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The Debate Over Indian Nuclear Strategy is Heating

Up

April 5, 2017

SAMEER LALWANI AND HANNAH
HAEGELAND

Most debates on South Asian security strategy tend to not attract much attention amongst U.S. policymakers except during the occasional crisis. Warnings about arms racing, belligerence, and nuclear risks between India and Pakistan have become so commonplace that they elicit yawns or eye rolls. Some aspects of the rivalry (namely the border ceremony) have even been [parodied](#) in a sitcom. It is noteworthy then that this past weekend [The New York Times](#) and [The Wall Street Journal](#) both felt compelled to write about potential changes in India's nuclear strategy and doctrine.

The impetus for these articles emerged from the recent Carnegie International Nuclear Policy Conference in Washington, D.C., where MIT professor [Vipin Narang](#) suggested that India might be rethinking its current nuclear strategy and considering "preemptive nuclear counterforce." Other notable analysts, [Ajai Shukla](#), [Shashank Joshi](#), and [Ankit Panda](#), all lent support to this assessment. The status quo "[retaliation only doctrine](#)" is relatively uncontroversial and ostensibly defensive in nature because it proposes the use of nuclear weapons only in response to WMD use against India. However, Narang points out that recent statements from senior Indian government and defense officials suggest India could be shifting toward a counter-force strategy. Such a strategy would seek to target and disarm Pakistan's nuclear weapons and related military infrastructure by destroying them with nuclear strikes. Whether in the form of a preemptive first strike or a massive second strike, this strategy is inherently more offensive than the current counter-value strategy, which targets Pakistani cities in response to a nuclear attack against India.

Many of the responses to Narang's argument – [including one at War on the Rocks](#) – have been dismissive, with many questioning first, whether a shift is actually occurring; second, if India possesses the requisite capabilities to enact a counterforce doctrine; or third, if a shift would be inherently destabilizing. For example, critics suggest that discussions of flexible options are [just part of](#) the “constant process of churning of ideas” in India’s “vibrant democracy,” and “[too much is being read into](#),” [misinterpreted](#), or “[cherry-picked](#)” by U.S.-based analysts. Others have taken issue less with the merits of the argument than its potential use by both states to justify the expansion of their nuclear arsenals. In fact, both [Indian](#) and [Pakistani](#) analysts have already made this point.

Although there is something to these criticisms, one should not dismiss the significance of this potential shift in Indian nuclear strategy too quickly. The risks that growing capabilities and shifting strategic logics bring to the subcontinent are too dangerous not to warrant further consideration.

Take it Seriously

As [others have pointed out](#), declaratory doctrine does not need to change in order for strategy to change. It is critical to remember that three major voices from the highest echelons of the military, the governing political party, and the civil service elite have all suggested a potential shift in nuclear strategy. These include Strategic Forces Commander Lt. Gen. [B.S. Nagal](#), former Defence Minister [Manohar Parrikar](#), and retired National Security Advisor [Shivshankar Menon](#). Again, it is important to remember that these officials rose to the very top of their field *because* of their experience with strategic issues and acute awareness that their words would be read and parsed for meaning. Those arguing Menon, Nagal, or Parrikar affirm declaratory doctrine one breath after challenging no first-use or counter-value targeting discount how these former officials might be suggesting the two positions are congruent. [Other Indian scholars](#) concur that the language of preemption or a “comprehensive first strike” is not out of context and reinforces India’s assured retaliation posture.

Only Parrikar’s remarks questioning no first-use could be construed as off-the-cuff, as they were delivered at a book launch. However, context is important: His comments were delivered during a discussion about India’s more aggressive response to cross-border terrorism with so-called “surgical strikes” so it seems likely he was quite intentional with his words. Nagal’s and Menon’s statements come from deliberative publications that likely went through some form of peer review with ample opportunity for revision. If they chose to invoke terms like “comprehensive [first strike](#),” which is well understood in defense circles, it was not an unintentional choice.

