

## BOOK REVIEW

### ***A Stepping-Stone to a Fully Nuclear Future?***

by M. V. Ramana

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*India's Emerging Nuclear Posture: Between Recessed Deterrent and Ready Arsenal*, Ashley Tellis (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2001), 885 pages, ISBN 0-8330-2781-6 (pbk)

For years the official aim of the U.S. with respect to nuclear weapons in India and Pakistan was to cap, then over time, reduce, and finally eliminate these weapons and their means of delivery. But since the mid-1990s, and especially after the 1998 nuclear tests, a growing number of influential Americans have urged the U.S. simply to accept the nuclear capabilities of India and Pakistan and work to shape the nuclear postures of the two countries. With India, the idea is to ensure that it does not overstep its boundaries and become a regional power that could in principle oppose U.S. interests. Nor should the Indian arsenal become large enough to alarm Chinese policy makers thus causing a build up of China's nuclear forces in reaction. That could upset the status quo in East Asia, which has been largely favorable to the U.S., and is therefore undesirable.

Prior to the 1998 nuclear tests, U.S. analysts often used terms like *non-weaponized* and *recessed deterrence* to describe the situation in India and Pakistan. The hope seems to have been that by elaborating on the virtues of that state of affairs, the two countries may be persuaded to stay at that level. Unfortunately for its proponents, India's nuclear tests dashed that hope—along with the idea that the state of affairs prior to the 1998 tests was stable.

It is this strain of analytical effort that *India's Emerging Nuclear Posture: Between Recessed Deterrent and Ready Arsenal* by Ashley Tellis represents. Tellis is a Senior Policy Analyst from the RAND Corporation, the U.S. Air Force's think tank, and currently Senior Advisor to the U.S. Ambassador to India. His views therefore carry considerable weight in shaping U.S. policy towards South Asia.

*India's Emerging Nuclear Posture* is a wonderful compendium of the public record on India's nuclear policy. Even though the book is primarily an intellectual audit of India's current and future nuclear posture, it has extensive

chapters on the technical characteristics of India's nuclear arsenal—fissile material inventory, delivery vehicles and so on. Meticulously documented (95 pages of references, not to mention extensive footnotes!), detailed and systematically argued, its value as a reference book can scarcely be overstated. This book should be on the shelf of anyone interested in India's nuclear weapons policy.

Tellis puts forward the thesis that India will end up with a “force in being”—a nuclear posture that is somewhere in between the pre-1998 form and a readily useable nuclear arsenal qualitatively modeled after that of the nuclear weapon states. The prediction is that India would develop and produce nuclear weapons and their delivery systems, but with key subcomponents under civilian custody. Further, “these assets as a whole are *not* deployed in any way that enables the prompt conduct of nuclear operations . . . This distributed posture can be maintained indefinitely, with the various parts never reconstituted to form a true war-fighting force except in the aftermath of a nuclear attack against India” (p. 367). India, according to Tellis, will end up with such a posture not because of the technical limitations facing India, for example the restricted amounts of fissile material it is believed to possess, but as a policy choice.

Tellis comes to this conclusion as well as other similar conclusions about the size of the arsenal based on an exhaustive reading of the Indian media, interviews with high-level officials and much surmising. The effort is indeed impressive and leads Tellis to recommend that “the United States should concentrate on shaping the character of the evolving Indian (and Pakistani) nuclear arsenals” (p. 760). The character that Tellis advocates is that the Indian arsenal be small but safe, survivable and “reasonably effective,” stealthy and surreptitious, and not rapidly useable.

Despite the remarkable scholarship underlying the effort, however, there is plenty of reason to fear that Tellis may be wrong. When it comes to nuclear weapons, rhetoric by political leaders in India, or elsewhere for that matter, should be taken with more than a grain of salt. Unfortunately Tellis does not take that precaution and prefers to accept, deliberately or inadvertently, the statements of moderates who seek to calm international concerns about India's nuclear weapons. Simultaneously, Tellis systematically dismisses the statements of hawks or military personnel as incompatible with the designs of India's “security managers.”

Indian leaders, for example, have claimed that they seek only a “minimum credible deterrent,” but never do they define what this minimum is. A look at the past history of India's nuclear policy reveals how politicians and strategists have often made a virtue out of necessity, while simultaneously deflecting international pressure. Thus, the 1974 nuclear test became a peaceful nuclear

explosion and the first version of the intermediate range Agni missile became a “technology demonstrator.”

History also reveals that nuclear policies and postures are not cast in stone. For years and years, Indian leaders and policy makers maintained that nuclear weapons were unnecessary, and that the capability to make nuclear weapons as demonstrated by the 1974 test was sufficient for India’s security. But once the Hindu right wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) took over and conducted the 1998 nuclear tests, all that rhetoric was thrown overboard. For all his sophisticated analysis, Tellis ends up forgetting the lessons of this history and, in essence, treating current rhetoric as eternal truth. Especially shortsighted is the complete neglect of the implications of the worldview of the Hindu right wing political formations associated with the BJP.

Trained in the realist paradigm of International Relations (IR) theory, Tellis is burdened with a theoretical millstone, a supposition of strategic rationality where there is none. This is wishful thinking and ends up substituting “ought” for “is” or “will be.” One example: Tellis argues that India’s force-in-being will not require any tactical early warning since there are no plans for prompt launches. Barely a few months after Tellis’s book was published in 2001, India acquired the Green Pine radar from Israel to detect incoming ballistic missiles.

In line with realist IR theory, Tellis also does not adequately appreciate variations in the strategic ideas of different civilian leaderships. Nor is sufficient notice taken of the power of the institutions that have vested interests in nuclear weapons. This is in contrast with George Perkovich’s masterful history of the Indian nuclear program, *India’s Nuclear Bomb: The Impact on Global Proliferation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), which convincingly established the importance of these factors in shaping India’s nuclear policy.

The message articulated by Tellis and others like him may be comforting to those U.S. policymakers who have come to terms with India’s nuclear status and seek only to ensure that India does not rock the U.S. boat too much. But it is not a message that those who are truly concerned about South Asia should be comforted by. India’s nuclear posture, like that of the US or other nuclear nations, is susceptible to hawkish pressures from a variety of sources. This could result in the “force in being” becoming a stepping-stone to a readily useable arsenal, accompanied by a more aggressive nuclear doctrine. What can counteract this tendency is domestic political pressure, primarily from the emergent peace movement. But in light of the limitations of the analysis forwarded by Tellis, it should not be surprising that the index running to 22 pages does not even have an entry for the peace movement.