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Strategic Stability:

The See Saw Margery Daw of Nuclear Politics¹

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Preamble

Ours is an enigmatic, deficient, at times unfair, and for the most, an incompetent world. Its dynamics often engender paranoia and deep distrust between States particularly when amorphous national interests and intentions come into question. Unfortunately the alternative to this system is anarchy. Marshall Ferdinand Foch, one of the lesser of the meat grinding generals of the First World War when faced with the bewildering nature of the larger strategic situation is said to have countered with a fundamental question, “*De quoi s’agit-il*”?² “What is it all about?” Indeed this poser, if understood and answered in the context of nuclear stability, would bring us to the complexities that face nations with the coming of a weapon that can obliterate the very purpose of warfare. Rarely in history have we seen the advent of a weapon that could in one flash achieve the grisly Clauswitzian goal of absolute war.

Against the reality of conventional war with its limited goals and moderated ends and the unlikelihood of it being outlawed in the foreseeable future, the separation of the conventional from the nuclear is a logical severance. Nuclear weapons are to deter and not for use. Given the politics of the South Asian region, the historical animosities and the emasculated nature of civilian leadership in Pakistan, the dangers of adding nuclear violence to military perfidy, as recent proliferatory history has shown, is more than just a reality. The collusive nature of the Sino-Pak nuclear weapons programme and the duality that it presents queers the field to an extent when

nuclear doctrinal co-relation is suggested. Stability in this context would suggest stability of the deterrent relationship with avoidance of conflict provocation being the leitmotif.

The essence of stability is therefore, firstly, to agree on certain foundational rules of conduct based on an understanding of realities. In defining these rules the intrusion of technology is unfortunately double edged for while it provides for modernization it invites covertness, which promotes, what I have termed as, a speculative bulge in the arsenal. The recent plutonium rush and the burgeoning of nuclear arsenals in the sub-continent is a manifestation of this bulge. Secondly, that the army in Pakistan is the true power centre, is that nation's most open secret and therefore for India to engage an enfeebled and impotent civilian leadership is self defeating. Unless the army is brought into the dialogue, either directly or indirectly through an interlocutor, deliberations on deterrent stability will be destined for failure.

Considerations that Influence Deterrence Stability

The Global Scenario

There is an entire range of factors that influence stability of a deterrent relationship but those that disproportionately prevail are what will be discussed in the ensuing paragraphs. We begin with the strategic environment and its external dimension. A single hyper power marks the global situation in the wake of the curtains coming down on the Cold War. In addition, the trends of globalization which technology and the mushrooming of democracies has ushered in, makes for the very concept of nation states in terms of their absolute sovereignty a shaky proposition. Three very obvious inconsistencies remain an abiding source of friction for a sovereign nation within the international system. In fact it makes a mockery of the individual nature of a state's power and its interests. These three maybe summarized as follows:

- The internal dimension of sovereignty encourages centralism at a point in history when more plurality and democracy is demanded.
- Sovereignty in its external avatar makes inconceivable international laws and universal regulations yet it is precisely the opposite that globalization requires.
- Given the vast differentials in military and economic power, sovereignty in terms of supremacy of state remains a chimerical concept. This is vitiated by the networked and globalised nature of the contemporary situation.

The South Asian Tangle

Centralism, the absence of plurality, and the vast disparity in economic and military power are all symptomatic of the situation in South Asia. Add to the equation a defacto military center of power that has persisted in the use of non-state actors in pursuit of its ‘national interests’³ and the portents of instability become more than apparent. The impact of these contradictory forces taken together not only makes for an unstable relationship, but also brings in a measure of nuclear multilateralism on account of the chain reaction that is set into motion in an action-reaction situation. While the lone hyper power would seek to control the action-reaction predicament, the other poles in the global scenario would seek advantage in it. The fact of the Sino-Pak collusion in the nuclear field is one such manifestation while the NPG waiver is another symptom of the same. The necessity is to cause strategic equilibrium in a manner in which the realities of the south Asian situation interplays with the external environment. The one virtue that would serve to bring about balance is transparency.

Internal Dynamics

The next consideration is internal pulls and pressures that the protagonists are subject to. These often defy rationality and tend to serve an agenda that loses sight of purpose of the nuclear deterrent, that is, nuclear war avoidance and, as has been stated by the two governments, an abhorrence of a nuclear arms race in the cold war mode. The effect of these internal dynamics is not just to enlarge the arsenal but to drive it in a direction that is neither predictable nor over which controls exist.

