

# No first use policy

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**Source:** *The Hindu*

**Manifest pedagogy:** No first use as a policy should be studied as part of India and Nuclear relations. India's nuclear policy is a big topic in itself covering her stance on nuclear weapons, energy, nuclear agreements etc. Hence the article below should be visualized from these perspectives.

**In news:** Recently Defence Minister Rajnath Singh said that the future of India's 'No First Use' (NFU) policy on nuclear weapons depended on "circumstances".

**Placing it in syllabus:** India and neighbourhood relations

**Dimensions:**

- Nuclear doctrine of india
- Advantages and disadvantages of the No first use policy
- Implications of abandoning NFU for India

**Content:** During his recent visit to Pokhran, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh has argued that India's adherence to the principle of 'no first use' (NFU) of nuclear weapons is not sacrosanct. These comments come amid tensions between the two countries which have increased following India's move to revoke autonomy in the disputed region of Kashmir, the cause of two of their three wars.

**Nuclear doctrine of India:**

A nuclear doctrine states how a nuclear weapon state would employ its nuclear weapons both during peace and war. By communicating to the enemy its stated intentions and resolve, nuclear doctrines help states to establish deterrence vis-à-vis its adversary during peace and once deterrence fails, guides the state's response during war.

- Nuclear programme of India was initiated in the late 1940s under the guidance of Homi J. Bhabha.
- When Communist China conducted the nuclear tests in October 1964, the five nuclear powers (US, USSR, UK, France, and China) had tried to impose the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT), 1968 on the rest of the world.
- Three main objectives of the treaty are non-proliferation, disarmament, and the right to peacefully use nuclear technology.
- India always considered the NPT as discriminatory and had refused to sign it.
- **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.**
- The first nuclear explosion was undertaken by India in May 1974. India argued that it was committed to the policy of using nuclear power only for peaceful purposes.
- India's nuclear doctrine was purely retaliatory in nature.
- **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.
- 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 which has three primary components:
  1. **No First Use:** India will only use nuclear weapons in response to a nuclear attack on Indian territory, or Indian forces. A caveat is made about their possible use in response to a chemical or biological attack.

2. **Massive Retaliation:** India's response to a first strike will be massive, to cause 'unacceptable damage'. While the doctrine doesn't explicitly espouse a counter-value strategy (civilian targets), the wording implies the same.
3. **Credible Minimum Deterrence:** The number and capabilities of India's nuclear weapons and delivery systems should merely be sufficient to ensure intolerable retaliation, also keeping in mind first-strike survival of its relatively meagre arsenal.

Since then, for almost two decades, 'no first use' has remained a core organizing principle of India's nuclear deterrence. However in 2016, then defence minister Manohar Parrikar raised doubts on India's adherence to the policy of 'no first use' by saying that New Delhi cannot "bind itself" to 'no first use' for eternity.

#### **No first use policy and its advantages and disadvantages:**

India's nuclear threat environment consists of two countries with vastly different nuclear postures. **China espouses** a doctrine similar to India's, that of '**assured retaliation**', with a small number of nuclear weapons and an arsenal designed to survive a nuclear first strike. While the **two countries are the only nuclear weapon states with a No First Use (NFU) policy**, China espouses a limited, 'unacceptable' strike on civilian targets, and not 'massive retaliation' like India.

#### **Advantages:**

- 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.
- Strict adherence to the doctrine can strengthen India's

efforts to gain membership in Nuclear Supplier Group (NSG) and United Nations Security Council (UNSC).

- Despite being a non-signatory to the Non-Proliferation Treaty, India's declared NFU pledge has contributed towards legitimising itself as a nuclear power, evinced in the Nuclear Suppliers Group waiver and Indo-US Civil Nuclear Agreement.

### **Disadvantages:**

- The idea of NFU of nuclear weapons has been rejected by some nuclear weapons states and accepted only at the declaratory level by most of them.
- 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.
- 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 makes no claims to NFU and in fact depends completely on its nuclear deterrent to safeguard its strategic goals.
- Despite the NFU pledge, India is naturally concerned about Chinese strides in technologies like the DF-17, a hypersonic glide vehicle platform designed to render missile defence redundant.
- Given the increasing asymmetry of conventional military power between India and China, some analysts believe that India should revoke its "no first use" policy. Where India fails to deter China conventionally, it should leverage its nuclear capability.

### **Implications of abandoning NFU for India:**

- India is now a member of most of the technology denial regimes such as the **Missile Technology Control regime**

**(MTCR)** and the **Wassenaar Arrangement**. It is also actively pursuing full membership of the **Nuclear Suppliers Group**(NSG). Revoking the 'no first use' pledge would harm India's nuclear image worldwide.

- Withdrawing the NFU policy and making a declaration to that effect such a step will abrogate India's commitment to the universal goal of nuclear disarmament and upset the regional balance in the sub-continent.
- 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.
- 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 is yet to induct the Multiple Reentry Vehicle (MRV) technology in its missiles, which is fundamental to eliminating hardened nuclear targets.
- The after effects of the nuclear fallout, depending on the magnitude of nuclear explosions, could pose existential threats to humanity itself.