

***Striking Asymmetries: Nuclear Transitions in Southern Asia,* Ashley J. Tellis, (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2022), 305**

*Striking Asymmetries: Nuclear Transitions in Southern Asia*, is written by Ashley J. Tellis. Ashley Tellis is a renowned scholar and has written extensively on security and strategic issues. He also worked for the US government and during his stay in the government, he was closely involved in negotiating the Civil Nuclear deal between the US and India. He has written several books including 'Interpreting China's Grand Strategy.' He is presently a senior fellow at Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. His area of interest is Asia and the Indian subcontinent.

Though Tellis wrote *Striking Asymmetries* as a report but it is detailed enough to be considered a book. It examines the changes in nuclear doctrines, capabilities, and nuclear postures of China, India, and Pakistan in recent years. There are four chapters in the book, the first three on China, India, and Pakistan, and the fourth analyzes the nuclear transitions and strategic stability in the region. At the beginning of the first three chapters, brief evolution of the nuclear programs of China, India, and Pakistan is discussed. Then, separately in each case, the evolution of nuclear doctrine – at both declaratory and operational levels – is analyzed. Moreover, the development of components that are essential for maintaining deterrence capability: such as fissile material, nuclear weapons designs and inventories, delivery systems, command-and-control arrangements, and strategic defenses are explained in detail. Furthermore, the operational posture, force employment options, and the extent of nuclear force integration with conventional forces are analyzed by the author. The last chapter takes Sino-Indian and Indo-Pakistani dyads as referent points and discusses the impact of recent developments on the arms race, deterrence stability, and crisis stability.

Ashley Tellis has analyzed the evolution of Chinese strategic thinking, delineating the transitions it has undergone in the post cold war era, and the changing international geostrategic milieu. Beijing's strategic threat principally emanates from the United States rather than Russia or India in the present scenario. The author believes that China does not take the

threat from its South Asian adversary lightly, however, in the authors' opinion Chinese are confident as their capabilities are far ahead of India. The belief of the Chinese that nuclear weapons are only meant to deter a nuclear attack persists in the Indian context. Indian nuclear forces in the Tellis view are not capable to challenge China or carry out a splendid first strike against it, thus allowing China to focus on the threat from the United States. Also, Beijing repeatedly reiterates its commitment to 'no-first-use' in any condition. Though China opting for a splendid first strike against India is not beyond imagination, there is however little incentive for it to do so. The deterrence stability and crisis stability in the Sino-Indian dyad will hold even in face of force modernization by both states, the author posits. Also, arms race stability will be ensured in this dyad because India has yet to cover a lot of ground to make its way in the Chinese strategic calculus.

Scholars like Christopher Clary and Narang have pointed out that India is undergoing changes in its nuclear policy at both the doctrinal and operational levels. The author contests this claim and argues that the use of language by Indian policymakers needs a careful hermeneutical interpretation. The author gives the benefit of doubt to India on the statements made by its senior decision-makers in the nuclear domain. Statements on nuclear and strategic issues cannot be dismissed as casual or mere poor linguistic formulations. Authors' argument therefore may not convince the reader. He attributes the two scholars' views to linguistic infelicity as most of the nuclear terminologies are developed in the west. Further, examining India's capabilities he theorizes that its growth is presently constrained. However, BJP government with the cooperation of the United States in the framework of Indo-US nuclear deal may provide the necessary push. With respect to capabilities, it may be noteworthy that India may not possess the necessary means to actualize its counterforce strategy but a modification of policy and its dynamics can change the situation. This will thus provoke a response from Pakistan that can put strategic stability under stress in South Asia.