Conventionalising the Deterrent

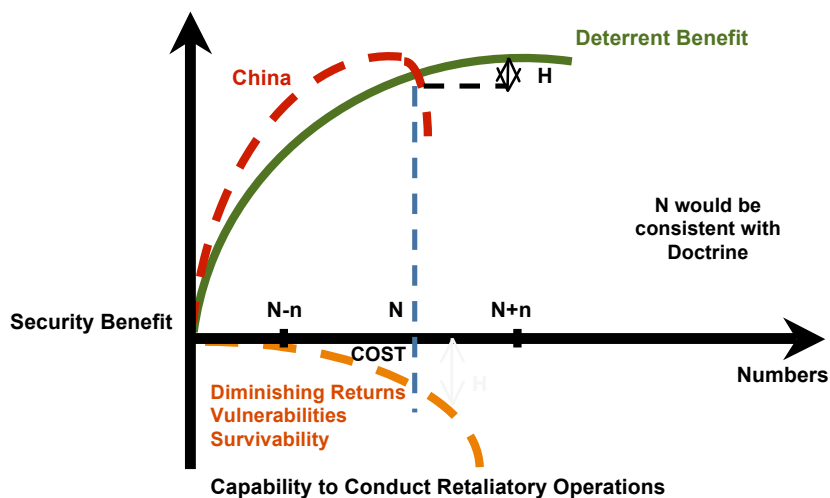
The impending mounting of nuclear warheads on the Babur cruise missiles, the work in progress of arming conventional submarines with nuclear tipped missiles are cases in point which do not in anyway uphold stability of a deterrent relationship. Additionally they do not conform to any strategic or doctrinal underpinnings whose goal is nuclear war avoidance. Far more disturbing is Pakistan’s declared policy to employ non-state actors⁴ as an essential part of their military strategy. Given the fact that both control and custody of the nuclear arsenal is resident with the military and complicity with terrorist organizations such as the Lashkar-e-Tayyiba is an

indispensable part of their gambit, the probability of a failure of orthodox command and control (as conventional wisdom understands it) is cataclysmically high. Such a state of affairs hardly engenders confidence in a deterrent relationship remaining stable.

Speculative Bulge and Logic for Numbers

Security anxieties that plague the subcontinent are fed on a staple of historical suspicions, absence of trust and a stultifying and obsessive paranoia. It places before the planner a lopsided and unbalanced ‘failure conundrum,’ having the potential to spur ‘speculative bulges’ in stockpile of fissile material and in the arsenal all in search of an answer to that open ended inscrutable question of ‘how much is enough?’ Logic for numbers may be found provided the strategic underpinnings that govern the development of the arsenal are kept verifiably transparent. One such logic which the Chinese reportedly use to cap their arsenal is graphically illustrated below:

**FIGURE 1: HOW MUCH IS ENOUGH? SECURITY BENEFIT OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS:
CHINA’S PERSPECTIVE**



Source: *Minimum Means of Reprisal*, Lewis J., MIT, 2007

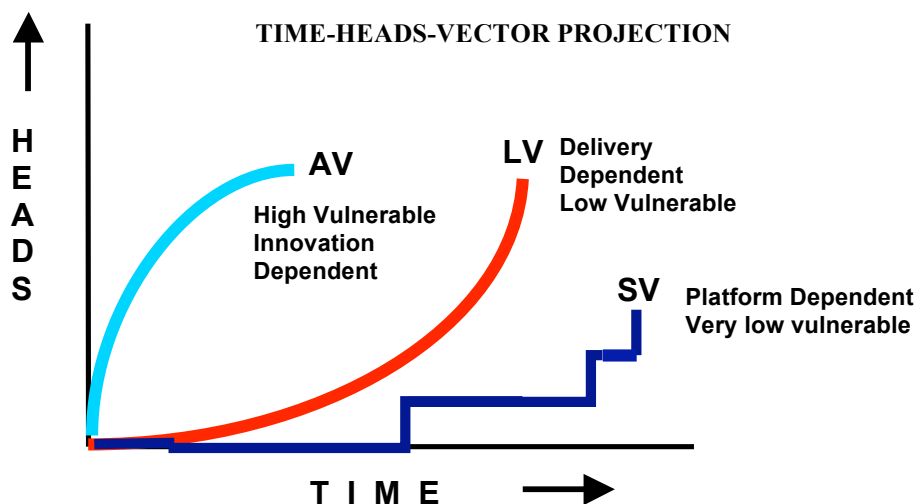
Quite obviously the graph, bereft of numbers, is more indicative of a line of reasoning than of a mathematical formulation. The framework uses subjective concepts such as ‘diminishing returns in security benefits’ as determined by vulnerabilities, survivability and the economics of maintaining a large arsenal. The rub, however, is really that this construct is more readily adaptable by states that have abjured the first use of nuclear weapons and not by those that consider nuclear war fighting as an integral part of their military strategy. Also, for reasons of vulnerability of vector and in order to provide credibility to the arsenal and its development, a No First Use (NFU) nation’s nuclear armory follows a very predictable trajectory. Significant to this trajectory is the assurance of massive retaliation. The graph makes certain assumptions:

