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(Remarks as prepared, not as delivered)

Everybody thinks they know the likeliest pathway to nuclear first use in South Asia. It is called a conventional wisdom for a reason. It starts with a terrorist attack presumed to be from Pakistan on an Indian metropole that kills scores of civilians. Unable to exercise restraint anymore due to domestic political pressures baying for blood, the Government of India orders the mobilization of its three main strike corps and commences offensive operations across the international border, not limiting its response to the Jammu and Kashmir sector and the Line of Control. The deepest thrust is undertaken by XXI Corps and its supporting elements in the desert sector. XXI Corps threatens to bisect Pakistan's north-south communications, putting Pakistani conventional forces on its heels. Unable to slow down XXI Corps, Pakistan flushes out Nasr tactical nuclear weapons batteries or Abdali missiles and its Strategic Plans Division (SPD) authorizes their use either in demonstration shots, against concentrated XXI Corps armored divisions, or bridgeheads and logistics behind the main thrust to slow down the Indian offensive. India then promises what most presume is massive countervalue retaliation against Pakistani cities, leaving aside how credible or incredible that might be.

This is how nuclear first use would unfold in South Asia, right? Well, maybe not so fast. There is increasing evidence that India will not allow Pakistan to go first. And that India's opening salvo may not be conventional strikes trying to pick off just Nasr batteries in the theater, but a full 'comprehensive counterforce strike' that attempts to completely disarm Pakistan of its nuclear weapons so that India does not have to engage in iterative tit-for-tat exchanges and expose its own cities to nuclear destruction. This thinking surfaces not from fringe extreme voices such as Bharat Karnad or retired Indian Army officers frustrated by the lack of resolve they believe their government has shown in multiple provocations, but from no less than a former Strategic Forces Command C-in-C Lt Gen BS Nagal and, perhaps more importantly and authoritatively, from the highly respected and influential former National Security Advisor Shivshankar Menon in plain sight in his recent 2016 book *Choices: Inside the Making of Indian Foreign Policy*. In short, we may be witnessing what I call a 'decoupling' of Indian nuclear strategy between China and Pakistan. The force requirements India needs in order to credibly threaten assured retaliation against China may allow it to pursue more aggressive strategies—such as escalation dominance or a 'splendid first strike'—against Pakistan. We may be seeing the emergence of this decoupling, or at least

serious mainstream thinking about it, with the intention being a disarming strike against Pakistan.

But wait, you say, doesn't Indian official nuclear doctrine and posture clearly espouse a No First Use Doctrine and threaten massive countervalue retaliation? Well as Scott Sagan and others, including myself, have pointed out the sanctity of India's NFU is already eroded in the official doctrine by threatening nuclear use against chemical and biological weapons. And the doctrine is silent about targeting, only threatening massive retaliation designed to inflict unacceptable damage. This could be countervalue, and has long been presumed to be....but it does not have to be.

Could all this be changing? Indeed, as Shivshankar Menon recently stated: "India's nuclear doctrine has far greater flexibility than it gets credit for."

First, although Menon ultimately concludes that No First Use is in India's strategic interests, he further undermines its sanctity when he writes the following:

"There is a potential gray area as to when India would use nuclear weapons first against another NWS. Circumstances are conceivable in which India might find it useful to strike first, for instance, against an NWS that had declared it would certainly use its weapons, and if India were certain that adversary's launch was imminent."¹

In practice, this scenario could open the door for India to initiate preemptive nuclear use if, for example, it detected Pakistan moving tactical nuclear weapons batteries into the theater of battle. No matter how imminent their use may actually be, Indian security managers would have no choice but to assume intent to use at that point. And the declaration of certain use in these scenarios has already been enunciated by SPD. This dovetails with writings of former SFC C-in-C Nagal who questioned the morality of NFU, particularly in a democratic state like Indian—asking how the Indian leadership could accept significant casualties if it knew a nuclear use by Pakistan were imminent. In November 2016, the sitting defense minister at the time, Manohar Parrikar, stated in his "personal capacity"—insofar as that is even possible—that India should not declare one way or another whether it in fact has a no first use policy. Increasingly, it is clear that serious national security officials in India have every intention of moving away from it: Menon clearly carves out an exception for preemptive Indian first use in the very scenario that is most likely to occur in South Asia. Indian leaders can disavow all of this as personal opinions, but when a sitting defense minister, former Strategic Forces commander, and highly respected NSA all question the sanctity of NFU, it all starts to add up.

¹ Ibid, p. 110.

More interestingly, Menon elucidates what the nature of Indian first use might be. First, he refers to countervalue targeting in the past tense: “Instead, the logical posture *at first was* counter-value targeting, or targeting an opponent’s assets, rather than counterforce targeting, which concentrates on the enemy’s military and command structures.” Implying, perhaps, that the current strategy has shifted away from countervalue targeting to counterforce. Then, in a paragraph which had, as far as I can tell, been missed by India nuclear doctrine watchers until now, he further writes:

“What would be credible would be the message India conveyed by how it configures its forces. If Pakistan were to use tactical nuclear weapons against India [or believed to imminently prepared to do so], even against Indian forces in Pakistan, it would effectively be opening the door to a massive Indian first strike, having crossed India’s declared red lines. There would be little incentive, once Pakistan had taken hostilities to the nuclear level, for India to limit its response, since that would only invite further escalation by Pakistan. India would hardly risk giving Pakistan the chance to carry out a massive nuclear strike after the Indian response to Pakistan using tactical nuclear weapons. In other words, Pakistani tactical nuclear weapons use [or imminent use] would effectively free India to undertake a *comprehensive first strike against Pakistan*.”²

Make no mistake, he is talking about completely disarming Pakistan in the Indian strike so that it had no ability to retaliate in a ‘third strike’ against Indian high value targets. In combination, these paragraphs suggest that the party that goes first in the most likely pathway to nuclear first use in South Asia may not be Pakistan, but India, if and when it believed that Pakistan might be ready to cross the nuclear threshold. The nature of that first use might be a full attempted counterforce strike against Pakistan’s strategic nuclear capabilities, and whatever tactical capabilities it could find. With such a strategy, in fact, India could not afford to go second and risk any attrition of its own forces. But knowing this, Pakistan has every incentive to go first and go massively itself...emplacing South Asia into the very definition of first strike instability.

Can India do this now? Almost certainly not. There is little evidence that it can find, fix, and destroy Pakistan’s nuclear forces in real time on land (we can talk more about the move to sea in discussion). Even if it believes that it only really needs to prioritize targeting the longer range strategic systems and can leave aside the tactical systems in order to achieve significant damage limitation, it is unclear whether India has a good fix on all the locations of Pakistani strategic forces. Although India’s envisioned arsenal size is a closely guarded secret, this strategy would demand numbers of warheads that India probably does not yet possess. And it would require working missile defenses to intercept any residual forces that were missed. Is India there yet? No. Is it working on all of these pieces? In fact, it is. MIRVs, missile

² Ibid, p. 117.

defenses, more, and more accurate, missiles which are increasingly responsive and not necessarily maintained in recessed de-mated states as the conventional wisdom believes. All being potentially developed. And serious voices which cannot be ignored seem to suggest that this is where India may be heading, and certainly wants to head. So our conventional understanding of South Asia's nuclear dynamics and who, in fact, might use nuclear weapons first and in what mode may need a hard rethink given these emerging authoritative voices in India who are not content to cede the nuclear initiative to Pakistan. This would mark a major shift in Indian strategy if adopted and implemented. Preemptive nuclear counterforce. With all of its attendant consequences.