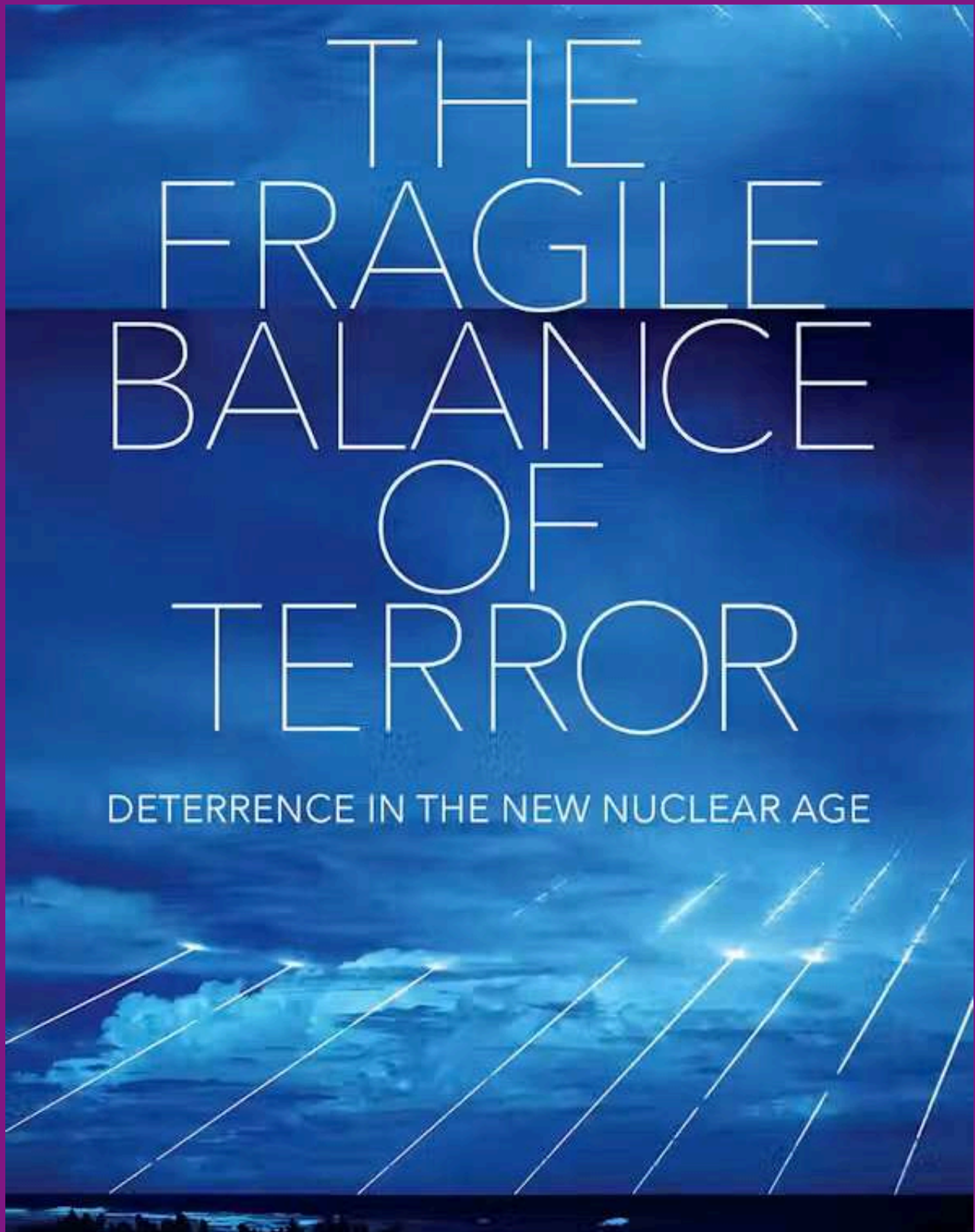


BOOK REVIEW

The Fragile Balance of Terror: Deterrence in the New Nuclear Age

Authored by *Vipin Narang & Scott D. Sagan (ed)*



In the backdrop of the Cold War, a widely held belief was that with both the United States and the Soviet Union being nuclear armed states, with a demonstrated capability, a nuclear war between them was unlikely. The thinking therefore went that two armed men, simply do not shoot. It is against this benign acceptance of the prevailing belief, that an analyst at RAND Corporation named Albert Wolstetter wrote a seminal essay in 1958, the “Delicate Balance of Terror” stating that securing deterrence is a lot more complex, from the buildup of arsenals to ensuring second-strike capabilities and can therefore be quite precarious.

