

Indian Elections: The spectre of the “Modi-festo” - The BJP and nuclear arms race

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In the South Asian region, the arms race is already accelerating at an ugly scale.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) election manifesto amply exhibits that the party has chosen an aggressive stance on the use of nuclear weapons. In the event it is voted to power, the BJP-led government would send packing India’s no-first use (NFU) nuclear doctrine. While releasing the party election manifesto, BJP president Rajnath Singh made it clear that the manifesto is like a pledge and this would be the Bible for the next government, which they are confident would be in their command. Such pronouncements, if turned true, could seriously imperil the region.

With the fifth phase of polling completed on Thursday, the battle for Indian parliament has heated up tremendously. The media projections continue to tilt even more towards the BJP and its prime-ministerial bet, Narendra Modi.

In the meantime, the party had unveiled its election manifesto - what critics call Modi-festo - on April 7, a day before the first phase of the elections. The proverbial party manifesto which is like “God’s plans for the redemption of his world” offers a lot of promises, from investment for job creation, 100 new cities, along with twin cities and satellite towns, increased public spending on education, a house for every family, and low-cost housing program, rail networks to connect hinterland to ports, agri-rail network and bullet train projects, and many other things which are bound to sweep our imagination.

However, the manifesto, largely devoted to economic development, sets out an inflexibly hawkish orientation on controversial issues and raises the spectre of a rescript of the country’s policy on the use of its nuclear weapons. It is this grave potential of a revision of India’s nuclear doctrine towards a more aggressive stance that has genuine reasons to create tensions in the region as well as the global geo-political space. The current Indian nuclear weapons strategy is centred around the NFU policy, which implies that in any conflict, India would not be the first party to use atomic weapons. The manifesto says that the BJP would reconsider the policy if it is voted to power.

In 1998, the BJP-led NDA government conducted a series of nuclear tests. Pakistan reacted within weeks with nuclear tests of its own. It was at this time that India adopted an NFU policy as it was pressured with punitive embargoes by the US and European nations for the above-mentioned tests. However, since then, it has been acknowledged as a nuclear power.

In the BJP election manifesto, the section titled “Independent Strategic Nuclear Program” promises to “study in detail India’s nuclear doctrine, and revise and update it, to make it relevant to challenges of current times.” This, it says, is necessary to “maintain a credible, minimum deterrent that is in tune with changing geo-static realities.” The same manifesto also spells out that, if elected, it would look for cordial relations with neighbours. However, without naming any country, it pledged to “deal with cross-border terrorism with a firm hand” and take a “strong stand and steps” as

required.

In the absence of any official statement, Pakistan's reaction to the pronouncement is still unknown. However, as it pursues an equally aggressive nuclear doctrine, the responses are bound to follow similar lines. With India dumping the NFU doctrine, chances are high that it would intensify Pakistan's concerns of a first strike against it. This would persuade, and also give license, to Islamabad to sharply enlarge and broaden its nuclear arsenal. A risky behaviour from India's western neighbours can't be ruled out under such circumstances.

The Chinese response to this is still unknown. It could also start slackening restraint on the conditions in which it could apply nuclear weapons. However, a verdict for the BJP in the current parliamentary elections could also be a verdict to intensify the nuclear triangle between India, Pakistan, and China.

It is undisputed that in the South Asian region, with three nuclear powers around, the arms race is already accelerating at an ugly scale. The powerful nations are in contention to pile-up both their conventional and nuclear arms and weapons systems. The uncouthly extravagant budgets in the name of patriotic defence, at the expense of the basic necessities of life - food, health, shelter, education, sanitation - is rendering people even more defenceless day by day. The region could turn very dangerous with nuclear bombs, missiles, and airplanes always threateningly hovering over the heads of over one fifth of the human race.

This nasty arms race and build-up of the Wehrmacht would undoubtedly sent waves of terror across the spines of the region. The smaller and militarily-weaker countries of South Asia - who would account for "collateral damages" - would feel even more threatened and assailable.

The profligacy on military hardware is the misplaced priority of the governments of the region, making the population feel more insecure and threatened. The states and other actors who are upbeat about militarisation, play in the name of national security and terrorism. Considering that extreme right-wing and fascist forces such as the chauvinist and ultra-nationalist BJP, thrive on whipping up hateful passions and violent aggression against the carefully chosen, and craftily constructed, adversarial "others" - "internal" and "external"; read together with the relevant portions of the manifesto, the prospect of nuclear instability can scarcely be dismissed.

Such an eventuality would no doubt tremendously damage the chances of advancing towards global nuclear disarmament and peace. South Asia might turn into a nuclear volcano just ready to erupt with horrendous consequences to follow.

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