Indian defence minister urges jettisoning of “no first-strike” nuclear pledge

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Indian Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar has publicly called for India to renounce its pledge to never mount a nuclear “first strike.”

Speaking last Thursday at a New Delhi book launch, Parrikar argued that the “No First Use” policy India has adhered to since proclaiming itself a nuclear-weapons state in 1998 is tantamount to “giving away strength.”

Arguing that “surprise” and “unpredictability” are essential elements of military strategy, Parrikar asked rhetorically, “Why should I bind myself?”

Parrikar said India would be better served by keeping its nuclear war options open—that is, by effectively threatening its principal strategic rivals, Pakistan and China, that if war breaks out, India could at any time seek to annihilate them through a nuclear first strike. “A written-down strategy” like No First Use “means you’re actually giving away strength,” India’s Defence Minister told the launch of *The New Arthashatra: A Security Strategy for India*, a volume edited by Brigadier General (Retd.) Gurmeet Kanwal, one of India’s premier military strategists. “Unpredictability,” declared Parrikar, should “be built in (to) certain types of policy.”

He then touted the “surgical strikes” Indian Special Forces mounted in late September targeting “terrorists” and their Pakistani “protectors”—the first military action New Delhi has publicly admitted carrying out inside Pakistan in more than four decades. Holding the strikes up as proof of the “advantage of surprise,” he cavalierly boasted that they had laid to rest Pakistani threats to repel an Indian invasion with tactical nuclear weapons.

Parrikar claimed he was merely voicing his own “thinking” and “feeling(s)” and that the Indian government has not changed its nuclear posture to make it still more threatening and aggressive.

Parrikar’s remarks are, to say the least, reckless and highly provocative. Not only is he the minister in charge of India’s military, but India is in the midst of a war crisis with its arch-rival Pakistan.

During this crisis, which continued to rage this past week with more cross-border artillery and machine-gun fire deaths and tit-for-tat allegations of spying under diplomatic cover, Parrikar has been notable for his belligerence.

He has repeatedly boasted that the Indian military’s “surgical strikes” mark a new chapter in New Delhi’s relations with Islamabad. While not “wanting war,” India, Parrikar has vowed, will continue escalating its military pressure on Islamabad until Pakistan renounces any logistical support for Islamist militants in Indian-occupied Kashmir, and will do so, even at the risk of precipitating all-out war.

“Nowhere in the world,” conceded an editorial in the Chennai-based *Hindu*, “do high officials voice their private musings on nuclear doctrine at book-launch functions, and with good reason. The possession of nuclear weapons, which can claim tens of millions of lives, imposes an obligation of great reflection and restraint.” Expressing grave concern, the *Hindu* added, “Those who use words without care, it could be said, are prone to act without thinking, too.”

Shortly after Parrikar spoke, India’s Defence Ministry issued a statement reiterating that his remarks were his “personal opinion,” but otherwise Indian Prime Minster Narendra Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government have taken no steps to distance themselves from Parrikar’s remarks.

To the contrary, Modi on his return from a three-day trip to Japan went out of his way to lavish praise on Parrikar, declaring him one of the “jewels” of his government. “After many years,” Modi told a BJP rally

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Sunday, “the country has got a defence minister who has solved problems of the armed forces which were pending for over 40 years. He has worked tirelessly.”

Parrikar’s “personal” remarks may in fact have been sanctioned by Modi with the aim of laying the groundwork for a change in India’s nuclear posture. In its manifesto for the 2014 national election, the BJP included a one sentence pledge to “revise and update” India’s nuclear policy “to make it relevant to (the) challenges of current times.” However, after sections of the media raised concerns that the BJP planned to abandon India’s stated policy of “deterrence”—i.e., that the sole purpose of India’s nuclear arsenal is to deter other powers from making it the target of a nuclear attack—the Modi government announced, in the summer of 2014, that it had no plans to review India’s nuclear policy.

At the very least, Parrikar’s remarks, and the blasé attitude of Modi and his government to them, attest to the belligerence that prevails in Indian ruling circles.

Islamabad and Beijing will certainly have taken note.

Over the past decade both India and Pakistan have rapidly expanded their nuclear arsenals, as part of a larger South Asian arms race that has been fueled by Washington’s aggressive campaign to harness India to its military-strategic offensive against China.

As part of that campaign, the US has showered strategic favours on India, overturning the tenuous “balance of terror” between South Asia’s rival nuclear-armed powers.

Washington has named India a major defence partner, giving it access to the most-advanced US weapons systems, and negotiated a unique status for India within the world nuclear regulatory regime that allows New Delhi to purchase civilian nuclear fuel and technology, although it is not a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). While the US justified its 2008 nuclear accord with India with the claim that it concerned only India’s civilian nuclear programme, Washington was well aware it would enable India to concentrate the resources of its indigenous nuclear programme on the development of its nuclear arsenal.

Significantly, Ashley Tellis, who as a member of George W. Bush’s National Security Council played a key role in the negotiation of the Indo-US nuclear accord, recently argued Washington should abandon its official policy seeking to constrain India’s development of its nuclear arsenal in recognition of its “value” in countering China.

Pakistan, alarmed by its ever-widening strategic imbalance with a US-supported India, has responded by strengthening its longstanding alliance with China and by expanding its nuclear programme, especially the development and deployment of “tactical” or battlefield nuclear weapons.

Islamabad has repeatedly warned in recent years that should India invade Pakistan, or even mass its troops to do so, it will use tactical weapons. In response, India has let it be known—notwithstanding its “No First Use” policy—that it will consider any use of tactical nuclear weapons as justification for using its “strategic” arsenal, that is for targeting Pakistani cities for annihilation.

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