

NUCLEAR OPTION AND DEFENCE JOURNALISM

Sankar Ray

Prof Sujay Basu, then director, School of Energy Studies and professor of electrical engineering, Jadavpur University, was speaking at a seminar of nuclear option, with former secretary of defence, K Subrahmanyam in the chair. It was during the Janata Dal regime with V P Singh as the Prime Minister. Dr Basu presented a paper on NPT and its relevance to Indo-Pak relations, Dr Raja Ramanna, the brain behind Pokhran –I(1974) – was then the minister of state for defence. He asked participants to imagine themselves in Pakistan and react on such a defence minister. Subrahmanyam interrupted repeatedly while Dr Basu was speaking. The speaker apart, several participants felt irritated at the awkward intervention. Within two days of conclusion of seminar, Dr Basu came under surveillance of both Central and state intelligence. “The Soviet vice-consul came to visit me all of a sudden at my house”, Prof Basu told his fellow teachers. Was Subrahmanyam instrumental in the surveillance? An officer from the Calcutta Police headquarters went to the department of electrical engineering to ask about him when the professor was abroad.

The above episode gives a feel of the power enjoyed by nuclear hawks, darlings of mainline dailies as commentators on defence, security and even foreign affairs. Unfortunately, many journalists thrive on inspired reporting in those areas. Among commentators, apart from Subrahmanyam are Uday Bhaskar, Jasjit Singh and at times Brahma Chellaney. In refreshing contrast to this is Teresa Joseph's **Reporting Nuclear Pakistan : Security Perceptions and the Indian Press*.

Joseph consciously delinks herself from those for whom peace between India and Pakistan is a symptom of pessimism and focuses on India's time-tested independent foreign policy and its dignity. So she commits herself against exaggeration of “threat perceptions” in Indo-Pak relations in the preface. In Pakistan, there are defence experts among former diplomats and even senior army officers who openly criticize Pak military aggressiveness. Some of them among over a dozen are Dr Ayesha Siddiqa and Dr Farrukh Saleem. Dr Siddiqa was hounded by the Pak government for her book, *Military Inc : Inside Pakistan's Military Economy*. Her weekly column in *The Dawn* is awaited by hundreds of readers every Friday. Dr Saleem, executive director of the Centre for Research and Security Studies in an article in January this year wrote against wasteful spending in war. The cost incurred by India and Pakistan on deployment and withdrawal in 2000-01 were \$65 billion and \$1.4 billion. “How long well India and Pakistan continue to beg, borrow and steal to fight each other? Guns or butter? Schools or bullets? Tanks or hospitals? Gunpowder or milkpowder?” he wrote from that position. Has the top boss of Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi (IDSA), the courage or willingness to pen sentences alike?

The hawks want subordination of foreign policy to defence and security imperatives. This is a refreshing break from the preponderance of experts who do not hide their obsession with defence and territorial issues. The school of scholars who oppose the war-mongers among defence/security experts is a new crop, emerged in the early 1980s.

With the strengthening of Congress in the ruling United Progressive Alliance, liberals among well-meaning national democrats expect the Indian foreign policy to re-imbibe the Nehruvian construct of anti-imperialist traditions handed down by the freedom movement. Strategic concerns are necessary but are no hindrance to the Indian government's principled conflict with the international security system . Interestingly, those who strongly advocate integration into the global system which is directly linked to neo-liberal monetarism which endorses the belligerent US foreign policy which the new US President Barrack Obama is yet to rid of.

A small section of defence analysts lay emphasis on India's peace-loving foreign policy in sync with the commitment to non-alignment which was authored by India's

first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru together with the then President of Egypt Gamal Abdel Nasser and Yugoslav President Josip Broz Tito. Among them are Praful Bidwai, Achin Vanaik and Rita Manchanda.

The disturbing institutional deterrent to dispassionate analysis of defence and security is the role of IDSA, including its associate functionaries. It was set up after the Indo-Pak war in 1965 under the Societies Registration Act, 1860, when Lal Bahadur Shastri was the Prime Minister. The defence minister is the ex-officio chairman of IDSA which receives fund from the ministry of defence. Since then IDSA, defence analysts, associated with or groomed by it, has been singing a militaristic tune. Apart from functioning as the philosopher-cum-guide to MoD biggies, IDSA has been a link between the MoD and the media to heighten 'perceived' security concerns among policy-makers and politicians. This breed of 'strategic experts', Joseph informs, did not exist until 1964. They "articulated the importance of nuclear option for India or emphasized the nuclear threats" from China and Pakistan.