The Indo-US civil-nuclear deal provides India with the opportunity to expand its reactor-grade plutonium stockpiles that can be used to rapidly increase its weapon inventory, a notion that Tellis also concedes. But he believes that until New Delhi returns to field testing, to validate weapon designs and yields, it would be unproductive to augment nuclear stockpiles

that are composites of small yield weapons. Further, Tellis points out that New Delhi despite having capabilities has not built the largest possible nuclear arsenal and delivery systems which are proof of maintaining 'credible minimum deterrence.' Nevertheless, in Pakistan's strategic calculus, it faces an existential threat from India and thus cannot rely on assumptions of Indian goodwill and ignore India's nuclear capabilities. It has to take countermeasures. In the same vein, the author contests the argument put forward by Christopher Clary and Vipin Narang that India's move from counter-value to counterforce strategy vis-à-vis Pakistan, points toward the inherent deficiencies of Indian nuclear weapons. However, the question arises, whether technological deficiencies constrain a policy change?

Reflecting on the nuclear transitions of Pakistan, Tellis argues that Pakistan's nuclear weapons are no longer for the sole purpose of deterring India and that Islamabad is moving towards deterring extra-regional forces like the US and Israel. He bases his conclusion on the statements of a Pakistani scholar Adil Sultan. However, the hermeneutical interpretation Tellis undertook of the statement of Adil Sultan in which he said 'mainly' and not 'solely'. The heuristics, by the author, of 'mainly' are interpreted unconvincingly. Similarly, strategic conclusions cannot be made basing on statements of politicians of religious parties that are not in the strategic decision-making circles. Pakistan's nuclear weapons are for Israel or the point that Pakistan may be developing an ICBM for deterring the United States as Ashley supposes, are not persuasive arguments. No Pakistani strategic decision maker would be so reckless as to draw the ire of the US. Ashley Tellis has elucidated in-depth, in the book, the evolution of Pakistan's nuclear program, changes in its policies, and transitions of its weapon designs. This explanation by Tellis also provides us with insight into how Pakistan's nuclear policy focuses on deterring India only, and not any extra-regional powers as asserted by the author earlier.

Deliberating the important question of the Indo-Pak dyad, Tellis maintains that the danger to strategic stability in the subcontinent is mainly due to Islamabad's policies. This line of argument overlooks the growth in Indian conventional force capabilities, the nuclear prowess of India, jingoism under Modi, and Indian proactive conventional military doctrines. It also fails to take into account Pakistan's commitment to using nuclear weapons as a 'last resort.' Pakistan has always been reactive towards Indian

strategic developments and not proactive in its policymaking thus putting the blame on Pakistan is rather unfair. On the question pertaining to the arms race in the Indo-Pak dyad, Tellis points out that there is no arms race per se between the two states. On deterrence stability, Ashley hypothesizes that it is inflicted by meaningful risks in the Indo-Pak dyad because of Pakistan's tactical nuclear weapons development. However, in Pakistani strategists analysis if India mounts a major conventional attack, only then Pakistan will use its battlefield weapons. Reflecting on crisis stability in the subcontinent and the possibility of a splendid first strike by India, as pointed out by Clary and Narang, the author comprehensively dissects their arguments and explains his perspective. Ashley Tellis points out that India does not possess the capability of executing a splendid first-strike and is unlikely to be seduced by such temptations. However, the arguments put forth by Clary and Narang and that of Tellis are based on their understanding and hermeneutical interpretations of Indian policymakers' statements.

In the concluding chapter, Tellis hints at the possibility of an India-US nuclear cooperation beyond what is already going on to a level where the United States can help India in developing a qualitatively advanced nuclear arsenal for maintaining a durable deterrent vis-à-vis China. But the author does not take into account the fact that in South Asia there are three and not two nuclear weapon states and if the US helps India, it will destabilize the Indo-Pak dyad and thus undermine stability in the region. Any attempt to consider the Sino-Indian dyad separate from the Indo-Pakistani dyad will not augur well for peace and stability in the region. There is a nuclear triangle in Southern Asia and while making any policy regarding the region, the United States should consider the security of all three states.

In comprehensively explaining the transitions of nuclear weapons in Southern Asia the conclusion drawn by Ashley Tellis in his own words is:

“The perception of nuclear weapons as essentially political instruments in all three Southern Asian states thus produces a measure of strategic stability that is more robust than their expanding arsenals would suggest.”

***Reviewed by Abdul Moiz Khan, Research Officer, Center for International Strategic Studies (CISS), Islamabad.***