

Nuclear Crises in the Time of Orwellian Wars

By Vice Admiral (Ret.) Vijay Shankar

A shorter version of this article is forthcoming (July 2017) on the Institute for Peace and Conflict Studies website

“...the consciousness of being at war, and therefore in danger, makes the handing-over of all power to a small caste seem the natural, unavoidable condition of survival.”

George Orwell 1984

The Stalin-Churchill Exchange

In 1946, a fustian exchange of rhetoric between Stalin and Churchill was to set the stage for incessant crises in international relations since. It would take countries to the brink and often over it. In assessing the state of the world and character of relations between nations, Stalin, on 9th February, declared to a Moscow audience, “[...] development of world capitalism does not proceed smoothly and evenly, but through crises and catastrophic wars.” His point was that inequities lead to instability; as perceptions of insecurities in access to raw materials and markets provoke the impulse to redistribute favourable “spheres of influence,” often by employing armed force. The awkward irony is that this state of affairs of an uncertain world fragmented into hostile economic and military camps on the brink in perpetuity is the reality; with the effects of climate change being the only sobering moderator. The inelegant scepticism of the US in the climate change context makes for a deranged future. While Churchill (the former Prime Minister), on 5th March 1946, responded by condemning Soviet policies in Europe and declared in a speech at Westminster University Missouri, “A shadow has fallen upon the scenes so lately lighted by the Allied victory. From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the continent.”

There was a self-fulfilling prophecy in these words as the world knuckled down to the ideological declaration of war by the two belligerent blocs. Stalin’s words were taken to mean the inevitability of conflict between the two; while Churchill’s speech is considered one of the opening volleys of the ‘Cold War’. With each passing year, heightened tensions between states retreating into the idea of closed dominions, the rise of nations that promote revisionist ideologies; to add to it all the disrupting role of non-state actors and nuclear

proliferation thrust new elements into the cauldron, deepening and making more catastrophic the probability of a global crisis spinning out of control.

The Nuclear Crisis Group

Recognising in the nuclear domain that the real peril lay in the inability of formal establishments to track potential situations of nuclear conflict that risk being ignored, misunderstood, mismanaged or even lead to unintended consequences; an international crisis group was formed as a sub-sect of Obama's nuclear legacy, the Global Zero Commission on nuclear risk reduction. Central to its mission is to generate analysis of these predicaments, develop proposals for de-escalation and consult with appropriate agencies to diminish the danger of nuclear exchange. The Group, an international assemblage of experts from nuclear armed weapon countries and their allies has set about realizing this initiative. The Nuclear Crisis Group met for the first time on 5-6 May 2017.

Wink-and-Nod Perils: Proliferation, Non-State Actors and Orwellian Wars

Historically the dangers of nuclear proliferation and the deranging role of non-state actors accessing nuclear technologies has been well acknowledged but more often acted upon with a "wink-a facetious-rebuke-and-a nod." How the deception works is exemplified by an episode of recent history: on 6 November 2008, just 75 days before the burden of the US Presidency descended on Obama's shoulders, he was briefed in camera by the then director of national intelligence (DNI). The crisis he was to be confronted with was not only to plague him through his two terms but was to be a barb that he would hand over to his successor in 2017, eight years later. The imbroglio was dealing with Pakistan, a dishonest American partner since the war on terror was declared in 2001. "They are living a lie," the then DNI asserted. In exchange for reimbursements that would total to more than \$3 billion a year, Pakistan's military along with its spy agency the Inter Service Intelligence (ISI) would play "both ends against the middle." The 'deep state' would at one end provide the logistic bases and conduits (at a price) to the Pentagon to fuel the war in Afghanistan; while on the other, it would give clandestine financial, material, intelligence, much needed sanctuaries and weapons to the jihadists to thwart White House policies. Former Secretary-of-State Clinton's 2011 blunt message to Pakistan on rearing "snakes in your backyard and expect them only to bite your neighbours" is another reminder of the hazards of a "wink-at" approach. To be sure, many counterterrorism and counterinsurgency actions have neutralized and displaced jihadi leadership and infrastructure. Yet these gains at the tactical levels have been iterative and

have generally lacked significance in the face of the most conspicuous obstacle to strategic realization: Pakistan's sanctuary and unfailing sustenance of the jihadis. Fighting from one campaign season to the next in the absence of genuine strategic impetus, have made this an 'Orwellian' war. And as the conflict rages, Pakistan remains a haven to one the world's highest concentration of terrorist groups, and its own population, too, has suffered from numerous terrorist attacks.