Subrahmanyam, headed the four-member Kargil probe body, set up by the BJP-led NDA government. He had a stint as IDSA director for several years. Queerly, he was close to the pro-Soviet lobby before the collapse of USSR but had no difficulty in switching over to the Saffron brigade. His propensity to exaggerate military threat from Pakistan is frequently manifest. For him, Pakistan, having gone nuclear, is "a convenient safe heaven for our extremists". Brahma Chellaney wrote in an article in a leading multi-edition English daily that disarmament would suit idle people, although he opposed the US-India 123 agreement. His bellicose mindset was eloquent after the Mumbai blast in November-end last year : "The Indian leadership's naiveté is more than matched by the rascality of the Pakistani military establishment, which demands a bribe for every move on its part — generous US aid flow to help rein in the Taliban, and a Kashmir resolution to sever its institutional support to India-directed terrorism".

George Perkovich's presentation at the Carnegie Endowment Roundtable in November 1999 is very pertinent. Indians began thinking in a way, he stated, "very different from how we in the west were taught to think about nuclear weapons "while wrestling with the bomb". Both India and Pakistan "live in an area of the world that is remarkably dangerous", a concern expressed by political scientist John Mearsheimer.

Small wonder, Indian media ignored scholastic and authentic defence analysts like Barry Buzan, Montague Burton, Professor of International Relations at the London School of Economics and honorary professor at the University of Copenhagen, or Keith Krause of Geneva Centre for Security Policy. The vacuous scholasticism of India's war-mongering instead dominates like dirty money in monetary circulation.

Buzan put forward a very different definition on security. Freedom from political, societal and ecological threats, he proposed, is an essential for security. Krause broke grounds in areas like emergence of transnational state and non-state action to combat small arms and light weapons proliferation, and state-formation and insecurity in the post-colonial world. Obviously, they have distinct epistemological gap with the militaristic defence experts.

The author pertinently touched upon the concept of securitisation, introduced by the Copenhagen School, Greek to most of Indian newspaper readers interpreted security as "a social construct" and hence, an outcome of social process. The very basis of a national security policy "is not given by 'nature' but chosen by politicians and decision-makers who have an interest in defining it in just that way". The overview of scholastically important schools of study on these issues is impressive, especially for readers with fascinating attraction towards defence and security-related issues and discourses.

One can't be but impressed with two chapters of the book specially: "Security discourses in South Asia and the Indian Press" and "Pakistan's Nuclear Programme : Indian Perceptions". Journalists—not necessarily those specialising in or covering

foreign policy, defence and/or security – benefit by reading the chapters to insulate them from inspired journalism. Shamefully, the Indian media was mum about *Operation Parakram* during the NDA rule, the author rightly recalls. The Indian Institute of Mass Communication blasted the media for one-sided coverage. Small wonder, Kargil Committee was all praise for the print and electronic media as “by and large satisfactory”–‘jingoistic’ vox populi. The IDSA, Defence Research and Development Organisation, Research and Analysis Wing and the inspired scribes, sadly enough, functioned like a unified command during the Kargil conflict.

Joseph made a survey of reports in mainline dailies between 1 May- 31 July 1998 (The Pokhran II happened on 11 May, 1998) on the bellicose milieu in the subcontinent. Mendicantly pro-Sangh Parivar dailies apart, the *Times of India* and to a small extent, even the *Hindu* often carried reports, opinion articles and editorials carried pro-establishmentarian views prominently. Out of 250 reports, only 2.8 percent “reflected dissenting voices”, in contrast to 4.8 p.c. of strategic enclave, obviously about 65 p.c. was a coverage of government views. Criticisms of nuclear weapon tests by scientists such as T Jayaram and R V G Menon, leave alone the crusader-editor Surendra Gadkar (“Buddha is sick of smiling”, caption of one of his sharp comment in an article after Pokhran-II), were “almost invisible”. Views of Prof M V Ramana and the like are very occasionally in print.

Joseph's concern about market-driven defence journalism which tends to “ignore alternative perspectives and voices of dissent.” War-mongers call the shots and put forward provocative ideas like nuclear Pakistan as ‘a convenient safe haven for extremists’ (KS), Tol's biased survey (not being based on random sampling) in 1995 that 79 p.c. of urban residents thought Pakistan's possession as “a serious security threat”—as if India's nuclear programme rids Pakistanis of all kinds of nightmares or describing Pak bomb architect A Q Khan as “the Pakistan scientist-spy” (Sridhar of IDSA) are discordant sonnata for the India's commitment to peace and disarmament.

*[*Reporting Nuclear Pakistan : Security Perceptions and the Indian Press by Teresa Joseph. Reference Press, New Delhi, pp 391+xvi, Rs 1100]*