way through his appointment as a Military Adviser and later an Officer on Special Duty in the National Security Council Secretariat, New Delhi.

This office would have exposed him to intelligence and policy inputs from the Ministry of Defence, Service HQs, Ministry of Home Affairs, Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Research and Analysis Wings and Intelligence Bureau. Therefore, he would have formed an idea of the decision-making process at apex levels of the National Security Policy formulation. To my understanding, the regular military officer even at one, two or three-star level (with exceptions of Military Intelligence officers) is generally kept out of the civilian defence/foreign ministry policy formulation. However, there were cross-postings of a couple of military (read army) officers in the MEA and a Joint secretary from the MEA in the Ministry of Defence.

This book examines the complexities of India-Pakistan relations which are characterised with hostility and nuclear weapons. The

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two countries have fought four wars with each other besides innumerable border skirmishes almost on a monthly basis. The book primarily deals with the last round of hostility between the two countries fought in 1999 over Kargil as nuclear weapon powers and the fear of escalation from the conventional to a nuclear engagement.

The concept of Limited War is also among the central themes discussed in the book and therefore merits some clarity. Limited War is the opposite of Total War. Both the World Wars were Total in terms of time, target, territory, weaponry, force levels and belligerents. On the other hand, Limited War is limited in terms of these very parameters. The India-Pakistan or India-China conflicts are limited to only two belligerents, territories, targets, time or weaponry or force levels. This is evident from the cross-border skirmishes of commando raids that are conducted by either side from time to time.

The beauty of the book lies in its chapterisation that enables readers to comprehend the contents with ease. The 'Introduction' highlights the basic premise that "Pakistan's use of terrorism as a foreign policy tool coupled with its penchant to seek security against retaliation through nuclear weapons is a substantial cause for instability in the India-Pakistan relationship. Future conflicts could, thus, take various forms, under an omnipotent shadow of nuclear war" (Menon, 2018).

The introduction of nuclear weapons into the India-Pakistan equation has altered the nature of the relationship largely based on the role of force. In the Introduction, he argues, "it is the role of force to make the use of force unattractive to political leaderships on both sides" (Menon, 2018).

Chapter Two, 'The Nuclear Doctrine of France' is discussed with reference to the similarity with the nuclear doctrine of Pakistan. To quote "In reality, France was not considered to have sufficient means for a nuclear battle and, moreover, it lacked the necessary surface area to absorb nuclear strikes and recover from them, unlike the superpowers which have vast territories. Similar, in fact is the case with Pakistan" (Menon, 2018).

Chapter Three which discusses 'Nuclear China' traces the Chinese quest for nuclear weapons and in the process discusses the China-Taiwan military engagements. However, the book does not refer to the Sino-Soviet conflict over the Ussuri River in 1969. This was a case of two nuclear-armed countries engaged in conventional war with each other, similar to the India-Pakistan strife over Kargil. Arguably, the 1969 military clashes almost had the potential to trigger World War Three.

During the Sumdorong Chu crisis of 1987-88, there was a reported instance of a Chinese tactical nuclear threat. Former Army Chief, General VN Sharma, has gone on record to say that a one-star rank People's Liberation Army (PLA) officer had actually threatened to use a tactical nuclear weapon during the stand-off with India. In response, the Army Chief conveyed to the PLA commander that a tactical nuclear weapon delivered through artillery fire would land either in the valley or beyond it given the circular error of probability involved with the targeting procedures. In such a situation, the Indian side, he explained, would remain unharmed due to bunkers that made them physically secure from such threats.

Chapter Four which examines the rationale for Pakistan's nuclear weaponisation could also include the interesting views expressed by former Pakistan Army Chief Mirza Aslam Beg who refers to the April 1998 Pokhran II Indian nuclear tests. The then Prime Minister, Vajpayee's letter to the US President Bill Clinton states that the nuclear tests were Sino-centric but the former Pakistan Army Chief refutes this line of thinking. He argues that Pokhran II was essentially Pakistan-centric because India deployed 11 mountain divisions along the India-China border and if there really was a Chinese military threat, India would not have scaled down these mountain divisions to be re-deployed in J&K for counterinsurgency operations. Such a Pakistani perspective is interesting from an Indian National Security viewpoint.

In the Chapter 'Deterrence Revisited - Mumbai to Uri', the book questions why India confined its response to Pakistan at the political and diplomatic levels and provides interesting answers to the same. It goes on to add that "India's future reaction to another major terrorist attack is impossible to guess" (Menon, 2018).

Another interesting statement is “India’s military inaction has strengthened Pakistan’s internalized narrative that India will not react militarily due to Pakistan’s threat for escalation to the nuclear realm” (Menon, 2018).

The concluding chapter, ‘The Conflation of Two Revolutions’ states how the fundamental problem of prosecuting a limited war is rooted in the clash between two definable paradigms of military security. One, in which the organising construct rests on preparing to fight and win the war (conventional paradigm) and another in which an avoidance of war is the underlying goal of military preparations (nuclear paradigm). Paradoxically, both the nuclear and conventional paradigms of war coexist concurrently even though they do so uneasily.