

India's National Security under the BJP: "Strong at Home, Engaged Abroad"

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Despite the numerous domestic and international challenges to India's security, successive national administrations have given little serious attention to military matters, especially in terms of the strategic role of the armed forces as a tool of government. With few exceptions, decisions dealing with challenges to national security have been reactive, tactical, and/or confined to the prime minister and an informal coterie of advisors rather than proactive, strategic and/or the result of a formal consultative process within the governing party, the armed forces and non-governmental experts.

In a marked departure from previous national governments, those led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) sought to address national security issues both proactively and strategically in line with the party's philosophy of achieving a strong India.

In the 1998 general elections, the BJP campaigned against the previous United Front administration and the Congress party with an ideology of *hindutva* that envisaged a great India as a militarily powerful India. Their 1998 election manifesto stated that the "frenetic pace of military expansion and modernisation by some of our neighbours" had not been addressed by previous administrations: "Since 1991, the country's defence budget has been declining in real terms...from 3.4% of the GDP in 1989-90 to a mere 2.2% this year", and it listed numerous defence projects that had been delayed for lack of adequate funds. The manifesto committed the party to a specific list of strategic, organisation and deployment options, including:

- (a) The establishment of a National Security Council to "constantly analyse security, political and economic threats and render continuous advice to the Government...[as well as to] undertake India's first-ever Strategic Defence Review...".
- (b) A re-evaluation of India's nuclear policy with a view to "exercise the option to induct nuclear weapons."
- (c) Expediting the development of the Agni series of ballistic missiles.

India Goes Nuclear

The 1998 elections were a victory for the BJP and its electoral allies. The 12th Lok Sabha contained 178 members of parliament (MPs) from the BJP and 264 in total in the BJP-led coalition. While Congress(I) and its allies also gained seats, up from 141 to 168, all but one of these seats were won by supporting parties. The big losers were the parties of the United Front (UF) which had made up the governments of the previous 18 months but saw their number of MPs plummet from 179 to 101. When two UF parties, the Telegu Desam Party (TDP) and Kashmir's National Conference decided not to vote against the BJP bloc, the latter had a majority of 6 and formed the next government. Would the BJP-led coalition keep to its manifesto's national security promises?

The seriousness of the BJP's intentions was demonstrated within months of their electoral victory when, on 11 May 1998, Prime Minister Atul Behari Vajpayee publicly announced that three nuclear devices, one of them thermonuclear, had been tested at Pokhran in the Rajasthan desert (just some 60 miles from the Pakistan border). Two days later, another series of nuclear devices were tested. Whereas the first series of devices tested included including a hydrogen "city buster" bomb, the second were quantitatively smaller, indicating, perhaps, the intention to develop battlefield nuclear weapons. A day after the second series of tests, Vajpayee declared "India is now a nuclear weapons state".

In fulfilling their election manifesto's pledge to induct nuclear weapons, the BJP realised long-standing Indian preparations to go overtly nuclear. The overt demonstration of its nuclear weapons capability meant Indian had to elucidate a strategy for their deployment and use. Speaking in the Lok Sabha soon after the tests, Vajpayee confirmed that his government:

- (i) Was imposing a voluntary moratorium on further tests;
- (ii) Would consider signing the CTBT;
- (iii) Was adopting a "no first strike" policy regarding nuclear weapons;
- (iv) Would not use nuclear weapons against any country not in possession of such weapons; and
- (v) The country's nuclear weapons would remain under civilian control.

Little further information was forthcoming as to the exact nature of any command-and-control structure for nuclear weapons or, indeed, to what extent the government intended to weaponise its nuclear capabilities, although there was immediate talk of a minimum deterrent deployed in a triad of air, land and sea weapons delivery systems.

To address these questions and other national security issues in depth, the BJP government created a new National Security Council (NSC) in November 1998. This was a seminal moment as, for the first time in independent India, the government now had a civilian hierarchy of expertise to co-ordinate defence thinking and advise on all matters of national security. The NSC consists of several tiers. At cabinet level, it is made up of the prime minister, deputy chairman of planning, the respective ministers of Home, Finance, External Affairs, and Defence, the respective military chiefs of staff, and a new national security advisor (NSA)—who also serves as principle private secretary to the prime minister.

Uncertainties about the command-and-control structures and nuclear doctrines of India and Pakistan further increased worries about the possibilities of them going to war. The NDA did not announce its official nuclear strategy until January 2003. In the meantime, confidence in the government's management of its nuclear arsenals responsibly rested on their "no first use" policy announced back in August 1999—as well as the country's history as a democratic state which had always maintained undoubted civil supremacy of rule over the military. In contrast, Pakistan, then and now, is under a military government led by the chief architect of the 1998 Kargil Conflict, during which elements of its armed forces had been suspected of manoeuvring nuclear weapons independently of the country's elected civilian prime minister. Not until the day after India's announcement of its NCA did the Pakistan press carry reports that its own nuclear National Command Authority (NCA)—

consisting of the president, chiefs of the three military services and the civilian prime minister—had been in control of the country’s nuclear arsenal for four years, and that no one individual, not even Musharraf, had sole say as to the use of nuclear weapons. With Pakistan refusing to embrace a “no first use” nuclear weapons strategy the path to nuclear war remains highly volatile.

