The prism of strategic culture and South Asian nuclearization

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In this paper, Ken Booth’s concept of strategic culture is drawn on to examine India and Pakistan’s nuclear policy options. The thrust of the argument is that the perceptions of India and Pakistan’s strategic insecurities as interpreted by their security managers, through the prism of their strategic cultures, have, in conjunction with material, domestic and technological factors, defined their nuclear trajectories. In framing the argument, although appreciative of the material (realist) realm, attention is drawn simultaneously to the inter-subjective (constructivist) realm, namely, that productions of insecurities are also ‘cultural’. This constructivist line of analysis, which draws attention to culture ‘as both a source of insecurity and an object of analysis’ in international relations, has implications on the future of a nuclearized South Asia.

Keywords: constructivism; India; nuclearization; Pakistan; South Asia; strategic culture

The last quarter of the twentieth century witnessed a shift in India–Pakistan’s nuclear trajectory from one of nuclear ambivalence to nuclear-capable states, followed by a fully fledged nuclear arms race in the region. Diverse schools in International Relations theory have addressed the issue of nuclear proliferation in general, and more specifically with respect to South Asian nuclearization. While these arguments explain how structure (neo-realism) and domestic politics (neo-liberalism) induce states to prepare for military strategies, neither provides a decisive modification of structural realism, if by such a modification one means generating alternative hypotheses from existing realist assumptions such as states as primary actors and anarchy as given in international relations. Specifically, from the lenses of critical social constructivism, a theoretical perspective that is followed in this paper, both realists and the neo-liberals leave a vital question unattended, i.e. how inter-subjective factors, namely discourses and ‘codes of intelligibilities’ of states’ leaders may define their strategic thinking and ‘cultural’ notions of insecurities in international relations?1 This critical constructivist viewpoint when applied in revisiting India–Pakistan’s nuclearization enables one to explore why India, despite becoming a nuclear-capable state in 1974, did not make any efforts to transform its wherewithal to nuclear weapons until 1998?2

Before detailing the research question, i.e. how discourses and ‘codes of intelligibilities’ of states’ leaders may define their notions of insecurities, the critical social constructivists’ premise of insecurity in international politics is introduced briefly. ‘[I]n contrast to the received [conventional] view, which treats the objects of insecurity and insecurities ... as pre-given or natural, ... [critical constructivists] treat them as mutually constituted cultural and social constructions ...’ (Weldes et al. 1999, p. 10). Viewing culture ‘... as encompassing ... [a] multiplicity of

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discourses or “codes of intelligibility” … through which meaning is produced …’, critical constructivists view, ‘insecurities … [as] cultural in the sense that they are produced in and out of “the context within which people give meanings to their actions and experiences and make sense of their lives”’ (Weldes et al. 1999, pp. 1, 2). Furthermore, countering the conventional security studies conception of the state as a natural fact, the critical constructivists view the state as a cultural entity. State as a cultural entity means that by virtue of its identity the state becomes the self/subject that defines security and is simultaneously an object that faces threat from its constructed insecurity. This ‘discursive constitution and “interpellation” … of [the] subject/object position’ of the state produces a set of ‘statist discourses’ where state officials, government leaders, or members of political parties ‘… describe to themselves and others the world [as they understand it, and] in which they live’ (Weldes et al. 1999, p. 14). In this sense, states play a privileged role in the production and reproduction of reality.

Yet, given that the international arena is not without power politics and lack of trust, it would be absurd to follow solely a constructivist approach in explaining states’ nuclear behaviour. Thus, this article accepts that nuclear strategy decisions by states are, to a certain extent, structural given that structure induces a recurrent pattern of behaviour corresponding to the realist logic of security dilemma. None the less, how material imperatives of the international system are interpreted and ‘discursively’ constructed by states by drawing from inter-subjectively held ideas, historical memories, traditions and practices also becomes critical.

Accordingly, in this paper, I draw from Ken Booth’s concept of strategic culture as representing ‘a nation’s traditions, values, attitudes, [and] patterns of behavior …’, to examine India–Pakistan’s nuclear policy options/choices (Booth 1990a, p. 121). India–Pakistan’s strategic culture is contextualized as an illustration of these nations’ ideational inter-subjective realm given that it is a nation’s ‘… strategic culture [that] moulds the [perceptions and] responses of the state to both [its] external and internal [domestic] stimuli’ (Basrur 2001, p. 181). The thrust of the argument in this paper is that the perceptions of India and Pakistan’s strategic insecurities as interpreted by their security managers, through the prism of their strategic cultures, have, in conjunction with other material, domestic and technological factors, defined their nuclear trajectories.

In analysing this claim, while I am appreciative of the material (realist) realm, I will, significantly, draw attention to the inter-subjective (constructivist) realm, namely, that ‘… insecurities are cultural in the sense that they are produced in and out of “the context within which people give meanings to their actions and experiences and make sense of their lives”’ (Weldes et al. 1999, pp. 1, 2). The critical constructivist basis of the argument (which dovetails with Booth’s ‘interpretive’ analysis of strategic culture) enables an exploration of: how the notion of ‘threat’, as a socially/culturally constructed form of ‘relationship’ (Booth 1990b, p. 50), is played out amidst real politics to explain why a country is likely to adopt a certain national security strategy at a certain point (and not at another); how national elites project a certain strategy as the best possible option to remedy their insecurity; and how they successfully associate these beliefs within their nation’s existing ‘cultural’ norms and political priorities. This constructivist line of analysis, which draws attention to culture ‘as both a source of insecurity and an object of analysis’ in international relations (Weldes et al. 1999, p. 1), has implications on the future of a nuclearized South Asia given that those who make the decisions of going nuclear are also in a position to create conditions for altering their perceptions vis-à-vis the identities of adversaries, insecurities and nuclear brinkmanship.

The remainder of the paper is divided into the following parts. The following section introduces Booth’s concept of strategic culture as a ‘prism of perception’ \(^3\) and then situates strategic culture scholarships as relevant to the Indian and the Pakistani contexts. Attention is paid to how interpretive aspects of threat assessments may set the ‘mood, tone or milieu’ from which
decision-makers may define their insecurities and security policies (Booth 1990b, p. 58). Following Booth’s concept of strategic culture, the next section offers a comparative analysis of India and Pakistan’s strategic cultures, insecurity and nuclear policies over the years 1947–62 and 1962–98. How India and Pakistan’s strategic thinking over these years, in interaction with material (realist) and interpretive (constructivist) factors, has defined their nuclear trajectories as nuclear ‘ambiguous’ states is explored. This is followed by an exploration of the shift in India and Pakistan’s strategic thinking over the years 1998–2004, and how this shift in interaction with material (realist) and interpretive (constructivist) factors explains their policies of ‘open’ nuclearization. The penultimate section analyses India and Pakistan’s strategic thinking in the post-2004 period, and the ‘newer’ strategic cultural insecurities faced by these nations, namely Pakistan, following the US–India Nuclear Pact of 2008. The paper concludes by analysing the significance of strategic culture and the production of (cultural) insecurities as relevant to South Asian politics, and international relations theory.