In strategic persuasion, the Pakistan military remains more than convinced that the US would eventually withdraw from the region whether its aims are fulfilled or not. In the wake of total withdrawal, would be a devastated and warring Afghanistan and an enfeebled insurgent wracked Pakistan. Central to their strategic paranoia is their envisaged lonely and losing confrontation against the growing economic and military influence of the avowed enemy India, and that had to be countered. As General Nicholson, Commander US Forces Afghanistan, testifying before the US Senate Armed Forces Committee in February 2017, put it "Pakistan's actions have been harmful to itself, to its purported friends and to peace and stability in South Asia." Indeed, Pakistan and its intelligence service armed and supported the most virulent strains of Islamist insurgents and terrorists in South Asia over the past decades.

If insecurity in relations with India was pivotal then the question that begs to be asked is why not a détente that sets the tone for peace, after all the point of convergence is an end to Pakistan's cross border jihadist activities. And this is where the rub lies; the use of jihadists as a part of military strategy, to Pakistan is as old as its independence (August 1947). The Indian Independence Act divided British India into two independent states, awarding "... each of the 565 princely states the freedom to join India or Pakistan or to remain independent. Most of the princes (some convinced others cajoled), joined one or the other of the two nations. Jammu and Kashmir ruled by a Hindu Rajput Maharaja Hari Singh, however, dithered, since independence was on his mind. But the invasion of his State by jihadi tribals supported by the Pakistan army ruled out autonomy as an option. The Maharaja turned to India to safeguard his territories and signed the "Instrument of Accession" of the entire state of Jammu and Kashmir on 26 October 1947. Indian troops landed at Srinagar airport in Kashmir on 27 October and secured it before proceeding to evict the invaders from the Kashmir Valley. A portion of the State remained in Pakistan's control when the UN sponsored ceasefire came into effect.

Recounting this piece of history has two purposes, firstly to underscore the nature of Pakistan's military strategy that from inception had a role for jihadists, and secondly, the self-ordained propriety of the Pakistan Army to determine the destiny of the State there.

Salients of the NCG Deliberations and Nuclear Flash Points

The Indo-Pak situation, as one of the flash points, will exercise our attention while decisions arrived at on the other flash points will be touched upon briefly. Salients that were projected by the author as prescripts for the deliberations at the first meeting of the NCG are outlined in the subsequent paragraphs.

Longevity of Concords: Balance

Between objectivity and keeping a set of recommendations '*au courant*' there lies time, events and influence on leadership. For proceedings of the NCG to endure there has to be balance if at all agreement between protagonists is to be reached. The relative incapacity to generate conditions that are impartial has at times been at the cost of longevity of the concord while at others the dominant power has paid of its political legacy. But in cases when the concord determines inhibition or non-use of a weapon of war that can potentially destroy political intent, then it becomes an instrument of balance.

Any strategic situation, such as the one posed by Pakistan, places before the Indian planner a host of considerations and a finite set of possible responses. Which really is the object of airing views—it makes transparent the complexity of the problem and invites the necessary intellectual rigour to arrive at mutually agreeable solutions. When approached in this manner a set of strategic recommendations will take into account judgment and experience in the interest of concord durability.

Non State Actors and Proliferation--the *Sine Qua Non* of the Pakistan Military

Two overarching considerations that begged the focus of the NCG, had for reasons, best known to the convenors, not been adequately addressed in their original agenda. The first was the significance of non-state actors; while some scholars have suggested that terror organisations may or may not be under control of the Pakistan government", this in a manner is a denial of the internals of the Pakistani state where the nexus between the Army, the ISI and the terrorist outfits operating against India is well established. Nuclear terrorism is an

existential threat not just to the South Asian region but to the world. Even if control over Jihadis does not exist, the minimum that Indian planners seek is tangible resolve on the part of Pakistan to tackle them; and where it does, to disband them. Also, to handle the Pak military-ISI combine with kid-gloves on grounds of destabilizing the fragile civilian government in Pakistan is seen by Indian leadership as appeasement and playing into the military's hands.

