



Nuclear Doctrine of India

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Why in News?

Amidst heightened tensions between India and Pakistan, Defence Minister of India has recently said that the **'no first use nuclear policy' of India may change in the future.**

What is a Nuclear Doctrine?

- A nuclear doctrine states **how a nuclear weapon state would employ its nuclear weapons both during peace and war.**
- The doctrine helps to **establish deterrence vis-à-vis adversary.**
- Through the nuclear doctrine a state can **communicate its intention and resolve to the enemy.**
- The doctrine also guides the state's response during war.

Historical Background

- Nuclear programme of India was initiated in the late 1940s under the guidance of **Homi J. Bhabha.**
- Nehru was against nuclear weapons so he pleaded with the superpowers for **comprehensive nuclear disarmament.** However, the nuclear arsenal kept rising.
- When Communist China conducted the nuclear tests in October 1964, the five nuclear powers (US, USSR, UK, France, and China) also the five Permanent Members of the UN Security Council had tried to impose the **Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT)** of 1968 on the rest of the world.

Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)

- Signed in 1968, the treaty **entered into force in 1970**, now has 190 member states. It requires countries to **give up any present or future plans to build nuclear weapons** in return for access to peaceful uses of nuclear energy.

- Three main objectives of the treaty are **non-proliferation, disarmament, and the right to peacefully use nuclear technology.**
- **India is one of the only five countries that either did not sign the NPT or signed but withdrew,** thus becoming part of a list that includes Pakistan, Israel, North Korea, and South Sudan.
- India always considered the NPT as **discriminatory** and had refused to sign it.
- India has opposed the international treaties aimed at non-proliferation since they were selectively applicable to the non-nuclear powers and legitimised the monopoly of the five nuclear weapons powers.
- The **first nuclear explosion undertaken by India in May 1974.**
- India argued that it was committed to the policy of using nuclear power only for peaceful purposes.
- India opposed the indefinite extension of the NPT in 1995 and also refused to sign the **Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT).**
- India conducted a **series of nuclear tests in May 1998,** demonstrating its capacity to use nuclear energy for military purposes.
- Pakistan soon followed, thereby increasing the vulnerability of the region to a nuclear exchange.
- The international community was extremely critical of the nuclear tests in the subcontinent and sanctions were imposed on both India and Pakistan, which were subsequently waived.
- After the 1998 nuclear test India also enunciated a doctrine of '**No First Use' (NFU) of nuclear weapons.**
- The doctrine was **formally adopted in January, 2003,** and says that nuclear weapons will only be used in retaliation against a nuclear attack on Indian territory or on Indian forces anywhere.
- Since the adoption of nuclear doctrine, **India has said consistently that its nuclear weapons were based on staggering and punitive retaliation,** in case the deterrence has failed.
- Pakistan, by contrast, has openly threatened India with the use of nuclear weapons on multiple occasions beginning from the time the two nations were not even acknowledged nuclear powers.

Advantages of NFU

- The NFU policy **facilitates restrained nuclear weapons programme** without tactical weapons and a complicated command and control system.
- The doctrine **minimises the probability of nuclear use** by avoiding the deployment of weapons on hair-trigger alert and keeping an arms-race in check.
- The doctrine also **reduces the chances of unnecessary chaos** as the onus of taking the decision to escalate a nuclear use lies on the adversary.

- Strict adherence to the doctrine can **strengthen India's efforts to gain membership in Nuclear Supplier Group (NSG) and United Nations Security Council (UNSC).**

Arguments Against NFU

- The idea of no-first-use (NFU) of nuclear weapons has been rejected by some nuclear weapons states and accepted only at the declaratory level by most, if not by all of the others.
- Nuclear weapons are often seen as an **antidote to conventional inferiority as the inferior** party will seek to deter conventional attack by threatening a nuclear response.
- The first-use nuclear doctrine introduces an element of nuclear risk to any war contemplated by the superior state as it is hard for the potential attacker to confidently calculate that it can achieve victory at an acceptable cost when there is a possibility of nuclear escalation.

Cuban Missile Crisis and MAD Doctrine

- The Cuban Missile Crisis was one of the most intense confrontation between the Soviet Union and the United States during the entire course of the Cold War.
- The Cold War nearly became hot on October 16, 1962, when the White House became aware of the Soviet missiles present in Cuba.
- The Cuban Missile Crisis is widely regarded as the **boiling point of the nuclear arms race**, when fears of thermonuclear war between the Soviet Union and the United States seemed not only plausible, but even possible.
- The Cuban Missile Crisis was the ultimate byproduct of MAD, or **mutual assured destruction**, a strategic military doctrine in which the use of nuclear weapons on a full scale would theoretically result in the destruction of both the attacker and the defender.
- This strategy ultimately sends both parties into an endless loop of increased military budgets.
- In India the NFU policy has been called into question on the grounds that it allows Pakistan to take the initiative while **restricting India's options militarily and puts India in a disadvantageous position.**
- Pakistan's low nuclear thresholds and its policy of using its **nuclear umbrella to foment sub-conventional conflict in India** is the principal reason behind the debate around India's 'no first use' policy.

Implications of Abandoning NFU for India

- Withdrawing the NFU policy and making a declaration to that effect **can affect India's status as a responsible nuclear power.**

- Such a step will **abrogate India's commitment to the universal goal of nuclear disarmament** and **upset the regional balance** in the sub-continent.
- Further, abrogating the doctrine would signal a first use posture by India, thus reducing the space for conventional warfare below the nuclear threshold. This could also severely corrode India's ability to limit Pakistan's offensive tactics and policies at the conventional level.
- Moreover, China's expansionist policies cannot be deterred by revising the doctrine, the decision to abandon the doctrine **can send a deliberate signal of provocation to China.**
- Nuclear preemption is a **costly policy** as it requires massive investment not only in weapons and delivery systems but also intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) infrastructure.
- India **would require a far bigger inventory** of nuclear weapons particularly as eliminating adversaries' nuclear capabilities would require targeting of its nuclear assets involving multiple warheads.
- India is yet to induct the **Multiple Reentry Vehicle (MRV) technology** in its missiles, which is fundamental to eliminating hardened nuclear targets.
- First use doctrine will also require to devolves control of nuclear weapons from the scientific enclave to the military for their eventual use.
- Moreover, the after effects of the nuclear fallout, depending on the magnitude of nuclear explosions, **could pose existential threats to humanity itself.**

Way Forward

- As security is a **dynamic concept** and all doctrines needs periodic reviews. Same is the case with India.
- If Indian policymakers feel a need to **review the nation's nuclear doctrine**, they should be cognizant of the costs involved in doing so.
- A sound policy debate can only ensue if the costs and benefits of a purported policy shift are discussed and debated widely.
- Also, India must gradually revise its posture of **'active deterrence' to 'dissuasive deterrence'** by building up its infrastructure along the border and improving the surveillance and warning capabilities among other things.
- Like India, China too has an NFU policy so it provides an opportunity to work jointly towards a global no first use nuclear order.