

The Strategy Trap: India and Pakistan Under the Nuclear Shadow by Prakash Menon, New Delhi: Wisdom Tree, 2018, pp. 245, Rs 895

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Ever since India and Pakistan emerged as declared nuclear weapon states in 1998, national security ideation in both countries has factored in the nuclear dimension in significantly different ways. While Pakistan views its nuclear arsenal as an offensive weapon against what it perceives to be an existential threat from India and a conduit to wage a proxy war in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), India has a nuanced perspective of nuclear weapons as primarily a credible deterrent and not a weapon of war fighting. How these divergent perspectives have shaped both Indian and Pakistani security doctrines and strategies over the past few decades is what the author, Lieutenant General Prakash Menon attempts to explain in his recent book, *The Strategy Trap: India and Pakistan Under the Nuclear Shadow*. Apart from being an accomplished practitioner-scholar, his stint as a Military Advisor to the National Security Advisor adds significant value to his narrative, albeit within an overarching limitation of caution and restraint that comes after being part of the inner circle of national security decision making. While the author clearly highlights the five objectives of the book in the ‘Preface’ (p. vi), the one that stands out for its clarity is his examination of ‘deterrence perspectives of the Kargil Conflict and the India–Pakistan crisis of 2002 and other sporadic crises thereafter’. There is also a conviction about the author’s

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proposition that there exists adequate space within the nuclear threshold for the prosecution of a limited war by India against Pakistan should the latter breach unarticulated Indian red lines that revolve around terrorist attacks and the ongoing proxy war in J&K.

Examining deterrence from a regional context in some detail, Menon argues that a defining moment for the maturing of doctrinal concepts emerged after the Kargil conflict (p. xiv) when both India and Pakistan realised that a limited war was possible under a nuclear overhang based on thresholds of time, space and red lines. By resisting the temptation to head straight into an examination of the India–Pakistan nuclear conundrum in his main narrative, the author does well to wean the reader into a refresher lesson in nuclear deterrence, the role of nuclear weapons in statecraft and whether they have altered Clausewitz's essential dictum of 'warfare being a continuation of politics' (pp. 7–9). Insights into French, Chinese and Pakistani nuclear doctrines offer fresh perspectives into the various drivers and challenges that impacted the formulation of India's draft nuclear doctrine (Chapters 2–4). It is evident that the French experience was critical for India, particularly when it came to deterring a powerful nuclear power like China in the backdrop of an adversarial relationship. The author posits, 'France's nuclear doctrine remained essentially a strategy of Minimum Deterrence that provided very limited options if deterrence failed except as an automatic and full-blown response that was designed to be unacceptable' (p. 19). While the qualitative and quantitative analyses of China's nuclear forces conform to existing studies, the author explains very cogently why he considers the nuclear situation with China to be congruent and stabilised by a similarity of views on 'No First Use (NFU), minimum deterrence and de-mated deployment' (p. 44).

Chapter 4 on nuclear Pakistan is the longest chapter in the book and leads on to the complexities that India faces against a nuclear adversary who professes a flexible response strategy that straddles across the spectrum of conflict if one considers the possibility of nuclear weapons falling into the hands of jihadis. Here again, the value of the narrative emerges when the author offers operational insights into the minds of Pakistan's nuclear strategists as they have attempted to weave a veil of ambiguity around Pakistan's actual capabilities with 'leaked stories and tangential statements that cannot be substituted for a capability' (p. 71). This became particularly important for Pakistan after it sought to use its development of tactical nuclear weapons (TNW) as a smart signalling

strategy to squeeze the Indian narrative of limited conflict and counter India's Cold Start doctrine, which evolved in the years after Kargil. By highlighting the various aspects of the Pakistan military's operational control over nuclear assets and decision making even when a civilian government is in power, the author drives home an essential point: 'the stranglehold of the Pakistan military on strategic decision making' (p. 77). That apart, he offers a crisp primer on the chronological development of various missiles and their capabilities, and the extensive Chinese and North Korean assistance for Pakistan's nuclear weapons programme based on widely available open sources.

Menon commences his analysis of India's nuclear doctrine (Chapter 5) with an overview of the era of diffidence and restraint (1974–98) when India baulked at converting its peaceful nuclear capability into a weapons programme. It is here that he sticks to a 'party line' and fails to seize an opportunity to revisit the period of hesitation as a possible failure of Indian strategic thinking. However, his examination of India's nuclear doctrine is comprehensive and well-structured and highlights the fine print of no-first use (NFU), 'massive retaliation', 'disproportionate response' and 'unacceptable damage' (p. 86). His description of the trajectory of the development of India's nuclear weapons and its associated command and control structures is safe and factual. He stays clear of any of the hiccups that were encountered along the way or any discordant notes in the nuclear debates that have emerged periodically. There is also a reluctance to discuss the emerging debate within India's strategic establishment on whether NFU merits reconsideration, or whether there is a willingness to explore counter-force targeting as a calibrated response to the use of TNW.

Woven into the chapters that examine Kargil and Operation Parakram (the military face-off between India and Pakistan following the attack by Pakistan-sponsored terrorists in December 2001 and a similar attack on an Indian Army camp in 2002) is the 'stability–instability paradox' that Menon effectively fuses into his narrative. This paradox challenges established notions of military victory between adversaries armed with nuclear weapons. He argues that in the India–Pakistan nuclear face-off, Pakistan seeks to undermine India's conventional advantage by waging a proxy war and squeezing the space for India to retaliate conventionally by flashing the nuclear card regularly. India, on the other hand, strains to put together credible punitive responses in what it believes is an operational environment with adequate conventional threshold. The

hesitation of the Indian strategic establishment to go through with its threat of retaliating with a conventional response in 2002 after mobilising its armed forces was seen by Pakistan as the success of its nuclear-cum-proxy war strategy, while India had to ruminate on whether its actions were once again a demonstration of restraint like during Kargil, or a sign of strategic hesitation and operational unpreparedness. The critique is understandably soft and muted.

The author is at his best in the last segment of the book where he embarks on a critical questioning of whether India's strategic establishment and its armed forces have understood the constantly changing character of war and conflict in the India–Pakistan context. Whether it was the Indian military's inability to convince the political leadership that it had the coercive capability to force Pakistan to desist from supporting the proxy war and terrorist attacks in its hinterland (p. 138), or the lack of political clarity in India on the use of the military instrument of force, Menon is direct and forceful in his questioning. His insights into the operational methodologies of limited war in the India–Pakistan context are instructive; however, some may feel that his theoretical interventions impede the flow of the narrative (Chapter 9, pp. 152–66). The author argues that one of the weakness of the Indian military is its inability to contextualise theory and operational art—a valid criticism at that.

The book ends strongly by reinforcing the commonly prevalent but sombre prognosis of de-escalation in the India–Pakistan relationship. There is also a convincing argument of the need for India's military to better understand the linkages between strategy and political objectives (p. 205) through a reformed professional military education (PME) system and better strategic communication. There is an element of overreach in the last chapter as the author has much to share on revolution in military affairs (RMA), force restructuring in the Indian military, military strategy and plans, and flagging some innovative ideas such as a no-war pact between the two constantly warring neighbours. These minor criticisms apart, the book is a welcome addition to the repository of contemporary Indian strategic thought from a military scholar of impeccable pedigree and is a must-read for policymakers, practitioners and academia.