Pakistan is associated with groups that have conducted attacks in India and elsewhere; it is also clear that these are known terrorist groups and in their control. Decision makers and Scholars have long declared that these terrorist groups are instruments of Pak state policy. The strategic perception is that jihadis are central to the narrative; since the build up to nuclear exchange scenarios are all predicated on being triggered by a terror strike emanating from Pakistan. However, the key to GHQ Rawalpindi's compliance with rational norms of nuclear behaviour lies in Beijing. And the direction in which Sino-Pak collusion is headed will, to a large extent, influence nuclear stability in the region. If the alliance was intended (as it now appears) to nurture a first use capability in order to keep sub-continental nuclear stability on the boil then the scope for achieving lasting stability is that much weakened.

The second consideration is ramifications of continuing proliferation on sub-continental nuclear circumstances. From blueprints of a nuclear device through testing to the AQ Khan enterprise and now to TNWs, China has been central to the Pak nuclear programme. Add to this is the essence of Pakistan's rogue links, which have, unmistakably, seduced the Islamic State (IS) into the sub-continent, underscoring the distressing probability of the IS extending its reach into a nuclear arsenal. At a time when the politico-ethnic situation in western China remains fragile and the fanatical outburst of xenophobia advanced by the IS has stretched south and eastward from Syria and Iraq, a nuclear armed Islamic State, is an alarming prospect which China, the world and indeed this Group cannot be blind to, nor can it be in any players interest to persist with the promotion of Pakistan's nuclear weapons programme. The reasons for this profligate orientation are a matter of conjecture and may have originally reflected balance of power logic in the sub continental context to offset and contain India's comprehensive conventional superiority. While in North Korea's case, it must be to keep the USA and the Pacific allies embroiled in a snare of insecurities. However the consequences of proliferation amongst radical Islamic groups may have motivations that are far more sinister in purpose and perilous in fallout. Radical islamic terror groups perceive nuclear weapons as a means to destroy and dislocate an order that has so

wilfully kept the faithful under political, economic and spiritual subjugation. Yet, such proliferation had been conspicuously left out of the Groups' agenda.

Multi-Lateral Nature of Nuclear Security

Nuclear multilateralism introduces dynamics that are vastly dissimilar from the two-state confrontation of the past. Motivations of one state have an effect on the other and therefore the need for exceptional faith in a nuclear calculus where 'intentions' rather than 'capability' alone, weighs in with greater influence. Underlying the changed nature of nuclear multilateralism is the need to redefine how best to achieve a stable deterrent relationship. In this altered plurality, a scene from the 1995 Hollywood war film *Crimson Tide* is surprisingly most apt. In an exchange between the Executive Officer and the Commanding Officer of the USS Alabama, when questioned on his will to destroy the enemy, the Executive Officer responds "in the nuclear world the true enemy can't be destroyed." Upon being mocked to explain who the true enemy was he adds "... in the nuclear world the true enemy is war itself."

Ambiguity of Command and Control

In Pakistan's case, Command and control is ambiguous. Does it lie in Rawalpindi or is it in the hands of the civilian government? Political leaders and scholars have emphasised the reality of the "Deep State", at which time the question is, which agency does one negotiate with? To the Deep State, as most recognise, even in Pakistan, the civilian leadership provides a convenient front. In this framework, rapprochement with India is anathema; it is also why there is scant regard for the Simla or the Lahore Agreements.

Decision-making in a conflictual situation does not fall into an easily predictable mould. Future response to an Indian military conventional action is at best a calculated guess. If there is one lesson to be learned from the Kargil episode, it is that escalation neither follows a tit-for-tat pattern nor do things quickly transit to the nuclear dimension. In that event, the conflict reached a relatively quick Pak capitulation and abandonment of plans. Whether this ending was brought about by a return to sound strategic thinking by the Pak military, US pressure, Indian resolve or indeed the weather, remains a moot point. A larger question that wars such as, Kargil, Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria raise and planners will have to ponder over is the efficacy of military action to bring about desired political outcomes.

Covert Jihadi Operations

On covert jihadi operations the question really is: where does balance lie? Clearly when a democracy such as India is up against an Islamic republic controlled by a military-ISI combine, the balance is weighed in favour of Pakistan. It comes as no surprise therefore that Pakistan has fully leveraged this imbalance and yet for India to suffer the violent effects of covert action in quietude makes for poor internal as well as external policy.

