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**Christopher Clary and Vipin Narang. "India's Counterforce Temptations: Strategic Dilemmas, Doctrine, and Capabilities." *International Security* 43:3 (Winter 2018/19): 7-52.**

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On 14 February 2019 a suicide bomber struck an Indian Central Military Reserve Force (CRPF) convoy in Pulwama in Jammu and Kashmir, killing about 40 Indian paramilitary personnel and injuring numerous others. Responsibility for the attack was swiftly claimed by the Pakistan based terrorist group Jaish-e-Mohammed, and confirmed by Indian authorities, immediately dragging the subcontinent—yet again—into a period of crisis. Expectedly, on 26 February, a poll-bound India retaliated with an unprecedented set of airstrikes on suspected Jaish camps in Balakot in Pakistan's Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province. Pakistan responded the next day with airstrikes of its own, with the consequent dogfight resulting in an Indian aircraft being brought down in Pakistani territory and its pilot captured alive.

To the relief of observers everywhere, the captured Indian pilot was soon released and the crisis subsequently petered out. And while details of this period are still being debated and legislated, and will be for some time, what it did incontrovertibly do was to highlight the continuing potential for rapid and disastrous escalation from the sub-conventional to the nuclear level in a subcontinental context where such crises are far too frequent. For India, more specifically, the inconclusive denouement to this period also served as yet another reminder of a still unresolved challenge it confronts; that of deterring a Pakistani state that has in recent decades relied on its nuclear weapons to provide cover for such sub-conventional means of challenging Indian security and interests.

In the midst of these post-Pulwama developments, and as these dilemmas and challenges became once again a topic of immediate debate, in what can only be considered a case of perfect timing this piece by Christopher Clary and Vipin Narang was published online on 15 February 2019 in *International Security*. It explores, as the title puts it, temptations in India for a shift to a nuclear counter-force strategy, away from a counter-value approach that has long been understood to characterize India's nuclear doctrine and strategy; the potential regional stability consequences of such a shift; as well as the broader implications of these developments for nuclear stability beyond South Asia.

Keen and well-established observers of South Asia, especially its conventional and nuclear military dynamics, Clary and Narang make three key interventions in this article about both the current thinking on nuclear strategy in top echelons of the Indian state, as well the potential consequences of such thinking for the future of nuclear stability in the region and globally. First, with regard to India's nuclear strategy and doctrine, the authors make an important—and likely controversial—contention that contrary to India's previously stated claims, and conventional wisdom about the country's nuclear strategy, New Delhi is likely moving away—by either abandoning or imparting more flexibility to its current doctrine—from a position of minimum nuclear deterrence, counter-value targeting and No First Use (NFU) of nuclear weapons, to one that is increasingly tempted by the idea of addressing the deterrence dilemmas posed by Pakistan's use of sub-conventional warfare through a strategy of counter-force targeting. The logic supporting such a move, the authors contend, is premised on the fact that if India were able to ensure a sufficiently reliable counter-force strike to remove all or most of Pakistan's strategic nuclear weapons (with a Ballistic Missile Defense system to intercept any remaining ones), it would unshackle its currently limited options in responding conventionally to terrorist strikes such as the one in Pulwama and thereby establish robust deterrence against Pakistan's use of such means to imperil Indian security in the future.

Clary and Narang provide the most comprehensive account yet to support the idea that India is indeed making such a shift. In doing so they rely on two kinds of evidence. First, they point to statements by top ranking former officials in India's national security establishment, both civilian and military. Specifically, they detail important statements made by former national security advisor Shivshankar Menon, retired former strategic forces commander Lt. Gen. B.S. Nagal, and former defense minister Manohar Parrikar, all of whom have argued on separate occasions for either the explicit abandonment of India's NFU stance to introduce greater amount of deliberate ambiguity in the country's nuclear doctrine, or alternatively suggested that India's current doctrine is itself flexible and ambiguous enough to allow for the preemptive use of nuclear weapons. Crucial from the authors' point of view is not only the fact that these statements were made in public fora, but also that such undermining of India's supposedly explicit NFU policy did not elicit immediate (or any, for that matter) clarifications and denials by the Indian government.

The second prong of evidence relies on the evolution of actual capabilities in India that might allow for the implementation of such a strategy. Here, Clary and Narang note that a “combination of more weapons, a greater number of accurate delivery vehicles at higher state of readiness and responsiveness, precise warheads, multiple independently targetable reentry vehicles (MIRVs), and a layered ballistic missile defense system...” being developed by India in recent years can only be understood in the context of an explicit shift towards at least creating a permissive environment that would allow for the pursuit of a first-strike/counter-force strategy if and when deemed necessary (25). Clary and Narang consider and dismiss potential alternative explanations, such as technological drift centered at the Defense Research and Development Organization (DRDO) and strategic bluffing as unconvincing given the nature of developments they describe.

