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DAY 48

India & the Nuclear Question

· **8 questions**

Every question carries a Flow Snapshot, and the channel carries a handwritten model answer. **No PYQ will be unfamiliar.**

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2016 · 10 marks

Critically analyze India's nuclear policy.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 two goals held at once: security + universal disarmament → strategic ambiguity (**Pant**) **R2** 2003 doctrine institutionalises the restraint-deterrence balance → NFU + credible minimum deterrence

Body flow

strategic ambiguity (**Pant**) → 2003 doctrine (CMD + NFU/CBW caveat + assured retaliation + civilian NCA) → strengths (responsible image, cost discipline, de-mated posture) → internal fault-line: "minimum" vs "massive" → **Karnad** (retaliation neither proportionate nor deliverable) → **Narang** (neither credible vs China nor minimal vs Pakistan) → recent shifts: Agni-V MIRV 2024 + canisterised/mated missiles → flexible, counterforce-ready deterrence → China ~600 vs India ~180 (SIPRI 2025) → "minimum" strained

Counter-view

restraint case (responsible image, cost discipline, de-mated posture, no arms race) vs credibility critique (minimum-massive incompatibility, modernising China + Pakistan's tactical weapons, drift toward counterforce)

Conclusion routes

R1 distinctive place: outside NPT/CTBT (discriminatory) yet inside the non-proliferation norm **R2** pragmatic and restrained, tensions unresolved → periodic review + clearer operational definitions

Since independence India has pursued two goals at once i.e. national security & universal disarmament. Harsh V. Pant shows the result was a posture of strategic ambiguity i.e. moral aversion to the weapons alongside a security hedge.

The 2003 doctrine set that balance i.e. credible minimum deterrence, No-First use & assured retaliation under strict civilian command. Its strengths are responsible-power image, cost discipline and a de-mated posture.

"Minimum" sits awkwardly beside "massive" i.e. against Pakistan's tactical weapons. Bharat Karnad finds massive retaliation neither proportionate nor deliverable. Vipin Narang argues that India risks being neither credible against China nor minimal against Pakistan.

Recent shifts deepen the strain as the 2024 Agni-V MIRV test & canisterised, mated missiles push the arsenal toward flexible, counterforce ready deterrence. Against China's roughly 600 war heads to India's 180 (SIPRI, 2025), the "minimum" claim looks harder to sustain.

India's place stays outside the NPT & CTBT as discriminatory, but inside the non-proliferation norm through a clean record & export controls.

The policy is pragmatic & restrained, but its unresolved tensions make periodic review & clearer operational definitions the real task.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2017 · 15 marks

The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) has failed to achieve the ultimate objective of Global Nuclear Disarmament. Discuss the deficiency in provision of NPT.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 NPT's twin aim: non-proliferation + disarmament → arsenals never fell → fault sits in the provisions **R2** treaty designed to freeze proliferation, not remove arsenals → disarmament unmet by design

Body flow

unequal bargain → NWS (pre-1967) vs NNWS split → have-nots forgo weapons + accept IAEA safeguards; NWS only pledge "gradual disarmament" (Article VI) → Article VI = "good faith," no timeframe / target / penalty, no duty to destroy → **Jaswant Singh** "nuclear apartheid" → blocks new entrants but permits vertical proliferation → SIPRI: all nine modernising, several expanding, fresh arms race → enforcement thin (North Korea's withdrawal + 2006 test) → 1995 indefinite extension entrenched the format → 2022 RevCon collapsed, second in a row, over unmet disarmament → non-nuclear states push TPNW into force (2021), no-confidence in Article VI

Counter-view

NPT did curb horizontal proliferation, near-universal (191 parties) → deficiency lies in the disarmament pillar, not the whole treaty

Conclusion routes

R1 fails by design: asks the strong to disarm with no deadline or sanction **R2** remedy: a universal, verifiable framework with a fixed timeframe (Nuclear Weapons Convention)

The NPT set out to halt the spread of nuclear weapons & move the world toward disarmament. Decades on, global arsenals have not fallen.