It is against this premise that Vipin Narang and Scott D. Sagan test the enduring logic of deterrence, in a world that has moved from a bipolar to a multipolar nuclear competition with nine armed states, and some of them even led by leaders who are far less predictable than Kremlin ever was. With contributions from eleven nuclear strategists and experts, the two editors ask a simple question, even if the answer is not: that as more countries join the nuclear club with smaller and less sophisticated arsenals, can the nuclear stability still hold today or does multiplying the number of fingers on the button also multiply the risk of catastrophe as well? The book was published by Cornell University Press in 2023, and consists of 282 pages.

What the Book Is About

As the book’s argument builds up, its points of emphasis turns to India, Pakistan and North Korea, countries who acquired the ‘bomb’ at the end of the Cold War. Divided across two sections and eight chapters, the first half turns to the nuclear triangle of US-Russia-China or a regional triangle like India-Pakistan-China where measures taken by one state may trigger a response that then spreads across the triangle. While not always cascading, Caitlin Talmadge does highlight the vulnerabilities that the interaction of multiple actors now pose. This is why Rose McDermott actually turns to the men who hold the button. She points out that many of these states are actually led by personalistic leaders, those at the helm who answer to none and whose political decisions are shaped less by cold calculations and more often by fear, pride and the desire to be acknowledged, to be treated as a peer. All of this as Narang and Heather Williams aptly demonstrate in the chapter ‘Thermonuclear Twitter’, which with the advent of social media has added a new layer of complexity to these crises.

The Lessons Learned or Missed

A more familiar problem that the book interrogates is the unsettling issue of what constitutes ‘enough’, as it is perception that tends to matters more than the technical perfection, a dynamic that North Korea demonstrates in its trajectory. Therefore from Pyongyang to other nuclear powered fledglings this ‘enough’ has become a moving target shaped not only by the capabilities but their adversarial responses. Delegating the authority of its arsenal also carries anxiety as loosening the leash may ensure survivability, but it makes escalation equally harder to manage. Throughout the book therefore an observation emerges, moving past the usual warnings that deterrence is fragile and instead showing that for countries which survive a crisis unharmed believe that their survival lied in skill, not luck, that results in confidence and a behaviour more ambitious which they carry into the future moments of uncertainty.

What makes the book a genuinely interesting read is the way India is treated, as not just another example but an addition to its broader argument. This is shown through the Balakot crisis in 2019, to all the way back in episodes such as the Mumbai attacks of 2008 tracing how India navigated its relationship with a nuclear neighbour over the years.

The Takeaway

What however makes the book work, is it never asks the readers to simply trust its conclusions. The arguments that the authors make are embedded in actual crises, real stories and the moments of close catastrophic calls, so that when the book reaches its warnings they don't just feel asserted. At the same time, its propositions are not alarmist, the editors do not suggest that a nuclear war is imminent but what they do is question that whether our confidence in nuclear peace has grown stronger than the evidence that supports it.

The book conversely is less even in its treatment with South Asia and the Korean Peninsula, which receives far more attention than the tensions that are brewing between the US, Russia and China. While the relationship is discussed, but it falls short of the depth and range in regards to the other regions. An unresolved tension that remain is that crises rarely teach the right lessons by which states become more cautious and responsible, yet the final chapter places its faith in dialogue, diplomacy and hotlines, measures that can work only when the states themselves are prepared to learn.

For intelligence analysts, they tend to benefit the most, particularly from the chapters on open-source intelligence which is underlined by the encouraging point that satellite-imagery and public data are no longer limited exclusively to state intelligence agencies. Defence planners and practitioners responsible for nuclear command, control and communications (NC3) can also gain from how the book treats nuclear authority in peacetime and crises, something that a lot of literature skims over. Available across shopping platforms such as Amazon and Flipkart in ebook, paperback and hardcover editions, its an essential read for anyone assessing nuclear risk in today's multipolar world.

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