The prism of strategic culture

According to Ken Booth, ‘the concept of strategic culture refers to a nation’s traditions, values, attitudes, patterns of behavior, habits, symbols, achievements, and particular ways of adapting to the environment and solving problems with respect to the threat or use of force’ (Booth 1990a, p. 121). Strategic culture ‘of a nation derives from its history, geography and political culture, and it represents the aggregation of the attitudes and patterns of behavior of the most influential voices’, which, depending on the nation’s political structure, represent decisions of their ‘political elite[s], the military establishment, and/or public opinion’ (Booth 1990a, p. 121). In this sense, strategic culture represents a perceptual framework of orientations, values and beliefs that serves as a prism through which a state’s strategic decision-making community interprets the dynamics of their external environment, the available information about their environment, and decides the strategic options in a given situation. In others words, ‘it helps shape ... how a nation interacts with others in the security field’ (Booth 1990a, p. 121).

In this context, Booth claims that security decisions are shaped by different cultural influences on the decision-makers and not simply by the rational pursuit of national security or functional organizational interests (Booth 1990a, p. 124). To this extent, he draws attention to how interpretive aspects of threat assessments such as notions of ‘ideological threat[s]’, attribution of ‘symbolic meaning[s]’, ‘implicit enemy imaging’ and the ‘cultural politics’ of foreign policy-making may set the ‘undercurrents, of mood, tone or milieu’ that may define states’ security policy-making (Booth 1990b, pp. 51, 57, 58, 67). While he clarifies (in the context of US–Soviet politics) that states’ political, strategic and economic interests play an important role in determining their strategic policy choices, he also contends that giving foreign affairs a ‘symbolic meaning’ via ‘... ideologies propagates the most basic beliefs and doctrines’ in international affairs (Booth 1990b, p. 64). ‘It heightens the individual’s sense of “friends” and “enemies” ... ’ (Booth 1990b, p. 64). This is because ‘politics ... takes place in a distinctive socio-psychological area’, i.e. within the socio-cultural thought patterns of decision-makers, where ‘strategic realities are ... in part culturally constructed as well as culturally perpetuated’ (Booth 1990a, p. 124). In this context, dominant elite narratives also play an important role in reinterpreting a nation’s strategic past, such that these interpretations influence their decision-making elites’ perceptions of insecurities and selections of strategies to cope with such insecurities. Emphasizing the significance of ‘interpretation’, Booth (1990b, p. 50) wrote:

It reminds us that a threat involves a relationship, and so requires an inclusive interpretation (involving an understanding of the character of the apparently threatened as well as of the apparently threatening party); thus the ‘reality’ of threat assessment is to an important degree made up of what
the perceiver (the threatened) brings to the situation, by way of preconceptions . . . and fears, as well as what the threatener actually does and says. [In this sense] all threat relationships are affected by what might be called “permanently aggravating factors” . . . [or] mindsets . . . that magnify the problems of threat assessment.

As useful as these inter-subjective aspects such as historical narratives, beliefs, norms and values might be in understanding strategic dispositions of states, it may be difficult to explain states’ security-related decisions only with reference to these interpretive aspects of strategic culture. This is because objective factors of a polity, namely the role of technology and the dynamic of external threats, may overtly influence a country’s security decisions. Notwithstanding these complexities, strategic culture is an important concept that takes into consideration the prism of perception through which policy-makers will interpret their strategic threat environment, as a form of ‘relationship’. Thus, a more balanced perspective to strategic culture and security policies to which many strategic cultural theorists (Sagan 2000), including Booth, have agreed is that states’ security decisions may be explained both from the inter-subjective frames of strategic culture as well as the dictates of ‘real’ politics (Booth 1990a, b). Viewed in terms of the International Relations theories, the above understanding of strategic culture as a prism of perception incorporates both the material (realist) and the inter-subjective/discursive (constructivist) factors of international politics that may explain states’ nuclear policy choices.

Before proceeding to use Booth’s framework of strategic culture to explain how India and Pakistan’s nuclear policy-making have played out as an interaction of the material (realist) and inter-subjective/discursive (constructivist) factors, I outline the strategic culture scholarships relevant to India and Pakistan’s strategic security contexts.

**Strategic cultures in India and Pakistan**

Determining India and Pakistan’s security policies in the context of their strategic cultures is a difficult task as neither India nor Pakistan had written documents or institutional structures until 1998, as in the Western or the Chinese sense, which spelt out their strategic thoughts. None the less, there have been some efforts in studying these states’ security policies in the light of their strategic thinking. For instance, according to American analyst Tanham (1992), strategic thinking is nearly absent in the Indian strategic mind; according to Bajpai (2002) and Basrur (2001), it is growing incrementally; for Rosen (1996), it represents a ‘Hindu mind-set’; for Singh (1998), who later became a Cabinet Minister in India under the coalition-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government, India’s strategic thinking is passive and not sufficiently militaristic; and Ollapally (2001) sees it as one of non-decision. These claims, despite diverse observations on India’s strategic culture and nuclear policies, concur that India’s strategic practices have been averse to overt decision-making, and have remained one of nuclear ambiguity.

In contrast to India, analysts of Pakistan’s strategic culture are more or less unanimous that the following factors have influenced Pakistan’s strategic thinking vis-à-vis its nuclear policies: Pakistan’s India-centric insecurity; acquisition of military capacity to raise the cost of war against India; allocation of its resources for defence; weapons procurement from abroad; alliance-building with states external to the region (especially the United States); and Pakistan’s Islamic identity (Rizvi 2002, Lavoy 2005, 2007). Pakistani defence analyst, Rizvi (2002), analyses the Islamic component of Pakistan’s strategic culture. He claims that ‘Islam is an integral part of Pakistan’s strategic culture because it contributes to shaping societal dispositions and orientations of [its] policy makers’ (Rizvi 2002, p. 319). This is because ‘Islam is directly associated with the establishment of the state . . . with an emphasis on the Islamic character of Pakistani identity’, and has configured predominantly in the political, military
and educational discourses of the Pakistani state and the training of its military personnel (Rizvi 2002, pp. 319–320). Yet, strategic cultural analysts of India and Pakistan, like their Western counterparts, argue that an analysis of India–Pakistan’s strategic culture takes us into messy terrains that must include additional factors, namely technology, superpower involvement in the region, and their domestic organizational capabilities, before concluding how their strategic cultures have influenced their security policies.