The failure lies in its provisions, built to freeze proliferation & not remove arsenals. The treaty rests on an unequal bargain. It splits states into nuclear-weapon states, defined by a test before 1967, & non-nuclear weapon states. The have-nots give up weapons & accept intrusive IAEA safeguards.

The nuclear power pledge "gradual disarmament" under Article VI. It asks them to negotiate "in good faith," but fixes no timeframe, no target & no penalty, and never requires destroying a warhead. Jaswant Singh called this frozen order "nuclear apartheid".

SIPRI records that all 9 nuclear armed states are modernising their arsenals, and several expanding them. It points to a fresh arms race as arms control weakens. The sanctions did not stop North Korea's withdrawal & 2006 test. The 1995 indefinite extension entrenched this format.

Frustrated non-nuclear states brought the Treaty on the Prohibition of nuclear weapons into force in 2021, a vote of no-confidence in Article VI.

The NPT did curb horizontal proliferation & stays near-universal with 191 parties. But as a disarmament instrument it fails by design. It asks the strong to disarm without a deadline or a sanction.

Therefore, only a universal, verifiable framework with a fixed time frame can close the gap.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2019 · 15 marks

Given the recent developments in the region, do you think that there is a need to change India's 'No First Use (NFU)' nuclear policy?

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 locate NFU (1998 → 2003 doctrine, CBW caveat) → credible minimum deterrence → is it now a liability? **R2** region shifted (Pak tactical, China rise) → pressures real → stake the spine: capability, not first-use posture

Body flow

case for revision: China ~500 warheads erode Himalayan buffer + Pak sub-conventional / Nasr → **Karnad** "unenforceable," peacetime-only → **Chari** frees Pak's tactical use → **Clary & Narang** counterforce logic + exceptions to NFU → capabilities present (missiles, surveillance, BMD) but disarming strike "exceptionally difficult" → intent outpaces capability

Counter-view

retention holds: **Sethi** "liberating" (no first-use infra, no hair-trigger) → **Subrahmanyam** perception of survivable retaliation, not pre-emption → **Basrur** deployment differs little beyond declaratory policy

Conclusion routes

R1 Sindoor 2025 = punish terror without nuclear signalling → read as gradual recalibration + doctrinal ambiguity, not reversal
R2 NFU suits conventionally dominant power, no existential threat → retain + strengthen triad / early warning / second-strike credibility

India's No First Use pledge, articulated in 1998 & formalised in the 2003 doctrine. It promises retaliation - only use with a single caveat for chemical & biological attacks & rests on credible minimum deterrence.

Whether Pakistan's tactical weapons & China's rise now make it a liability is the real question. China's modernisation & its roughly 500 warheads have eroded the Himalayan buffer, while Pakistan blunts India's conventional edge through sub-conventional war & tactical systems like the Nasr.

Bharat Karnad calls NFU "unenforceable" i.e. a peacetime declaration, not a wartime constraint. P.R. Chari adds it frees Pakistan to use tactical weapons without freeing an Indian riposte.

Christopher Clary & Vipin Narang show Indian officials increasingly advancing counterforce logic & laying out exceptions to NFU, backed by accurate missiles, surveillance etc.

Manpreet Sethi calls NFU "liberating", it avoids an expensive first-use infrastructure & hair-trigger alerts.

K. Subrahmanyam grounds deterrence in the perception of survivable retaliation, not pre-emption. Rajesh Basrar argues that deployment patterns differ little beyond declaratory policy.

Operation Sindoor (2025) showed India can punish terror without nuclear signalling. It is viewed by strategic scholars as gradual recalibration & doctrinal ambiguity, not reversal. NFU still suits a conventionally dominant power facing no existential threat.