Some dismiss these statements as cheap talk only meant to trigger uncertainty in Pakistan. However, such criticism ignores the [quiet development of counter-force capabilities](#) in India. Led principally by the scientific/technical community, India is building up some of the necessary capabilities to allow for a quick shift in strategy, technologically putting themselves in “[a position to adopt a very different posture](#)” if future political support materializes.

Quietly More Capable Than You Might Expect

In criticizing Narang’s argument, others have dismissed the prospects of preemptive counter-force on the basis of capability shortfalls that would complicate a shift in Indian strategy. In his own remarks, Narang himself was skeptical of India’s ability to do this at present. Critics have [argued](#) that since India does not have the platforms, the intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capacity or the numbers to completely disarm Pakistan with a counterforce strike, analyzing a shift in strategy is a moot point. Still, the potential aspiration alone is worrisome and worthy of further consideration.

For almost a decade now, India has been slowly developing platforms and tools that extend beyond an assured retaliation posture. These include “[canisterized](#)” systems (warheads pre-mated to the delivery vehicle) for increased readiness, short-range missiles, hypersonic weapons, cruise missiles, multiple independently targetable reentry vehicles (MIRVs), and ballistic missile defenses, which are all particularly useful for offensive counter-force missions like a “splendid” first strike, damage limitation, or even nuclear warfighting. Thus, going from counter-value to counter-force signals a potential shift from a strategy of deterrence through punishment to one of deterrence through denial.

India is also building up its ISR capabilities. It presently [surveils](#) the Line of Control with drones and is [close to acquiring](#) its first missile-armed drones from Israel. India has also [tested](#) an indigenous medium-altitude long-endurance unmanned aerial vehicle, [launched](#) a multi-media communications satellite “intended to augment its military’s network-centric warfare capabilities,” and will likely [purchase](#) two intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition and reconnaissance aircraft from the United States. No doubt there remain considerable obstacles to the development of India’s ISR capabilities, including [prohibitive costs](#) and [delays due to internal politics](#). Nevertheless, India’s recent technology purchases suggest it is moving towards generating real-time targeting information that could be used to track an adversary’s mobile missiles, a crucial factor for counter-force targeting.

Additionally, the numbers problem is not as insurmountable as one might expect. [One scholar](#) offers some back-of-the-envelope calculations to estimate the number of targets India would have to hit to be confident of a disarming or “splendid” first strike. While the numbers seem daunting, Indian leaders might try to convince themselves they only need [between 15-30 specific strategic targets](#) with nuclear missiles. The other targets, including the tactical nuclear weapon-laden Nasr missile batteries, could be targeted

with precision conventional missiles and airstrikes. Even if some Nasr batteries survived, Indian planners might conclude they could be intercepted with Indian ballistic missile defenses or absorb tactical nuclear blows without strategic consequence. The Nasr's [short range of 60 kilometers](#) ensures that even if these batteries were moved to the border, they could not hit any major Indian cities except Amritsar. With the vast majority of India's population therefore secure, a preemptive strike could be all the more enticing to India in a crisis. [Reassurances](#) that India would only use [conventional platforms](#) to hunt Pakistan's nuclear assets does not mitigate but compounds fears because it suggests India might have numerous capabilities to employ in a disarming first strike.

Indian Counter-Force: Risky and Destabilizing.

Other Narang critics suggest an Indian counter-force approach is not so risky, or that it is no worse than pure counter-value targeting. Yet, as [others](#) have recounted, there are three reasons why a counter-force strategy is especially dangerous for South Asia. First, it creates "crisis instability" involving "use it or lose it" pressures where each side has an incentive to launch its weapons before the adversary. Second, it can trigger destabilizing reactions with both states moving towards risky nuclear behavior. High alert statuses and hair-trigger retaliatory policies can make operators much more prone to [accidental](#) or unauthorized nuclear use. Third, counter-force strategies could prompt "deterrence instability" and an arms race cycle by driving up the numbers of weapons one side believes it needs to conduct or avoid a disarming first strike.

Some, in turn, have argued that fostering ambiguity and uncertainty "[would enhance and not diminish deterrence](#)" by bolstering the credibility of an Indian response. This misguided assumption carries significant risk.