In the remainder of the article, I continue exploring the relationship between India and Pakistan’s strategic cultures and their security policies, but contribute to the existing analyses by exploring from a critical constructivist angle how certain discourses or ‘codes of intelligibilities’ of India–Pakistan’s political elites, regarding their national histories, traditions and cultural identities, have served to rearticulate the material aspects of their strategic insecurities to justify their nuclear decision-making. This framework, situated in terms of International Relations theory and Booth’s interpretive analysis of strategic culture, is as follows: first, interpretive factors (i.e. differences in the realms of ‘codes of intelligibility’ as encompassing differences in identities) underpin relations of mutual resentment, hostility and strong threat perceptions between adversarial states; and second, these interpretive aspects are played out within larger material factors (i.e. power distribution and rivalries in the international system) that help sustain such tensions and antagonisms.

**Strategic cultures and nuclear policy options in India and Pakistan: 1947–98**

With the geopolitical/cultural forms of nation formation that unfurled in the post-partition era, the idea of India–Pakistan’s shared security as envisaged by Jinnah, in the mid-1940s, became an illusive concept in South Asia (Waheeduzzaman 1969); so was Jinnah’s vision of Pakistan as a secular and democratic state – which ended with his premature death in 1948. A newly born Pakistan self-identified as an Islamic state, inherited a weak divided Muslim League leadership (which neglected democratic government) and a military-bureaucratic apparatus that came to control the state’s decision-making power. While the bureaucracy governed the state, security policy became the domain of the anti-Indian military (given Pakistan’s post-partition communal clashes with India and even a war with it in 1947–48).

By contrast, India’s ‘civilizational’ moorings (Nehru 1961), heightened by its colonial experience, caused India’s post-independent leaders to circumscribe India’s geopolitical vision as a strong, sovereign, secular, democratic state – to be pursued through the principles of idealist nationalism. In pursuing this line of strategic thinking, known as Nehruvianism, post-colonial India’s political leaders were influenced by Gandhian non-violence, which, drawing from the ancient Indian civilizational moorings, was considered by the Indian leadership as an alternative to the conflict-ridden strategic conceptions of the West (Nehru 1988). Thus, India’s policy towards China under Nehru, despite recognizing it as an expansionist power, departed from conventional power politics and relied on panchsheel (the policy of peaceful coexistence) (Manekar 1968). In the international sphere, this strategic thinking was represented by India through non-alignment. However, India’s approach of political idealism did not prevent India’s policy-makers from maintaining grandiose ideas about India’s role in the region. This strategy had a two-pronged perception. First, India’s growing military power is not a threat to any state in South Asia. Instead, the neighbouring states must coordinate their foreign policies in keeping with the imperatives of India’s centrality in the region. Second, India does not favour any outside powers supplying weapons to or establishing a military presence in any neighbouring states. This high-handed attitude, referred to as Nehru’s ‘national egoism’ (Jiegen 2007, p. 86), became a stumbling block in India’s relations with other South Asian states, namely Pakistan.
Strategic culture and nuclear aspirations of India–Pakistan: 1947–62

Pakistan’s policy-makers perceived the India-managed security model as conflicting with the national aspirations of Pakistan. Certain immediate post-partition developments between India and Pakistan, namely the outbreak of communal riots, settlement of refugee property, the dispute over Kashmir (leading to the first India–Pakistan war 1947–48), and Afghanistan’s claims on Pakistan’s territory (which was supported by India), accentuated this line of thinking (Rizvi 2002). In this context, it was not at all difficult for the Pakistani leadership to evolve historical narratives to justify its strategic thinking and insecurities vis-à-vis India. Pakistan’s official and unofficial circles argued that having failed to stop the creation of Pakistan, India purposely wanted to jeopardize Pakistan’s survival, and was not amicably solving its disputes with Pakistan (Rizvi 2002, p. 310). Although PM Nehru emphasized that in the aftermath of partition respect for territorial status quo and a common subcontinental history and culture should draw India and Pakistan together (and in this sense was also drawing from the Nehruvian interpretations of India’s strategic culture), simultaneous negative statements by the Indian policy-makers convinced Pakistan of an external vulnerability vis-à-vis India (Menon and Bhasin 1996).

Pakistan’s insecurity vis-à-vis India manifested itself in four major defence/security policy options: enhancing its India-centric national security by prioritizing its defence needs; acquiring weapons from abroad; identification with conservative Islamic values as a way of building its national unity against a ‘Hindu’ India; and reliance on diplomacy including military alignments to counter a militarily powerful India. Needless to say, Pakistan’s military engagements with the United States through the Mutual Defence Assistance Treaties brought a US presence in South Asia and ran counter to India’s non-aligned intentions. India insisted that if Pakistan abandoned its anti-Indian efforts at mobilizing support from states outside South Asia the security scenario of South Asia would improve (Rizvi 2002, p. 314).

How did these mutually re-enforcing strategic insecurities shape India and Pakistan’s early nuclear strategies? Although Jinnah’s early death, depriving Pakistan of an early nuclear patronage, explains the lack of Pakistan’s early pursuit of the atom, the Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission (PAEC) was established in 1955 – with some internal debate about the potential of atomic power for Pakistan (Kapur 1987). Although these events did not represent any significant development in Pakistan’s nuclear infrastructure at that point, even in those early years Pakistan’s atom was justified vis-à-vis India. This is evidenced in Ayub’s claim that ‘We will buy the bomb off the shelf if India goes nuclear’ (Kapur 1987, p. 26).

By contrast, India initiated an indigenous atomic development project. This development was explained by India’s political leadership in realist and developmental terms: the realist argument was positioned by saying that India needed to fortify itself against external dependency, and the developmental one emphasized the nation’s economic wherewithal. Shortly after India’s independence, Nehru, on Homi Bhabha’s (Chair of the Board of Atomic Energy Research) recommendation, sponsored the Atomic Energy Bill in the Constituent Assembly. An Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) was also established (1948) that controlled all activities relating to atomic energy. In India’s post-colonial climate, surging to ‘catch-up’ with modernity, India’s scientific capability, to a great extent, became identified as a measure of national pride, autonomy and modernity (Abraham 1999).

Strategic culture and nuclear ambiguity in India–Pakistan: 1962–98

The Sino–Indian war (1962) in which India was defeated provided the Indian policy-makers with the space to rearticulate their strategic thinking and nuclear policy choices from a Hobbesian context. This line of thinking was exacerbated by China’s fission test in 1964, and a second test
in 1965. Although, segments of elite opinion in India were by then in favour of a military nuclear policy (more so, given PM Shastri’s failure to secure a nuclear security umbrella for India from the United States), the political leadership showed restraint in proceeding in that direction. As claimed by the then Indian Foreign Minister, Swaran Singh, in the Indian Parliament: ‘The government still feels that the interests of world peace and our own security are better achieved by giving all support to the efforts for world nuclear disarmament than by building our own nuclear weapons’ (Bhatia 1979, p. 109). However, in 1967 India began scientific studies on the feasibility of an underground nuclear explosion – following Bhabha’s speech to the International Atomic Energy Agency that it would be difficult for India to follow a policy of restraint with the introduction of nuclear weapons in the neighbourhood.