India should retain it while strengthening its triad, early warning & second-strike credibility.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2020 · 15 marks

Discuss the efficacy of India's 'no first use' policy (nuclear weapons) in the context of the evolving strategic challenges from its neighbours.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

RI NFU's efficacy ≠ the pledge itself → rests on a survivable, assured second strike → 1998 → 1999 draft → 2003 doctrine (CBW caveat) **R2** retaliation-only pledge (shared with China) → real question = does it still deter evolving neighbour threats?

Body flow

case for NFU (**Sethi**: no costly first-use infra / hair-trigger → de-mated posture; **Koithara**: eases command-and-control) → escalation burden shifted to the adversary → evolving threats test it → Pakistan TNW/Nasr + sub-conventional blunt the conventional edge → **Karnad**: massive retaliation vs a small tactical strike not credible → China's fast growth (~600 warheads/SIPRI; Pentagon >1,000 by 2030) → eroded Himalayan buffer → **Narang**: neither credible toward China nor minimal toward Pakistan → India's reply = capability, not reversal (triad, Agni-V MIRV 2024, Operation Sindoor calibrated strikes; ORF urges flexibility)

Counter-view

expansionist strain: NFU forces India to absorb the first strike, "massive" threat empty against tactical use, counterforce temptation → vs moderate case: economy, de-mated stability, no decapitation capability, first use invites an arms race

Conclusion routes

RI NFU still efficacious for a dominant power facing no existential threat → task = survivability + clearer signalling, not abandonment **R2** discarding NFU changes little in deployment but costs the responsible-power image → strengthen triad / early warning / second strike, retain the pledge

India's NFU pledge voiced in 1998, fixed in the 1999 draft, & kept with a chemical-biological caveat in the 2003 doctrine. It ties nuclear use to retaliation alone.

Manpreet Sethi shows that NFU removes the need for costly first-use infrastructure & hair-trigger alerts, allowing a de-mated posture. Vaghese Koithara adds that it eases the cost & complexity of command & control. By conceding the first move, India puts the escalation burden on the adversary while keeping the freedom to respond.

Pakistan's tactical weapons, like the Nasr, and its sub-conventional strategy blunt India's conventional edge. Bharat Karnad argues that massive retaliation against a small tactical strike is not credible. China's arsenal grew fast, near 600 warheads by early 2025 (SIPRI), the pentagon projecting over a 1000 by 2030 eroding the Himalayan buffer.

Vipin Narang cautions that the posture may prove neither credible toward China nor minimal toward Pakistan.

India's answer has been capability, not refusal i.e. a completed triad & the Agni-V MIRV test of 2024. After the 2025 Pahalgam attack, calibrated strikes under Op. Sindoor hit terror infrastructure while holding escalation below the nuclear line.

Dropping NFU would invite arms racing & weaken India's responsible-power image, as Harsh V. Pant states. For a dominant power facing no existential threat, NFU stays efficacious; the task is a more survivable, better-signalled deterrent.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2021 · 15 marks

Examine the evolution of India's role in the global nuclear order.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 principled outsider → accommodated de facto power → never joined the central treaty **R2** **Pant:** security ↔ universal disarmament tension → India as first critic, then claimant

Body flow

early advocacy + institutions + implicit umbrellas (**Kennedy**) → 1974 PNE = latency → NPT rejected as “nuclear apartheid” (**Jaswant Singh**) → 1998 Pokhran-II = self-declared NWS → sanctions → normalisation → 2005–08 deal + 2008 NSG waiver → MTCR / Wassenaar / Australia Group → **Chacko & Davis:** “responsibility” reframed as equality → compliance as resistance

Counter-view

still outside NPT, CTBT, TPNW → order now unravelling → New START lapse (Feb 2026) + NPT credibility test (2026 RevCon) → clean record + regimes still sustain de facto power → but standing rests on great-power restraint India cannot command

Conclusion routes

R1 outside advocate → de facto power that turned exclusion into a case for reform → accepted in practice, apart in law **R2** reframed responsibility as India's lever → next test: holding its standing as the order decays

India's place in the nuclear order has moved from principled outsider to accommodated de facto power. Harsh V. Pant states India's long effort to harmonise security with universal disarmament.