- Strategic underpinning and nuclear doctrine of the protagonist stipulates NFU. In the event of a breakdown in deterrent relationship and recourse is taken to or a nuclear exchange contemplated, then the nature of the arsenal is so sculpted that its survivability is not just guaranteed, but retaliation is assured and is massive in its destructive potential.
- The curves themselves are, once again, suggestive in form; yet planners will note that given units, they will define the arsenal and the eventual retaliatory weight. The evolution in form of an NFU arsenal is graphically depicted below:

FIGURE 2: THE EVOLUTION OF NFU ARSENAL

Parameters: NFU, 2nd Strike Survivability

Probabilistic Analysis: Vulnerability, Retaliatory Weight



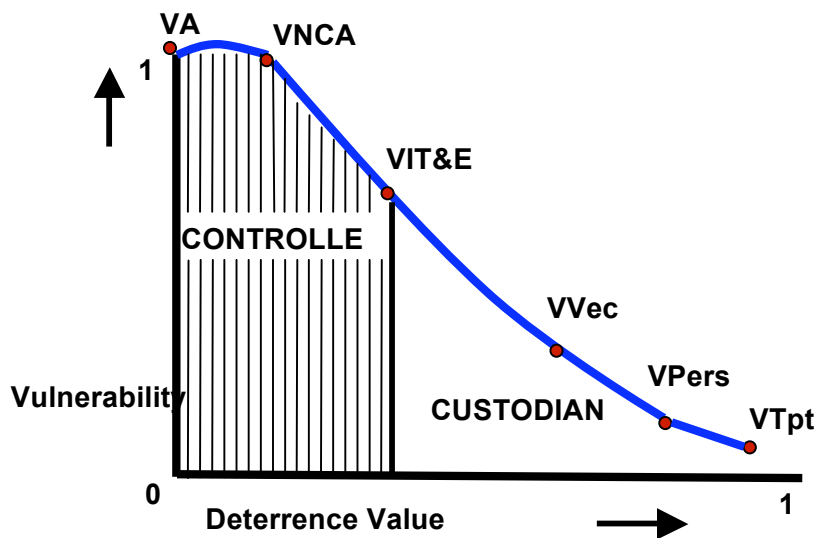
Legend: AV, LV & SV – Air, Land and Submarine Vector

Source: Author

Philosophy of Avoidance

Separation of the Custodian from the Controller of nuclear weapons is another feature that underscores the philosophy of ‘avoidance’ which characterizes the very different and unusual nature of the weapon, it also provides a basis for strategic CBMs. Intrinsically such an approach is robust in its abiding commitment to avoidance. When viewed against a situation where custody and control are resident in the same military ‘trigger finger’ a whole set of contradictions appear in terms of ‘intentions-to-use’. The separation of custodian from controller, vulnerability of the various elements and impact on deterrence is depicted below:

FIGURE 3: THE PHILOSOPHY OF AVOIDANCE: SEPARATION OF CUSTODIAN FROM CONTROLLER
VULNERABILITY & IMPACT ON DETERRENCE



Note: Vulnerability values based on CARVER/DELPHI

Index: VA – Vulnerability of Arsenal; VNCA – Vulnerability of the Nuclear Command Authority; VIT&E – Vulnerability of IT and Electronics; VVec – Vulnerability of Vectors; VPers & VTpt – Vulnerability of Personnel and Transportation. Source: Author

Technological Intrusions

Technology intrusions into the arsenal are inevitable. It serves to modernize, miniaturize, compress time frames and, most significantly, the dilemma it poses is that it invites covertness while its impact demands transparency. The absence of transparency manifests itself in

‘speculative bulges’ in the arsenal and combined with technology holds the portents to carve an arsenal designed for nuclear war fighting which would make mockery of attempts to stabilize the deterrent relationship. This, if unregulated, represents the most dangerous development in our times. The direction in which arsenals are headed is a grim reminder of the upshot of opacity and the probable descent to a nuclear war fighting capability.