Pakistan’s India-centric insecurities were no less improving. The second India–Pakistan war (1965), the Bangladesh war (1971) and the temporary absence of US weapons supplies to Pakistan (following the Bangladesh war) contributed to Pakistan’s insecurities. By then, however, Pakistan had consolidated its relation with China, and Z. A. Bhutto (the then Foreign Minister of Pakistan) took this opportunity to renew his call for Pakistan’s nuclear weapons capacity against India. Expressed by Bhutto (1972, p. 224): ‘the nuclear threat is real and immediate . . . India is reported to be on the threshold of becoming nuclear . . . we will [also] make nuclear weapon even if we have to eat grass . . . We will make Pakistan Army second to none’. Following Rizvi’s (2002, p. 319) assertion that ‘Islam [a]s an integral part of Pakistan’s strategic culture . . . contributes to shaping the dispositions and orientations of [its] policy makers’, one notices how Bhutto’s justification of Pakistan’s nuclear weapons capacity was situated in the context of Pakistan’s Islamic identity and culture. Referring to Pakistan’s potential nuclear bomb as an Islamic bomb, Bhutto further claimed that:

We know that Israel and South Africa have full nuclear capability. The Christian, Jewish, and Hindu civilizations have this capability too . . . Only the Islamic civilization was without it . . . but this was about to change. (Bhutto 1969, p. 151)

Subsequently, strategic developments in Pakistan with further musings of an improving Sino–US relationship in the early 1970s (following Henry Kissinger’s visit to China in 1971 and the announcement of President Nixon’s in 1972) were of concern to India. Thus, despite the fact that the political debate in India over its nuclear stand had come to a rest by 1970 with India’s decision not to join the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and not to join the nuclear club either, India in 1974 conducted its first ‘peaceful nuclear explosion’ (PNE) in 1974. However, in contrast to Pakistan’s India-centric rationale, India’s rationale for the PNE was economic – although some ‘muscle-flexing’ vis-à-vis Pakistan was indeed implied through the PNE (Jain 1974).

The military regime under Zia continued to use the Indian threat in conjunction with orthodox Islamic injunctions to enhance Pakistan’s nuclear weapons capability and, despite some ambiguities, media reports revealed Pakistan’s steady pursuit towards nuclear weapons capacity. Zia acknowledged to an Indian news magazine in 1981 that, ‘We are amongst the five countries in the world [that] know and practice this technology’ (i.e. the conversion of natural uranium into enriched uranium) (Ali 1984, p. 62). The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan further boosted the course of Pakistan’s nuclearization when billions of dollars in military and economic assistance started arriving in Pakistan from the United States, and subsequently Zia, in an interview with Time magazine (1986), declared that ‘Pakistan has the capability to build the bomb whenever it wishes’ (quoted in Specter and Smith 1990, p. 95). Although following the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan the United States imposed the Pressler amendment on Pakistan, the cost of the US sanctions was limited because nearly a decade of US assistance had enabled Pakistan to enhance its nuclear capacity. In 1992, Pakistan’s Foreign Secretary,
Shahrayar Khan, noted that Pakistan possessed ‘all the elements which, if hooked together, would become a nuclear devise’ (Ahmed 2000, p. 7). The above developments, when seen against the already deteriorating India–Pakistan relations over Brasstacks (1987), the fall of the Soviet Union that had provided a counter-weight to India against Pakistan and China, another Pakistan instigated insurgency in Kashmir in 1992, China’s testing of another nuclear device in 1993, and the introduction of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), explain why India under PM Rao attempted to conduct a nuclear test in 1995.

Although PM Sharif’s second term saw some possibilities of rapprochement in India–Pakistan relations, these gestures were offset by the Pakistani army’s anti-Indian trend (which continued to view Kashmir as an unsettled score) and Pakistan’s detonation of an intermediate range missile Ghauri in April 1998. While Pakistan’s policy-makers claimed that Pakistan tested Ghauri because of a perceived nuclear ‘aggressiveness’ from India’s new Hindu-Right BJP government (which in its election manifesto had declared that India would go nuclear once it came to power), the detonation caused insecurity to India. This was because the Ghauri could carry a nuclear warhead (payload) of 1,500 lb within a range of 900 miles, bringing in its purview the northern cities of India (Center for Defense and International Security Studies 1998). Thus, what followed Pakistan’s testing of Ghauri was the nuclear detonation by India under the BJP in May 1998. This was followed by Pakistan’s nuclear detonations later that month.

What does the above discussion imply in terms of India–Pakistan’s nuclear trajectories when interpreted through the prism of these nations’ strategic cultures? In terms of Booth’s definition of strategic culture, the trajectory of India–Pakistan’s nuclearization from 1947 to 1998 can be attributed to how these states’ strategic insecurities were perceived by their security managers through the prism of their strategic cultures – in interaction with other external and domestic factors. In the case of India, one sees that there has indeed been a gradual evolution of India’s strategic thinking that has revealed a transformation from the Gandhian brand on moralistic politics to one of a militarized India. In this context, one apprehends why India conducted the PNE in 1974 and why it proceeded with nuclear testing under Rao. Despite the gradual evolution in India’s strategic thinking and its nuclear trends, I contend that between the years 1947 and 1998 Nehruvianism constituted the dominant representation of the post-colonial Indian leaders’ strategic mind-set, where nuclear ‘ambiguity’ represented the perceptual framework of their orientations towards the use of nuclear defence strategies in international affairs. Viewed from this perspective of India’s strategic culture, India’s nuclear threshold during the years 1947–98, which in the post-1962 years faced considerable realist challenges, may be characterized as one of technology demonstrations that simultaneously provided the Indian state with a strategic space to pursue a variety of policies, sometimes contradictory, with regard to nuclear defence. This ambiguous strategic posturing recognized the ‘credibility of a latent nuclear option’, as was evidenced in India’s development of dual-use technological capabilities, its maintaining a fairly autonomous security policy, and simultaneously exercising nuclear self-restraint by paying tribute to India’s principled stand on global disarmament (Ollapally 2001, p. 930). I argue that this strategic ambiguity fitted well with India’s economic constraints, material realm and the cultural moorings of its elites, and seemed to support the strategic option that adequate security could be achieved for India through such an approach. This line of strategic cultural thinking of India’s decision-making also suggests that nuclear matters were viewed in political (not cultural) terms.