Having made their case for contending that India might be on the path to counter-force, Clary and Narang move on to the second strand of their contribution in assessing the potential consequences of such a dilution in India's strategy—or even the appearance of it happening—for regional nuclear stability. They argue, very persuasively, that the consequences of such a (perceived) shift in India's posture will likely be alarming from a regional stability perspective, rendering it a risky proposition on the part of India, especially given the fact that such a strategy's viability (both in economic and technological terms) continues to be highly suspect despite the strides that the country has made in acquiring the requisite capabilities. The primary risks, of course, pertain to the nuclear dynamics that might emerge from how Pakistan will likely respond to a perceived shift

in India's stance, leading to the likely creation of first-strike instability in any future crises. Simply put, the authors suggest, a belief in Pakistan that India is moving to counter-force is likely to lead to actions which will both "spark an interminable arms race in peacetime" (39), (as Pakistan seeks to bolster the numbers of its strategic weapons, which India must then counteract), and create greater risks of rapid nuclear escalation during crises as Pakistan begins to fear being confronted by a use-or-lose situation. A larger, diversified, and more dispersed nuclear arsenal in Pakistan will also only magnify the not inconsequential fears of loss of control of such weapons to radical elements in the country.

Finally, the piece concludes with an intriguing broader theoretical point about a more general potential for increased temptation amongst nuclear powers to move towards counter-force doctrinal postures. The authors suggest that the evolving thinking in India might indeed be an indication that we are entering what they term a "new era of counterforce" (49) owing to the sort of technological developments that may facilitate thinking along those lines. To that extent, the Indian case might portend troubling tendencies that might in fact be more global in nature.

While Clary and Narang have made a crucial and provocative (in the best sense of the word) contribution to thinking about nuclear strategy and stability in South Asia, there are some aspects of their argument that perhaps need greater exploration and can inspire more research and dialogue going forward.

First, while the authors do a very persuasive job in pointing to the sort of technological developments towards a counter-force capability that India has been undertaking in recent years, on the question of why this is happening I would suggest there is still more room for debate. Clary and Narang of course suggest that this has something to do with a possible shift in mind-set in New Delhi. The evidence for this claim, however, relies primarily on assorted statements by three admittedly key former security practitioners. And while these are important players, it is questionable whether their opinions constitute sufficient evidence to establish the claim, especially considering the fact that one would expect that individuals seeking change in the doctrinal status quo are likely to be more vocal on these matters than those who might be satisfied with things as they stand. To their credit, the authors themselves acknowledge that such statements do not point categorically to there being any sort of "official consensus in Delhi as to the wisdom of fully transitioning to a counterforce strategy..." even if it might suggest some agreement on development of capabilities that might allow for such a shift. They even suggest that the sources for this "perceived evolution" could be equally "intentional or unplanned" (38). All of which raises the question of whether there could be more than just a "temptation" for counter-force which is driving such changes. Perhaps what we are seeing is evidence more of an inadvertent policy drift driven by particular individuals and constituencies than anything else, which might indeed—as the authors surmise - be a far more troubling possibility from a regional stability perspective.

Furthermore, I would suggest that the alternative explanations the authors point to are more persuasive than they suggest, and merit stronger refutation. This is particularly true of the inadvertent technological drift argument wherein Indian scientists may be pursuing these technologies with limited oversight for primarily organizational and technological reasons with little direction from the government. Clary and Narang suggest that this is unlikely to be the case because it simply does not make sense for a poor country like India to make such investments with no underlying strategic purpose. While logically sound, the argument is not completely persuasive. For one, it is not unknown for countries to squander resources on unwise technological investments, or to do so because scientists can persuade political leaderships that such technological developments are in the interest of national security. Secondly, and more importantly, this is exactly the argument that one of the authors (Narang) has made in the past quite convincingly with regard to the

DRDO.<sup>1</sup> It would be useful to understand what evidence has led him to reconsideration; since the only thing that has changed in the meantime has been the nature of statements emanating from the likes of Menon and Nagal, it seems likely that it is this evidence that has led to the reappraisal. If so, this then raises the question of whether earlier technological pursuits were a case of technological drift or whether India has always been tempted by counter-force as an option. The point here is to suggest that there perhaps might still be some place for inadvertent technological drift as an explanation for Indian actions, barring which we ought to reconsider the motivations driving Indian nuclear doctrinal thinking from its very inception.

In conclusion, Clary and Narang have made an important and timely contribution on the matter of nuclear deterrence and risk in South Asia and beyond. Their contention that India is (or appears to be) moving away from counter-value to counter-force targeting is on the whole convincing, though why it has made that shift—and whether this is even a shift at all - likely needs further exploration. Clary and Narang also make an unexceptionable argument about the consequences of, or appearance of, such a shift in the context of what seems to be increasing skepticism in some circles in India about the NFU and other stabilizing elements of the Indian doctrine. Theirs is an intervention that should prompt greater academic engagement, and some immediate soul-searching in Indian policy circles, as the country continues to grapple with the dilemmas of deterrence under a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led government with a renewed and stronger mandate.

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<sup>1</sup> Vipin Narang, “Five Myths about India’s Nuclear Posture,” *The Washington Quarterly* 36:3 (2013): 143-157.