The Nuclear Nightmare

Case for Transparency

To summarize, we have thus far noted the effect of the external environment introducing nuclear multilateralism; an enfeebled civilian leadership in Pakistan that is incapable of action to remove the military finger from the nuclear trigger; the active attendance and involvement of non-state actors in military strategy; technology intrusions that invite covertness while its effects demand transparency; internal environment that without rationale finds solace in bigger, larger and more varied arsenals; security anxieties, all for want of transparency, shoving arsenals down the slippery slope of developing nuclear war fighting capabilities; absence or at best ambiguity in doctrinal underpinnings that mould nuclear posture and the alarming reality of ‘intention-to-use.’ The larger consequence of the considerations discussed so far makes the status quo untenable. The need for change in the manner in which we do business is urgent and is the call of the hour. Strategic restraint predicated on failsafe controls, verification in a transparent environment, providing logic to size and nature of the arsenal and putting the brakes on the slide to nuclear conventionalizing become imperatives to stabilizing the deterrent relationship.

The Nightmare

The nuclear nightmare, when articulated, is a hair trigger, opaque deterrent leaning towards conventionalizing under single military control steered by a doctrine seeped in ambiguity and guided by a military strategy that carouses and finds unity with non-state actors. It does not take a great deal of intellectual exertions to declare that this nightmare is upon us.

Conclusion

The challenge before us is clear. To put the genie back into the bottle is neither realistic nor a proposition that merits consideration at this stage of the global nuclear scenario. Areas that could

be addressed begin with dispelling the veil of opacity that surrounds the nuclear deterrent. Technology intrusions that have put the arsenal on a hair trigger must be subjected to a safety catch through the instruments of transparency and the removal of ambiguities in strategic underpinnings. NCA to NCA communications must be conditioned by institutional verification measures that evaluate and exchange risks and alert status. It is only such devices that will enable strategic restraint to be realized on the sub continent. While these remain the broad objectives, the first series of steps on the road to stability maybe specifically identified as follows:

- Transparency in strategic underpinnings through the declaration of doctrinal canons.
- Command and Control of the deterrent must differentiate between the custodian and the controller as also between the conventional and the nuclear without entertaining the possibility of non-state actors being a part of the overall strategy.
- Technological intrusions must be made transparent both with a rationale and the impact on arsenals particularly so when the dangers of conventionalizing of the nuclear weapon becomes manifest.
- Alert status of the deterrent at all times must be communicated.
- Logic for stockpile or fissile material and numbers and nature of arsenal will serve to eliminate the dangers of speculative bulges.



Vice Admiral (Retd.) Vijay Shankar PVSM, AVSM, holds an MSc in Defence Studies and is a graduate of the Naval War College, Newport, Rhode Island, USA. He is the former Commander-in-Chief of the Andaman & Nicobar Command, Commander-in-Chief of the Strategic Forces Command and Flag Officer Commanding Western Fleet. His Command and operational experience are comprehensive and include Command of INS Viraat the aircraft carrier and active service during the 1971 war against Pakistan, Op Pawan the IPKF operations in Sri Lanka and Op Vijay operations to vacate the Kargil intrusion. The Admiral retired on 30 September 2009, after nearly 45 years in uniform. He is today settled with his wife in the Nilgiris and passes down his operational and strategic experience through articles and participation in seminars that deal with his primary areas of expertise. He has contributed to various professional journals and continues to support his Alma Mater in Kochi through his writings. He has lectured at the Staff College, Higher Command College, the United Services Institute and the National Maritime Foundation. He is a member of the adjunct faculty of the National Institute of Advanced Studies and he has tenanted the Admiral Katari Chair of Excellence at the United Services Institute. Internationally, his participation in the Track II Ottawa Dialogue, the Bellagio Carnegie Endowment discussions, the Indo-Sino-Pak trilateral dialogue, the Cheophraya dialogue and the papers he has presented there seek to provide a new paradigm for nuclear security on the sub-continent.

Endnotes

¹ *See Saw Margery Daw*
Johnny shall have a new master
He shall earn but a penny a day
Because he cant work any faster

The see saw is the oldest ride for children. The words of the poem depict children playing on a see saw. The last three lines appear to reflect the use of child labour in workhouses and may have been used by a spiteful child to taunt another, implying the latter's family was destined for this pitiable state.

² Marshall Ferdinand Foch as quoted in the book *The Guns of August* by Tuchman, Barbara, Macmillan 1962.

³ US Secretary of State cable-30 Nov,. BBC.co.uk/news. Wikileaks key issues

⁴ General Kayani's statements with respect to Pakistan's army's support to militants as quoted in The Hindu Dec.02, 2010