First, uncertainty favors offensive military doctrines. Militaries [abhor uncertainty](#) and seek to reduce it with offensive doctrines in order to impose their standard scenario of war on the adversary. Since the Pakistani military is firmly in charge of national security policy, Indian efforts to enhance Pakistan's uncertainty will likely be met with more military-led offensive options to reduce that uncertainty. This will create tremendous offensive pressures upon the Pakistani military, especially in a crisis scenario.

Second, ambiguity intended to encourage an adversary to "imagine the 'worst' possible outcome" could make things worse by locking both states into a prisoners' dilemma of mutual defection that increases the likelihood of conflict. This is one common explanation for how [World War I began](#), where "everyone's behavior was conditioned by the worst fears of what everyone else was likely to do if a war came."

To enhance credibility, words must be backed by actions. The more you enhance the credibility of your resolve for counter-force targeting by building out mission requirements, the more you intensify crisis and deterrence instability and catalyze an arms race spiral.

Claims that India's declaratory no first-use doctrine will signal sufficient "[restraint](#)" to prevent a conflict spiral are either disingenuous or naïve. The credibility of Indian restraint stems not from declaratory doctrine but from costly signals or a reputation for restraint perceived by the adversary. Both of these have been eroded over time as India has built up counter-force capabilities and [deliberately cultivated](#) a reputation for toughness.

Responsibility, Nay, Imperative to Openly Debate these Issues.

The most dubious response to Narang's assessment is that publicly connecting the dots on India's potential strategic shift encourages the very worrisome strategies he identifies. Some have [suggested](#) his assessment will embolden Pakistan with a license to build up its nuclear force. Those in Pakistan's strategic community who have latched on to this argument have suggested Narang is incentivizing or even [advocating](#) an Indian buildup.

However, it is an analyst's job to identify trends, explain causes and consequences, and clarify risks. How these arguments are then marshaled in practice is beyond the analyst's control and should not be used as a justification to stifle valuable analysis. Indeed, these findings could produce self-fulfilling prophecy, but they could just as easily draw enough attention to create a [self-negating prophecy](#).

This seeming shift in Indian strategy toward counter-force should spark a discussion among American policymakers. Prominent American officials, including former Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter, [supported](#) a strategic realignment with India and a nuclear deal on the expectation of India being a "responsible stakeholder in the nonproliferation regime," exercising "nuclear restraint," and pursuing a "'minimum deterrent' – not an all-out arms race." As a rising power, India has every right to [renew on these commitments](#) as it expands its interests, force requirements, and notion of strategic stability, but the United States has every right to question whether a continued policy of "[calculated altruism](#)" fits with its theory of stability in Asia.

The United States routinely expresses concern over the pace and scope of Pakistan's nuclear program while India's contribution to arms racing is regarded as normal military modernization. While the United States might understandably be focused on strengthening India to balance against China and stabilize Asia, it does not seem to consider the unintended second-order

consequences of a rapidly strengthening India upon South Asian stability. The continuing destabilization of the India-Pakistan dyad, without American recognition of its associated risks, could lead to all sides being woefully underprepared for the intensity and speed of the next crisis in South Asia.

Absent conflict resolution anytime soon, the United States can at least help advance conflict management or a détente. If the United States has a stake in building up India but also in ensuring strategic stability (not parity) on the subcontinent, it might be in its interest to address the “[strategic chain](#)” that creates upward pressures on modernization efforts between the United States, China, India, and Pakistan. This could begin by facilitating a series of quadrilateral and multilateral discussions in Asia that both addresses new arms buildups, as well as strategic concepts like mutual vulnerability and counter-force. A rapid expansion of capabilities and ambitions amidst regional power transitions requires some meaningful arms control dialogue to ensure strategic stability.

Sameer Lalwani is a Senior Associate and South Asia Program Deputy Director and Hannah Haegeland is a Research Associate at the Stimson Center. Please listen to the [latest episode of](#) The Subcontinental, which features a discussion on this topic.



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