

2. Will India Change its 'No First Use' Policy?

Prelims: Security, Policies

Mains: GS-III- Challenges to Internal Security through Communication Networks, role of media and social networking sites in Internal Security Challenges, basics of Cyber Security; Money-Laundering and its Prevention.

Why in News?

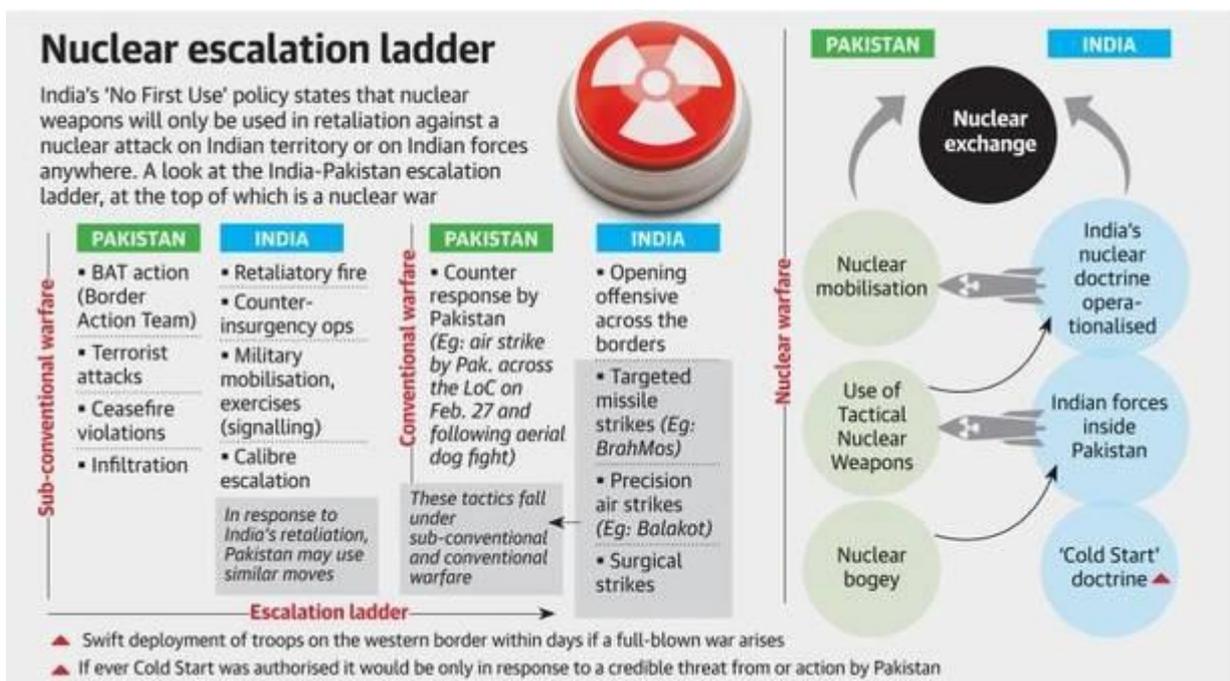
- ▶ Since conducting its second nuclear tests, Pokhran-II, in 1998, India has adhered to a self-imposed commitment to 'No First Use' (NFU) of nuclear weapons on another country. However, last week, on August 16, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh dropped a hint that in the future, India's NFU promise "depends on circumstances."

A Brief History of India's N-Weapon Journey:

- ▶ India embarked on the path of nuclear weapons development after its face-off with China in the 1962 war, followed by China carrying out nuclear tests in 1964 and in the subsequent years.
- ▶ **In 1974, under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, India conducted its first nuclear tests, Pokhran-I, dubbed as a "peaceful nuclear explosion".**
- ▶ Despite more than two decades of international pressure that followed to make India abandon its pursuit of nuclear weapons, **India again carried out a test in May 1998, Pokhran-II**, involving a fission device, a low-yield device, and a thermonuclear device.
- ▶ Its successful execution meant that India had the ability to introduce nuclear warheads into its fast-developing missile programme.
- ▶ A fortnight after the Pokhran-II tests, Pakistan also carried out similar tests, confirming progress with its nuclear weapons programme; since that time its nuclear arsenal has expanded rapidly.
- ▶ In 1999, India came out with an explicit nuclear doctrine that committed, among other things, to NFU — **that is it would never carry out a nuclear first-strike.**
- ▶ **This doctrine emphasised "minimal deterrence, no first use and non-use against non-nuclear weapon states"**, in the words of former National Security Adviser Shivshankar Menon. The NFU promise thus went together with **Credible Minimum Deterrence (CMD)**.