Technology Intrusions and the Cyber Dimension

Nuclear weapons have put us on a razor's edge, in part because of our inability to control the manner in which political events and technology are driving nuclear weapon policies. While technology invites covertness; lethality, precision, stealth and time compression that accompanies it demands transparency. This is the dilemma faced by planners: to balance the effects technology with the need for openness.

As far as the cyber domain is concerned, information sharing and transparency in this sphere is a requirement that would serve to reduce hazards of unintended actions particularly when nations prepare to use the cyber arena to actively manipulate command and control networks. But unfortunately, in an ambience of great mistrust, transparency is seen as not just compromise of nuclear security, but also a factor that spurs counters.

India's nuclear Doctrine and Deterrent

India's doctrine and deterrent is not country specific. NFU and the development of a credible minimum deterrent are at the heart of the doctrine. Credibility then remains an abstraction in the mind of the potential adversary, while minimality is magnitude in the mind of the deterrer (India in the case). India does not differentiate between 'tactical' and 'strategic' nuclear weapons; this is resonated by most practitioners and scholars, for the use of nuclear weapons introduces a new and uncontrollable element. When dealing with the threat of use of nuclear weapons, to suggest that ambiguity and first use provide options, is to suggest that nuclear war fighting, almost in conventional terms, is an option. This, by most, is denial of the nature of nuclear weapons, which is characterized by mass destruction and volatility.

The link between sub-conventional warfare and nuclear war fighting is at best a tenuous one. Conceptually no reconstitution of nuclear policy can impinge upon terror

attacks. Pak calculus of terror groups is that they are instruments of state policy. It is clearly this policy that has to be targeted. To promote a view that the solution to nuclear deterrence asymmetry is escalation dominance, is not to state the entire theorem, which is, that the corollary is nuclear war fighting (most consider this a rather flaky concept). Limited nuclear option and proportionality of nuclear response are all sub-texts to the same and is, in my understanding, flirting with absurdity.

The scenario of another 26/11 type terror assault and the chain of events that is perceived as a consequence is perverse. Consider this: Pakistan promotes a militant strike and in order to counter retaliation uses tactical nuclear weapons and then in order to degrade massive retaliation, a full blown counter force/counter value strike is launched. By this logic why isn't a bolt from the blue strike launched? or does Pakistan need a nuclear adversary at all! That nuclear weapons do not deter sub-conventional warfare is appropriate however that a sub-conventional situation can spin out of control is a reality that cannot be wished away.

Proceedings of the Nuclear Crisis Group

The Course to Abolishment: NFU and Exclusion of TNWs. In its opening statement the Group unanimously accepted that “the only way to eliminate the risks of nuclear weapon use is through abolition. To achieve this, nuclear weapon states need to at a minimum reduce their reliance on nuclear weapons in their national defence plans, restrain the expansion of their nuclear arsenals and reduce the number of weapons in their national arsenals. All states must also take pragmatic steps to avoid any use nuclear weapons, intentional, accidental or otherwise and avoid conventional conflicts that could escalate to nuclear use. In addition, they must pursue policies and dialogues that could enable them to adopt a no-first-use posture. All members were undivided in their support for the removal of all battle field and tactical nuclear weapons to central storage to reduce the risk of miscalculation, unauthorised or unintended use. (Details of proceedings may be found at https://globalzero.org/files/nuclear_crises_group_urgent_steps_june_2017.pdf).

TNWs, Cyber Operations and Command & Control. The argument that if nuclear war avoidance is the leitmotif, NFU is its natural handmaiden; gained unanimous acceptance. And the logic of self-preservation was best served by keeping the arsenal credible at a minimum level. In this frame of reference TNWs had necessarily to be excluded, Command and Control had to be arranged in a manner that they were, on the one hand, walled off against offensive cyber operations while on the other a clear demarcation is drawn between

Controller and Custodian of the arsenal. Enhanced risk reduction will demand increased means of communication as defensive postures are espoused.

Flash Points. Surveying the contemporary nuclear situation, unquestionably, nuclear weapons in the hands of terrorists will remain the biggest concern; for it could disrupt and then unhinge the nuclear status quo. The threat is at the centre of universal security perils and should such a threat develop into an attack which is connected to a second state, then, political realities of the victim nation will provoke a response with its consequences. Discriminating between terror groups, supporting some and making them instruments of state policy has to be rejected collectively. In addition to this perspective, the Group identified four priority geopolitical dynamics that risked escalation to nuclear conflagration: the Korean Peninsula predicament, US/NATO-Russia melt down in relations, India-Pakistan conundrum and U.S.-China confrontation. The aim was to pool collective expertise into pragmatic recommendations for defusing these crises.