India’s threshold position was symbolically shared by Pakistan. Yet, it was not simply a replay of India’s because Pakistan’s insecurities vis-à-vis the big-brotherly India were geostrategically important in guiding Pakistan’s nuclear path. Coupled with this was Pakistan’s cultural identity as an Islamic state, which was further consolidated into an Islamic-military nexus under the Zia years. Although Pakistan’s policy-makers knew that it would be unlikely for Pakistan to
attain military parity with India, ‘they wanted to develop enough military capability to [signal] India that Pakistan could not only withstand India’s military pressures but [could] also increase the cost of an armed conflict for that country [India]’ (Rizvi 2002, p. 317). This strategy, which brought significant external support to Pakistan’s missile and nuclear-building capacity, also worked well to meet Pakistan’s deterrence objectives vis-à-vis India while avoiding the more elaborate requirements of open weaponization (Rizvi 2002). Thus, the non-weaponized deterrence or recessed deterrence approach also worked in explaining Pakistan’s nuclear weapons programme until 1998. As Ollapally (2001, p. 930) noted, this aspect of the subcontinent’s strategic ambiguity posture ‘gained in import by being theoretically formalized as a non-weaponized deterrence or recessed deterrence’.

Altered strategic thinking in India and Pakistan: 1998–2004

Following Booth’s claim that ‘strategic realities are . . . in part culturally constructed as well as culturally perpetuated’ (Booth 1990a, p. 124), the paragraphs below probe to what extent India’s 1998 detonation and its nuclear deterrence reflect a continuation or rupture of the Indian state’s strategic thinking and a substantive change in its nuclear security policy. Cognizant of views to the contrary, my arguments in this context are the following. First, despite ongoing build-ups of India’s nuclear trajectory under the pre-BJP governments (which is all the more an indication that these pre-BJP governments could, if they so chose, go nuclear), the nuclear threshold was crossed by the BJP. Second, the BJP has discursively rearticulated the generally accepted Nehruvian version of India’s strategic culture to forward a ‘Hindu-orientated’ understanding of India’s strategic thinking. Understanding these ‘cultural’ aspects, which have underscored recent South Asia’s strategic thinking, is important for us to shed light on where India and Pakistan are likely to go with their nuclear weapons in the future.

Strategic culture and open weaponization in India: 1998–2004

India’s nuclear testing in May 1998 immediately after the BJP’s coming to power, as a Hindu-right-dominated coalition government, is significant because of the nationalist/communalist biases of the party, which, guided by the ideology of Hindutva, seeks to rebuild India as a Hindu rashtra (nation). ‘One nation, one people, one culture’ underpin the BJP’s construct of India as a Hindu rashtra (BJP 1998a, p. 6). Following the boundaries of Hindutva, as defined by the twentieth century Hindu nationalist Veer Savarkar, the BJP too defines it in a rather communal manner and circumscribes its usage in defining the parameters of a modern India. Pitrabhoomi (fatherland), jati (bloodline) and sanskriti (culture) are identified by the BJP as constituting the cultural boundaries of India as a Hindu nation. According to several critics, under the BJP’s Hindutva-orientated nationalist agenda, ‘Muslims, Christians, Jews, and whose ancestral land [by birth] lay outside the territorial boundaries of punyabhoomi (the holy land of India) were by implication excluded from both Hindutva and from their citizenship of India’ (Chowdhry 2001, p. 101).

The BJP had in its 1998 election campaign promised the first ever strategic defence review for India (BJP 1998b). The National Agenda for Governance mentioned that:

To ensure the security, territorial integrity, and unity of India we will take all necessary steps and exercise all available options. Towards that end we will re-evaluate the nuclear policy and exercise the option to induct nuclear weapons. (BJP 1998b)

Evidenced from this statement, the BJP, like its previous governments, has situated the question of nuclear weapons within realist parameters, namely India’s national security and territorial integrity. Yet, following Booth’s (1990b, p. 58) claim that interpretive aspects of threat
assessments as guided by ‘mind-sets’ set the ‘mood, tone, or milieu’ within which policy-makers operate, it becomes interesting to analyse how a cultural/religious rearticulation of India’s strategic culture by the BJP has also enabled their leaders to (re)define their strategic insecurities and India’s nuclear security options/policies.

Jaswant Singh (Minister of External Affairs for India under the BJP) describes his vision of India’s national security from what he perceives to be India’s ‘Hindu’ strategic culture. According to him (1998, p. 2):

＞＞to define India’s strategic culture one has to examine the very nature of India’s nationhood; the very characteristics of its society; and the evolution of its strategic thought over the ages . . . it is [mainly] a by-product of the political culture of a nation and its people . . . [and] this is where history and racial memories influence a nation’s strategic thought [and] its culture.

Furthermore, representing Rosen’s (1996, p. 18) concept of ‘mind-set’, as underlying a country’s strategic culture, Singh claims that it is the Hindu civilization/culture that essentially constitute India’s strategic culture. In his words:

＞＞above all else, India is Hindu and Hindus think differently from non-Hindus . . . [and] it is this “ism” [i.e. Hinduism] that has given birth to a culture from which we hope to extract the essence of its [meaning India’s] strategic thought. (Singh 1998, p. 5)

Following the earlier assertion that states’ security decisions can be explained both through the prism of strategic culture as well as the dictates of realism, I argue that the BJP’s rearticulation of India’s strategic culture as a Hindu ‘mind-set’ has been used in conjunction with the dictates of realism to access and magnify its nuclear threat perceptions from certain sectors, i.e. Pakistan, to justify India’s nuclear agenda. While the BJP in the mainstream media reports has officially proclaimed China as India’s ‘No. 1’ nuclear threat, thereby situating the detonation in grounds of realism, one finds from unofficial BJP pamphlets, documents and news magazines that the party has simultaneously drawn from India–Pakistan’s partition histories and their religious/cultural identities to define India’s insecurities and nuclear policies. Evidenced in the party newspaper Swastika:

＞＞. . . an anti-Hindu vengeance that the nation [Pakistan] has historically nurtured against India may even cause Pakistan to launch a nuclear crusade against India. In this context, is it not correct for the BJP to have a nuclear deterrent, a long-overdue defense strategy, for the nation’s security? (BJP 1998c, p. 10)

Furthermore, a discursive link between Pakistan as a ‘cultural’ threat to India and a suggested nuclearization by India to ‘crush’ the Islamic ‘offender’ is also suggested in the following quote that appears in BJP Today:

＞＞In our [Hindu] scriptures there is a provision to worship power shakti [good power or sat-guna] to crush the wrong doer [dur-guna] . . . As practitioners of Hindutva we uphold sat-guna. (BJP 2003, p. 17)

The above quote can be interpreted from the ideological framework of Hindutva, where ‘at the level of practice, the Hindutva outlook boils down to upholding righteousness (Sat-guna) and fighting ignoble attitudes (Dur-guna) . . . Heenam Naashaayati iti Hindhu [i.e.] Those who uphold righteousness and fight ignobleness are Hindus’ (Birodkar n.d.). Accordingly, the Swastika continues:

＞＞India is a religion-centric [dharmattik] country. It does not believe in violence, terror, and killing. Yet, this nation had to think about its nuclear deterrence because it knows that the virtue of religiosity will be reflected only when it is backed by power. (BJP 1998c, p. 10)

Although the above analysis does not claim that the BJP’s rise to power constitutes the only explanation for India’s nuclear detonation in 1998, from Booth’s (1990a, p. 124) strategic culture analysis that ‘strategic realities are . . . in part culturally constructed as well as culturally
perpetuated’, this section is supportive of the view that the BJP’s ideology of Hindutva has served as the prism for the party to rearticulate the nation’s strategic culture and facilitate its decision to test. Yet, these rearticulations and decisions were helped to a great degree by an increasingly permissive domestic and external (threat) environment that India then faced, namely from: the party’s militant factions; an assertive, unpredictable and rising China; increasing Sino–Pakistani nuclear transactions; and an increasingly nuclear-strong Pakistan under nuclear patrons such as China and the United States. Accordingly, along a more conveniently projected realist parameter, India’s Draft Nuclear Doctrine (DND) recommended an aggressive nuclear deployment posture for India. It spelt out that India will develop a triadic strategic defence system in which nuclear weapons could be delivered by aircraft, submarines and mobile land-based ballistic missiles – such that India could respond with punitive retaliation against a nuclear adversary. Thus, India’s earlier rhetoric of ‘minimum’ nuclear deterrence was replaced by an ‘effective’ credible nuclear deterrence, implying a retaliatory capability – should deterrence fail for India (Embassy of India 1999). The government’s test-firing of a series of missiles followed, and the introduction of several types of armament, electronic warfare and other support systems.

According to several scholars, other than introducing the DND, the BJP ‘... did not introduce any change of consequence [in India’s nuclear policy]. Let alone a move to deploy nuclear weapons’ (Basrur 2001, p. 188). There has also ‘... not been any significant organizational initiative’ by the BJP to incorporate nuclear weapons in India’s defence forces (Basrur 2001, p. 188, Ollapally 2001). These scholars even claim that despite a doctrinal stand, the BJP has verbally saluted the historically expressed mixed Indian commitment to pursuing disarmament through its adherence to a ‘no-first-use’ clause in the DND. On this note the BJP has also clarified that its decision to go nuclear in 1998, or not sign the CTBT, is a continuity of similar decisions taken by the former Indian governments. Although these observations are, to a certain extent, valid, namely the issue of CTBT when contextualized in terms of India’s perceived nuclear apartheid, for the author, these observations do not preclude the fact that the BJP crossed the nuclear threshold in 1998. More importantly, following Booth’s (1990b, p. 58) observation that ‘... ideologies propagate the most basic beliefs and doctrines [and] ... heightens the individual’s sense of “friends” and “enemies”’, what is unusual in Indian nuclear security politics is how the BJP’s Hinduva-orientated rearticulation of India’s strategic culture has enabled it to draw from culturally grounded notions of ‘enemy imaging’ to legitimize India’s 1998 nuclear policy. In this context, I do not enter the debate on the rationality underscoring the BJP’s 1998 testing. Rather, drawing from Booth’s (1990a) assertion that security decisions are shaped by cultural influences on decision-makers, the above section has emphasized from an interpretive perspective how a culturally and historically grounded rearticulation of India’s strategic culture has enabled the party to perceive and rearticulate their (cultural) sensitivities to external dangers (an act facilitated by an increasingly permissive external threat environment) to justify India’s strategic options/policies.

Strategic culture and open weaponization in Pakistan: 1998–2004

As Pakistani security analyst Rizvi (2002, p. 318) noted, ‘had India not gone for nuclear explosions in May 1998, Pakistan would have continued with the policy of nuclear ambiguity’. PM Sharif was at first hesitant to test because he was concerned about the potential impact of economic and military sanctions on Pakistan. Within Sharif’s cabinet, opinions differed within groups supporting or opposing Pakistan’s nuclear testing. Supporters of a retaliatory nuclear test included Foreign Minister Gowher Ayub, Information Minister Mushahid Hussain, and others, whose views reflected the influential segments of the armed forces.
Accordingly, ignoring US efforts to prevent Pakistan from testing, which included a visit by the US Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott to Pakistan, Pakistan tested its nuclear devices on 28 and 30 May 1998. Pakistan’s rationale of a retaliatory nuclear testing was reflective not only of a defence mechanism but also one that symbolized Pakistan’s prestige. Immediately after the testing, PM Sharif declared:

Today, we have settled a score and have carried out five successful nuclear tests... The entire nation takes justifiable pride in [this] accomplishment... Our security, and the peace and stability of the entire region, was gravely threatened. As any self-respecting nation, we had no choice left for us. Our hand was forced by the present Indian leadership’s reckless actions... Our decision to exercise the nuclear option has been taken in the interest of national self-defense. (Nuclear Weapons Archive 2003)

Yet, one notices how this political discourse of Pakistan’s nuclear insecurity vis-à-vis India is simultaneously rearticulated along ‘cultural’ lines. In this rearticulation, Pakistan’s nuclear insecurity is projected as Pakistan’s ‘Islamic’ bomb specifically vis-à-vis India’s ‘Hindu’ bomb. As claimed in Pakistan Today,

Pakistan...is...the citadel of Islam. Its arm[ed] forces are the armies of Islam... Religion is not just its [Pakistan’s] raison d’être but the guarantee of survival... There has always been a tacit understanding that Pakistan’s bomb will be to regain the glory of Islam and regain the ‘rights’ of the Muslims whenever they are persecuted [read: threatened] by infidel powers. This was truly an Islamic bomb [against the Hindu bomb]. (Sayeed 2003)

Furthermore, this cultural discourse also draws from Islam to define Pakistan’s nuclear (in)securities and justify the bomb. As reported in Pakistan Today:

The detonations...were according to the then Prime Minister of Pakistan, Mian Nawaz Sharif... the results of an inspiration he derived from the holy book – Qur’a’n. After conducting the nuclear tests, he proclaimed to the nation on May 28 that in resolving the dilemma ‘to explode or not to explode’ he ultimately turned to the Holy Quran... for guidance and he came upon the divine commandment ‘always to keep your horses [i.e. the latest war technologies in the present context] ready. (Sayyed 2003)

The above quotes show how Pakistan’s nuclear insecurities perceived vis-à-vis its adversary (India) and justifications to strike against it draw from Islam and its scriptures – an aspect that replays similar reiterations of the BJP that draw from the Hindu scriptures on sat-guna and dur-guna to justify the Indian bomb. Yet, like the BJP government officials, the Pakistani government officials too have sought to correct any religious/cultural (mis)interpretations of their 1998 detonation as an ‘Islamic’ bomb. Tariq Altaf, Pakistan’s Foreign Ministry spokesperson, hurriedly corrected such discourses by saying that:

Nothing gives me more offense than the use of the phrase ‘Islamic bomb’. There is no such thing as an Islamic bomb. This is a weapon for the self defense of Pakistan – period. (Warraq 1999)

Whereas India’s 1998 detonation and its subsequent deterrence may be explained through the combined frames of realism and the ‘cultural’ articulation of insecurities, Pakistan’s detonation from the realist point of view was retaliatory. At the heart was the issue of maintaining its nuclear parity with India, revealing Pakistan’s perpetual India-centric security dilemmas. In this realist sense, Pakistan’s 1998 detonation is perhaps not anything unusual and, in fact, reveals a continuation of its India-centric insecurities that has historically plagued Pakistan’s strategic cultural mind-set.