Credible Minimum Deterrence (CMD)- Indian Context:

- ▶▶ Credible minimum deterrence does not imply indefinite expansion of the nuclear arsenal; rather it is built on an assured second-strike capability.
- ▶▶ This implies that **in the event of another nation carrying out a first nuclear strike of any magnitude against India, India's nuclear forces shall be so deployed as to ensure survivability of the attack and the capability to carry out a massive, punitive nuclear retaliation aimed at inflicting damage that the aggressor will find "unacceptable"**.
- ▶▶ Additionally, CMD requires a robust command and control system; effective intelligence and early warning capabilities; comprehensive planning and training for operations in line with the strategy; and the will to employ nuclear forces and weapons.



- ▶▶ Currently, the **Nuclear Command Authority is responsible for command, control and operational decisions on nuclear weapons**; specifically, it is the Cabinet Committee on Security and **ultimately the office of the Prime Minister of India, that is responsible for the decision to carry out a nuclear attack.**

Why might the NFU Policy be Revisited?

- ▶▶ Regional geopolitical realities have a significant bearing upon India's NFU commitment, to the extent that the CMD is what the "enemy" believes deterrence to be, and their belief is manifested in their actions.
- ▶▶ After the 1998 nuclear tests in India and Pakistan, the CMD was established in the sense that in the following decade, including the aftermaths of the attack on the Indian

Parliament in 2001 and the Mumbai terror attacks in 2008, neither country felt inclined to instigate all-out war.

- ▶▶ However, since that time, the deterrent effect of India's arsenal seemed to have less effect in one significant aspect: Pakistani officials started speaking out about their country's development of tactical nuclear weapons, or "theatre nukes", which had a lower yield but could still inflict enough damage to blunt a conventional attack.
- ▶▶ It is surmised that Pakistan's talk of tactical nuclear weapons might have emerged as a counter to speculation that India might have developed the "Cold Start" doctrine. This is a purported classified plan for a conventional military attack by Indian forces on Pakistani soil, likely as a response to a prior sub-conventional attack from across the border (such as a state-sponsored terror-attack).
- ▶▶ In this context, in 2013, Shyam Saran, convener of the National Security Advisory Board, said: "India will not be the first to use nuclear weapons, but if it is attacked with such weapons, it would engage in nuclear retaliation which will be massive and designed to inflict unacceptable damage on its adversary. The label on a nuclear weapon used for attacking India, strategic or tactical, is irrelevant from the Indian perspective."
- ▶▶ However, there may be some concerns with this idea that India will retaliate massively even if Pakistan uses tactical nuclear weapons — possibly on Indian forces operating on Pakistani soil — against it.
- ▶▶ First, this strategy would take both countries back into the old-world deterrence paradigm of "mutually assured destruction", because any surviving forces in Pakistan after India's retaliation would surely launch a devastating attack against targets across India.
- ▶▶ Second, India may have more to gain by pre-emptive action. This is the question that analysts Christopher Clary and Vipin Narang have studied, and they argue that one option under consideration could be for "a hard counterforce strike against Pakistan's relatively small number — perhaps several dozen — strategic nuclear assets on land (and eventually at sea) to eliminate its ability to destroy Indian strategic targets and cities. Such a strategy would be consistent with India's doctrine of massive retaliation — massive retaliation strategies need not be countervalue — while avoiding the credibility issues associated with a countervalue targeting strategy following Pakistan's use of nuclear weapons on the battlefield."

India's Nuclear Doctrine- Accommodating Changing Realities:

- ▶▶ Mr. Clary and Mr. Narang argue, India's adoption of potentially pre-emptive "counterforce options" — i.e. to eliminate Pakistan's strategic nuclear weapons when it deems the risk of a Pakistani first-strike to have crossed a critical threshold — may require no explicit shifts in its declared nuclear doctrine.

- ▶▶ Remaining silent on this subject might be calculated as a strategic advantage for India as the country would be assuming deliberate nuclear ambiguity.
- ▶▶ The downside is that New Delhi remaining silent on this, except for occasional hints — such as what the Defence Minister tweeted recently — might compel Pakistan to adjust its nuclear posture accordingly, based on a calculation that India might be willing to carry out a counterforce attack and thereby eliminate the Pakistani nuclear threat entirely. This in turn risks fuelling an arms race or more unstable nuclear weapons deployment patterns in Pakistan.
- ▶▶ The Balakot strikes that followed the Pulwama attack (both in February 2019) demonstrate that the Narendra Modi government is not shy of taking cross-border military action.
- ▶▶ If another sub-conventional attack, say a terror attack, occurs on Indian soil anytime soon, these theories will likely be tested. What remains unclear is how high up the escalation ladder both countries will be willing to go.