Korean Peninsula. In addition to the anticipated multi-lateral and bi-lateral negotiations that the NCG aimed for complete denuclearization through negotiations the essence of which would be cessation of nuclear and weaponizing activities by North Korea balanced against a calibrated end to US military exercises and provocative deployments in the Republic of Korea followed by the easing and elimination of sanctions. The role of China in the North Korean problem is intricately woven into all strategic dynamics that occur there (after all not only has China fought a war on its behalf but continues to provide existential sustenance to that state). Detailed immediate and follow on steps were also identified to flesh out the governing objectives.

US/Russia/NATO. Crisis instability between the US/Russia and NATO has taken on a new and unacceptably dangerous complexion. This anxiety has been triggered by doctrinal moves that have the potential to foment conflict with nuclear ramifications. Nuclear war fighting dynamics such as a policy to “*escalate-to-de-escalate*” are patently troubling; while, rhetoric that promotes the idea that the US has neither any obligation to continue to have verifiable arms limits or a moratorium on testing are disconcerting. All sides having pledged to enhance nuclear forces and their deployment is downright disquieting, to say the least. The US has undertaken a fresh nuclear posture review (NPR) which is expected to be articulated by end 2017. The NPR which traditionally focuses on two areas policy and capability; already suggests several areas of change in policy; the question is how the U.S. is postured to meet

nuclear threats. This will likely be the area of most change from the last review of 2010; given how the world has changed through the crisis in West Asia, the confused war on the Islamic State in Syria, Russia's annexation of Ukrainian territory, recalcitrant Chinese activities in the South and East China Sea, and increased nuclear activity and missile testing by North Korea. All of which suggest major doctrinal transformation. The second part is capability, and the plan to refurbish the nuclear triad. Unlike the policy part of the review, there isn't much expectation from nuclear experts that the NPR will divert from the agreed-upon modernization plan which includes the nuclear cruise missile, known as the Long Range Standoff weapon. While a potential aspect that could be weighed differently is the question of alternatives to nuclear power; in this context the reevaluation of the concept of prompt global strike would appear on the cards. While immediate steps beginning with adoption of NFU policy and the broadening of arms control negotiations have been suggested; the real problem in the US/Russia/NATO entanglement is how best to devise acceptable measures that will prevent a slide back to the early Cold War era?

Indo Pakistan Situation. The Indo-Pak situation has been dealt with at some length earlier. What requires underscoring are certain foundational issues. The hold of the 'deep state' (by which is implied the military-intelligence-jihadi combine) on government and nation is so smothering that dialogue with that state is confounded by the question who to dialogue with? Duplicity and denial on issues related to state support, sanctuary and complicity with terror organisations such as the Lashkar-e-Tayiba, Haqqani network, Taliban, the IS etc. are a part of military strategy which not only provides the space for terror outfits such as the IS to reach into a nuclear arsenal, but also makes confabulations with civilian government a sterile exercise. As Robert Cassidy put it "Pakistan's actions have been harmful to itself, to its purported friends and to peace and stability in South Asia." Continued collusion with China on nuclear weapons production and proliferation of weapon related technologies is an area that must be seized; if multilateral constraints are not in place then the probability of these technologies falling into wrong hands increases by the day.

US-China Relations. US-China relations remain fragile as the latter's growth and aspirations come in conflict with America's global influence as is apparent in the sporadic friction that flares in the South and East China seas involving the entire region as well as other stake holders. China's revisionist drive in this expanse and its military modernisation plans and policy has not helped to pacify matters. Rather it has increased the probability of escalation. Its surreptitious nuclear proliferatory enterprises have further exacerbated the situation. While

China has over the years quite steadfastly adhered to its NFU nuclear policy, it is its support of maverick states such as North Korea and Pakistan that is worrisome.

A Half-way Conclusion

Fragmentation in geopolitics, rise of bigoted revisionist ideologies, nuclear perfidy of authoritarian dispensations and the end of an overwrought global order makes for fragility in nuclear affairs. As nations see themselves besieged by forces beyond control, it is timely that the Group has raised its collective voice to temper the idealistic nuclear agenda of abolition with a dose of realism that first charts a course across two pragmatic way points: No First Use and removal of tactical nuclear weapons.