Following, however, Booth’s interpretive analysis of strategic culture that a threat involves a relationship and thus requires an inclusive interpretation of the character of the threatening parties, what becomes unusual in Pakistan’s detonation is how its hitherto perceived nuclear threat perceptions vis-à-vis India were rearticulated on the eve of May 1998 in terms of
cultural/religious insecurities. In this context, one might recall that Pakistan’s Islamic identity has been an integral component of its strategic culture and insecurities, and Bhutto’s (1969) call for an ‘Islamic’ bomb encapsulated this link. Thus, in some ways Pakistan’s concept of an Islamic bomb even in the early 1960s alluded to a ‘cultural’ understanding of a Hindu/Indian (as well as a Christian and Jewish) nuclear adversary. Yet, following Booth’s (1990a, p. 124) contention that ‘politics . . . takes place in a distinctive social-psychological area’, where ‘strategic realities are . . . in part culturally constructed as well as culturally perpetuated’, one notices that Pakistan’s discourses of an Islamic bomb in 1998, unlike its earlier discourses, is situated vis-à-vis India as a Hindu/cultural adversary. Thus, although it is true that Pakistan’s material (external) and domestic (military-bureaucratic) realms have set the structural context of its 1998 detonation, it is also evidenced from the above discourses that the cultural (interpretive) aspects of Pakistan’s nuclear policy-making (on the eve of May 1998) have also set the ‘mood, tone, or milieu’ for its policy-makers (perhaps as a response to that of India’s) to rearticulate their nuclear insecurities from a ‘cultural’ perspective.

Three strategic challenges facing Pakistan in the post-9/11 context further enhanced Pakistan’s strategic insecurities, especially in terms of Pakistan’s identity as an Islamic state: first, Pakistan’s ability to be a US partner in the war on terror, failing which the United States could team up with its traditional adversary India; second, worries in Pakistan about US-led preventive strikes against Pakistan’s nuclear arsenal should Pakistan fail to be a US ally in the war on terror; and third, how to hold on to its Islamic identity when powerful Islamic domestic constituencies were opposed to Pakistan’s betrayal of the Taliban policy.6 While juggling with the global front, there occurred the December 2001 attack against the Indian Parliament by Pakistani-backed militants, and thereafter the alleged proliferation activities of Q. A. Khan (transferring nuclear weapons technology to Iran, Libya and North Korea) – both of which seemingly reconsolidated Pakistan’s image as an ‘irresponsible’ entity in Western circles (Lavoy 2002). These events created new identity crises and insecurities for Pakistan at three levels – cultural, global and material. At the cultural level was the issue of holding on to Pakistan’s identity as an Islamic nation-state before some of its domestic components who are opposed to Pakistan’s alliance in the war on terror; at the global level, to convince the United States and the global community that an Islamic state can act in cooperation with the United States to make the world secure; and at the material level, the question of retaining Pakistan’s national and nuclear sovereignty vis-à-vis India in the event of a possible India–US alliance. Thus, despite Pakistan’s initial quest for a strategic restraint and nuclear stabilization in South Asia, the post-9/11 strategic and cultural insecurities facing Pakistan resulted in a thoroughly planned nuclear deterrence by Pakistan – especially to deter a conventional military or a potential nuclear attack by India (for details, see Lavoy 2005, 2007).

Strategic culture, insecurities and nuclear strategies: post 2004

In the national elections of April 2004, the BJP government was replaced by the Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance as the national government of India. According to some prominent analysts of Indian politics, the return of the Congress government represents a return of Nehruvianism in Indian strategic thinking and politics, which, unlike Nehru’s non-alignment, is embedded in the logic of liberalism (Bajpai 2002). Contemporary Nehruvianism believes that international relations is characterized by war, coercion and the presence of big power politics; yet, the lure of mutual gain, or strategic interdependence, may be a conditioning factor among states in the conduct of international relations. Thus, this renewed brand of Nehruvian strategic thinking is of the view that in the contemporary world non-alignment is not a pragmatic policy; rather, India can become a great power through economic growth which is possible only
if India works with great powers such as the United States to increase its trade, technology transfer and investment (Bajpai 2002). This strategic interdependence is evidenced in the recent US–India Nuclear Pact of 2008, which envisages US–India military/nuclear cooperation in three areas: national missile defence, conventional defence, and economic and technological development (for details, see Mohan 2008).

Although India’s pro-US view in some ways clashes with India’s traditional tribute to global non-proliferation and has been critiqued by India’s oppositional parties such as the Marxist party, CPI(M), and the BJP as compromising with India’s national sovereignty (given that India as a result of this pact has allowed the International Atomic Energy Agency the right to inspect India’s nuclear facilities), this strategic balancing vis-à-vis the United States has not necessarily jeopardized India’s nuclear sovereignty. Rather, it has enabled India to maintain its status as a nuclear weapon state in a restrained way as well as pay tribute to its historic norm of non-proliferation (because India has agreed to an eventual plan of disarmament). Additionally, this alliance has also provided India and the United States with military security against their common adversary China, has given India an edge in combating Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism as emanating from Pakistan (by keeping Pakistan on a tight rope), and has provided the United States with two South Asian supporters in its war against terror by offering the ‘carrot’ to India and showing the ‘stick’ to Pakistan (by coercing Pakistan to be a devoted US partner in this war).

By contrast, three strategic insecurities plague Pakistan as a consequence of the US–India nuclear accord: first, India may be able to out-race Pakistan by rapidly expanding its production of fissile; second, India may be able to identity and target Pakistan’s strategic assets with its enhanced intelligence, surveillance and precision-strike missile capabilities; and third, the US government, which is seemingly emphasizing its strategic and political relations with India, may be inclined to support India in regional disputes such as Kashmir. Thus, despite the Indian and the US governments’ assurances that India’s expanding international defence relationships are not attempted as defence strategies against Pakistan and that Pakistan continues to remain of strategic interest to US security interests in South Asia, from the perspective of ‘real’ politics this pact has left Pakistan strategically isolated (Lavoy 2007, p. 19). The Pakistan–Beijing nuclear pact that followed in late October 2008, immediately after the US–India nuclear deal, is an illustration of this insecurity – quite justified without any firm assurances from India that it will not intrude Pakistan’s political and territorial integrity.