There are further notes of caution to be sounded. Thus, whereas deterrence may be argued to have worked during the Cold War as both sides had enough nuclear weapons and delivery systems to ensure the complete destruction of the other side, this is not the case for India and Pakistan. After a first and even second strike (India has always maintained that its nuclear doctrine includes a second strike capability), the military forces of these two neighbours may well “still be intact to continue and even escalate the conflict”. Also, while the geographic distance between the US and Soviet Union allowed for perhaps a 30-minute gap between the launch of a nuclear warhead and its projected impact during which the nature of the threat (mistaken identity, rogue launch, etc.) might be analysed, the proximity of India and Pakistan allows no such luxury. In such circumstances, immediate and full retaliation might be the only option considered.

Peering into the abyss of nuclear war in the summer of 2002 influenced the NDA into rethinking its strategy for ensuring national security towards a doctrine I call “Strong at home, engaged abroad”.

Strong at Home

The first part of this new national security doctrine entails a continued focus on force as the chief guarantor of national security. Therefore, as had the BJP-led coalition government, the NDA continued to increase the defence budget in absolute terms, from \$9.39 billion in 1998 to \$12.88 billion in 2002. Indeed, since coming to power in 1998, BJP-led governments have increased the defence budget by an average 6.28% per annum between 1998 and 2002. Note that these figures do not reflect the government’s total spending on national security. Much of the expenditure on the research and development of nuclear weapons and their delivery systems is thought to be contained within the respective budgets of the civilian Department of Atomic Energy and Department of Space. The budgetary requirements for maintaining internal order also need to be added to the total cost of national security.

The charge that national security costs under the NDA are too high for a developing nation like India, in which almost 30% of the population live below the official poverty line and over 40% remain illiterate, is not easy to answer. However, successive Indian administrations of whatever political ideology have rarely seen defence expenses in a “guns or butter” light—except in the notable case of nuclear weapons. Otherwise, various governments have adjusted defence spending in a reactive and/or ad hoc manner rather than as part of a long-term, proactive strategy.

Engaged Abroad

One aspect of the second part of what I am describing as an NDA national security doctrine of “strong at home, engaged abroad” may be seen from the administrations’ embrace of India’s historically favourite expression of military power; that is,

international peacekeeping. As described above, Prime Minister Nehru countered the “with us or against us” demands of the Cold War by leading the NAM, and backing up this ideological commitment by deploying Indian armed forces in support of UN peacekeeping operations. Under the NDA, in 2003 over 2500 Indian military personnel deployed in UN peacekeeping duties overseas, including those in the Congo (MONUC), Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE), Lebanon (UNIFIL), Ivory Coast (UNMIC), and Burundi (UNOB). While working with their foreign counterparts in an international milieu improves the professional skills of Indian officers and the balance of the Indian treasury, the chief aim of recent administrations in participating in UN peacekeeping has been to emphasise the country’s importance in the international order. Whether this has had any effect on India’s claim to a permanent seat on the UN Security Council remains to be seen.

A more recent demonstration of the NDA’s national security doctrine that has emerged post-2002 is its growing defence co-operation as a means of becoming “engaged abroad”. This is clearly stated by the Ministry of Defence: “the enhancement and strengthening of defence co-operation with foreign countries continued to be an important objective and component of our overall defence and foreign policy”.

Perhaps the most surprising manifestation of the “engaged abroad” national security doctrine is the NDA’s recent dedication to improving relations with China. After all, it was the BJP-led coalition government which reversed decades of (painfully) slow but steadily improving relations with their neighbour to the north by publicly stating that the threat posed by China was the main reason for the 1998 Pokhran tests. This claim was repeated in the Indian Military of Defence Annual Report, 2001 which noted the overwhelming superiority of Chinese versus Indian nuclear weapons, that all major Indian cities are within range of Chinese missiles, and that China was co-operating with Pakistan in developing missiles and nuclear weapons. More recently, however, Vajpayee reversed course when, following a visit to Beijing in June 2003, it was announced that India would acknowledge the Tibet Autonomous region as Chinese territory. In return, China effectively conceded India’s sovereignty of Sikkim by signing a border trade protocol to facilitate trade through the Tibet-Sikkim. India and China then conducted joint naval exercises in November, shortly after China and Pakistan had completed joint exercises.

Lessons Learnt

A national security doctrine, which I characterise as “strong at home, engaged abroad” became the operative policy of the NDA. In simple terms of law-and-order, to be strong at home is primarily a function of the local, state and CPFs; at least if and when the outstanding issue of securing the Kashmir border is settled. As Pakistan has nuclear weapons and the means to deliver them, this issue cannot be resolved by force alone. Thus, ensuring the internal security of India is best served by normalising relations with Pakistan. For the NDA, the best means of doing this is by using the economic self-interest of both countries to propel a slow but steady progression of normalisation, including the opening of transport links, sporting exchanges and people-to-people contact.