Conclusion: strategic culture and implications for security practices

In this paper, I have drawn from Booth’s (1990, p. 121) concept of strategic culture to examine India–Pakistan’s nuclear security policy options/choices in the context of their strategic cultures. Through a comparative analysis of India–Pakistan’s strategic cultures, I have explored how the perceptions of these states’ strategic insecurities as interpreted by their security managers through the prism of their strategic cultures have, in conjunction with other external, domestic and technological factors, defined their nuclear trajectories. In exploring the above phenomenon, while I have been appreciative of the material realm, I have also drawn attention to the interpretive (constructivist) realm, namely that states’ decisions to opt for certain nuclear policy options are influenced by their decision-makers’ ideas, and how such ideas perceive or ‘culturally’ interpret their strategic realities.

Played out as an interaction of the material and interpretive realms, the linkage between India and Pakistan’s strategic cultures and their security options/policies has revealed certain continuities/discontinuities as their strategic thinking has evolved over the years. In the context of India, one finds that India’s strategic thinking has, indeed, transformed itself from
one of Gandhian moral politics to one of militarism – a transition justified given the growing geostrategic threats facing the nation. In this context, one apprehends India’s 1974 peaceful nuclear explosion, why India had proceeded to conduct a nuclear test in 1995 and that the pre-BJP governments’ nuclearization programmes set the space for the BJP to detonate in 1998. Despite such observations, what is important to note is that the Indian leaders did not, until the coming of the BJP to power, overtly cross the nuclear threshold. I suggest that this restraint of the pre-BJP Indian leaders may be attributed to their ideological thinking (which Indian political analysts have deemed as a continuing imprint of Nehruvianism), where these leaders ‘did not see the need for using nuclear weapons’ (Ollapally 2001, p. 930). Although this paper does not claim that the BJP’s rise to power constitutes the only explanation for India’s nuclear detonation, following Booth’s (1990a, p. 124) claim that, ‘strategic realities are . . . in part culturally constructed and culturally perpetuated’, a point that dovetails with the International Relations school of critical social constructivism, this article is supportive of the view that the BJP’s ideology of Hindutva has served as a prism for the party to rearticulate India’s strategic culture, its ‘cultural’ insecurities, and facilitate its decision to test – within a permissive domestic and external environment.

While India’s 1998 detonation and its subsequent deterrence may be explained through the combined frames of realism and the ‘cultural’ articulation of insecurities, Pakistan’s detonation was retaliatory. At the heart was the issue of maintaining its nuclear/military parity with India – revealing Pakistan’s perpetual India-centric security dilemmas. In this realist sense, Pakistan’s 1998 detonation reveals a continuation of its India-centric insecurities, which have historically plagued Pakistan’s strategic cultural mind-set (Rizvi 2002). However, following Booth’s (1990b, p. 50) interpretive analysis of strategic culture that ‘. . . reminds us that a threat involves a relationship, and so requires an inclusive interpretation (involving an understanding of the character of the apparently threatening party)’, what becomes unusual in Pakistan’s detonation is how its hitherto perceived military/political threat perceptions vis-à-vis India were rearticulated on the eve of May 1998 in terms of cultural/religious insecurities – much like its Indian counterpart under the BJP.

These cultural rearticulations of India–Pakistan’s insecurities also expose a unique intersection underpinning the strategic ‘mind-sets’ of India–Pakistan’s strategic communities at the conjectural moment of May 1998. That is, despite quite different forms of strategic cultural perception guiding post-independent India and Pakistan’s strategic thinking (represented by India’s Nehruvianism versus Pakistan’s Islamic identity), the prism of their strategic thinking on the eve of May 1998 has simultaneously drawn from a plethora of ‘culturally’ embedded discourses to justify their notions of nuclear insecurities. This discursive intersectionality, drawing from cultural rearticulations of identities and nuclear (in)securities, albeit marking a brief transitional moment of South Asia’s nuclear problem, becomes critical for this analysis, which, appreciative of the material (realist) realm, also draws attention to the interpretive (constructivist) realm that may guide a nation’s security policy. This analytical framework, situated in terms of conventional International Relations theory and a critical constructivist re-approach to it, by way of my conclusion for this study, is as follows: first, interpretive factors (i.e. differences in the realms of ‘codes of intelligibility’ as encompassing differences in identities) underpin relations of mutual resentment, hostility and strong threat perceptions between adversarial states; and second, these interpretive aspects are played out within larger material factors (i.e. power distribution and rivalries in the international system) that help sustain such tensions and antagonisms. This constructivist assumption (which in Booth’s premise of strategic culture is referred to as ‘interpretation’, whereby ‘strategic realities are . . . in part culturally constructed and culturally perpetuated’) also contains policy implications on the future of a nuclearized South Asia – given that those who make decisions of going nuclear
are also in a position to create conditions (within a certain material, domestic and technological environment) for altering their ideational perceptions vis-à-vis their adversaries, insecurities, nuclear strategies and brinkmanship. Accordingly, how the ‘interpretive’ aspects of India and Pakistan’s strategic cultural thinking interacts with the ‘material’ to define their future nuclear insecurities and policies, namely following the recent US–India nuclear deal, remains a matter of speculation.

Notes

1. Structural constructivists such as Wendt (1992) provide inter-subjective explanations of national security, where anarchy is not given, but depends on the collective meanings that constitute the international system; but they do not explain how insecurity may be ‘culturally’ constructed.

2. For scholarships that have interpretively analysed India–Pakistan’s nuclearization, see Nizamani (2000), Abraham (1999) and Prakash (1999). Yet, they do not explore the ‘cultural’ production of nuclear insecurities in South Asian security politics.

3. Despite a plethora of scholarships on strategic culture and security policies (see Synder 1977, Gray 1981, Johnston 1995), I use Ken Booth’s analysis because of its reference to the ‘cultural’ politics of foreign policy-making – which is relevant for this case study.

4. The only exception being Kautilya’s Arthashastra, which, however, does not have the same strategic significance that Chinese or Western military classics do in international affairs. See Kautilya (1987).

5. The first principle pitrabhoomi (fatherland), implies that to be a Hindu one should be born within the territorial boundaries of India; the second, jati (bloodline), claims that to be a Hindu one should establish lineage from natural as opposed to converted Hindu parents; and the third, sanskriti (culture), implies that only those whose sacred land (sacred to their religion) lay within their fatherland (India) actually have the moral basis for claiming citizenship of India (Chowdhry 2000).

6. Pakistanis opposed to the country’s involvement in the war on terror mostly come from the Islamic fundamentalists concentrated in the North West Frontier Province of Pakistan.

References