While concentrating on the more traditional military aspect of national security means this paper cannot fully judge whether “strong at home, engaged abroad” has made India more secure under the NDA, it can offer some indications as to how defence-related decisions have impacted/will impact the country’s safety as a whole. The most momentous defence decision made in recent years was not to overtly demonstrate the country’s nuclear weapons capabilities in 1998, but to refrain from using them during the Kargil Conflict in 1999 and the build-up of armies along the Indo-Pakistan border in 2002. For, while the first decision brought down global opprobrium and economic sanctions upon India, and caused Pakistan to become the seventh declared nuclear weapons state, it did little to change the nuclear war-fighting doctrine of either country. Indian strategists had always envisaged an Indian nuclear bomb as a defensive weapon only. Similarly, their Pakistani counterparts always saw their bomb as a means of negating India’s superiority in conventional arms in the event of a war which threatened...what exactly?

The answer to the above question is why the latter decisions—refraining from using nuclear weapons during the 1999 Kargil Conflict and the 2002 border build-up—are more important than the 1998 nuclear tests themselves, for they taught Indian and Pakistan leaders the rudiments of fighting a war when both sides have the power to inflict unprecedented horrors on their enemy. In the Kargil example, the Indian leadership learned one vital lesson: if India could fight a relatively high-intensity but geographically limited war, nuclear weapons need not enter into the equation.

While this prudence, in terms of resisting attacking supply lines and bases across the LoC, cost additional hundreds of military lives, it prevented an escalation which, if it had resulted in a nuclear response, would have killed many millions of Indian civilians. Pakistan, on the other hand, seemed to learn very little; once again their strategic planning in terms of calculating the probable outcome(s) of their actions was abysmal, once again, they found themselves reacting to Indian moves rather than controlling them.

The 2002 border build-up taught different lessons. The Pakistan defence decision-making hierarchy, now under the direct control of Musharraf, the architect of the Kargil misadventure, was once again reacting to rather than controlling events and, as such, was predicating its responses wholly on decisions made by the Indian leadership. Now that the burden of escalation rested with itself only, the NDA administration forwent the muscular response of war many were advocating as a suitable response to the unprecedented attack on the Lok Sabha and other bloody provocations. Instead, they decided that as the chance of nuclear war, however remote, could not be discounted as an option which might exercised by the Pakistani leadership—under just what circumstances the Indians still could not predict with any certainty—the best option available was to use international pressure to wring promises of concessions from Musharraf regarding securing the LOC from infiltration. It seemed little reward for so much effort in the face of so much provocation. Yet, the lessons learned were vital:

- (i) Force as a means of settling major international disputes between South Asian states—at least between those equipped with nuclear weapons—is finished.

(ii) India cannot take its rightful place in the world if relations with Pakistan continued to fester.

From these lessons came the NDA's focus on economic, technological and diplomatic engagement with the world.

Future Prospects

The idea that it took the overt demonstration of nuclear weapons by both India and Pakistan to bring them to their senses is attractive—though flawed. It was not nuclear weapons per se that forced this conversion (at least, not for the NDA), but their near use. Who is to say that the outcome could not have been different; that in 1998 or 2002, Indian forces crossing the LoC to attack Pakistani bases and supply lines would have provoked a full-scale nuclear response, millions of Indian deaths, then a retaliatory strike and millions of Pakistani deaths? To say that such a scenario is unprecedented is true, but only until it happens. Indeed, on 30 December 2002, Pakistan President General Musharraf told an Army Air Defence Corps reunion in Karachi that he had personally warned Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee to expect “an unconventional war” if Indian forces had crossed the LoC or the international border earlier that year. Although an army spokesman said that Musharraf had not been referring to nuclear weapons, Indian Defence Minister Fernandes, attending a conference in Hyderabad on 7 January 2003, replied by saying that the “Pakistan leadership should not get into the idea of committing suicide because we can take a bomb or two”, which Pakistan Information Minister Sheikh Rashid Ahmed then called the “ravings of a crazy man....We do not want war but if war is imposed on Pakistan, we have the will to give a crushing reply”.

Finally, now that India has nuclear weapons, where will the NDA—or any other future Indian administration—go with them? As the Cold War showed, once begun, the qualitative development and quantitative deployment of nuclear weapons is almost relentless. How many nuclear warheads are enough? How much is India prepared to spend? There is a danger that, if continued by future administrations enjoying the country's current 8-10% yearly economic growth, the NDA's pursuit of military weapons which make a qualitative difference to the regional security environment may lead to a costly and highly dangerous arms race in Asia. ■

Dr Kundu is EIAS Senior Research Fellow. This presentation is abstracted from an EIAS Briefing Paper written by Dr Kundu. The full text may be found at www.eias.org/briefpapers.html. The summary was prepared by *EurAsia Bulletin*.

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