In its early decades India leaned on advocacy & institutions, placing faith in disarmament forums & implicit great-power umbrellas (Andrew Kennedy). The 1974 test left a latent power, capable but restrained, while it rejected the NPT as "nuclear apartheid" i.e. a haves-versus-have-nots order (Jaswant Singh).

PoKhran-II in 1998 turned latency into a self-declared weapons state; initial censure & sanctions gave way to normalisation. Priya Chacko & Alexander Davis show how India reframed "responsibility", from mere non-proliferation into a demand for nuclear equality, making compliance a form of resistance.

India remains outside the NPT, CTBT & TPNW and the order it once challenged is now weakening. The last US-Russia arms-control treaty, New START, lapsed in February 2026, leaving both arsenals unbound. The NPT faces a credibility test at its 2026 Review Conference.

India's clean non-proliferation record & export-control membership still keep it a de facto responsible power, though that standing rests on great-power restraint it cannot command.

From an outside advocate of disarmament, India became a de facto power that turned exclusion into a case for reform; accepted in practice, apart in law.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2022 · 15 marks

Discuss the reasons behind India's refusal to sign the nuclear non-proliferation treaty (NPT).

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 refusal of the treaty, not of disarmament → Nehru-era NFWF vision meets the 1968 “haves/have-nots” divide → “nuclear apartheid” **R2** India reads the NPT as unequal → three grounds staked → discrimination · insecurity · autonomy

Body flow

discrimination: 1967 cut-off + P-5 monopoly → IAEA binds only NNWS, no Article VI timeframe → “eyewash” → **Trivedi's** “disarm the unarmed” → 2026 RevCon collapse (3rd cycle, NWS resist deadline) → insecurity: China 1964 (**Pant**) + refused guarantees → self-help vs armed China & Pakistan → autonomy: external caps vs self-reliance

Counter-view

India upholds the non-proliferation norm (clean record, India-specific safeguards, MTCR/Wassenaar) → opposes the discriminatory treaty, not the norm → official line: no NNWS accession, “pending non-discriminatory... disarmament,” time-bound framework

Conclusion routes

R1 refusal both principled and realist → resistance to an unequal order, not to the goal **R2** compliance reframed as a demand for a fairer order → NFWF pursued through a non-discriminatory, verifiable, time-bound route

India's refusal to sign the NPT was never a rejection of disarmament, but of a treaty it read as unequal. Since Nehru, India had pressed for a nuclear-weapon-free world.

The 1968 bargain instead split it into "haves" & "have-nots" what Jaswant Singh later called "nuclear apartheid". Three grounds explain it: discrimination, insecurity & autonomy.

The first was structural. It recognised as weapon states only those that had tested before 1967, entrenching the P-5 monopoly. Non-nuclear states accepted IAEA safeguards; the 5 accepted no enforceable duty or timeframe to disarm. India read Article VI's "gradual disarmament" as an eyewash; non-proliferation dressed as disarmament.

V.C. Trivedi had called the emerging treaty an attempt to "disarm the unarmed". The grievance stays current: 2026 review conference again failed, a third collapse after 2015 & 2022 as the weapon states resisted any disarmament deadline.

China's 1964 test transformed India's environment, and both superpowers refused India a nuclear guarantee. Joining as a non-weapon state meant giving up the option while China, and later Pakistan, stayed armed, a self-help logic India rejected.

India still upheld the non-proliferation norm i.e a clean record, India-specific safeguards, MTCR & Wassenaar membership. Its official position stay firm: no accession as a non-weapon state "pending non-discriminatory & global nuclear disarmament", pursued within a time-bound, verifiable framework.

The refusal was principled and realist together as resistance to an unequal order, not to the goal itself.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2023 · 20 marks

“India’s Nuclear policy is deeply influenced by its cultural beliefs and the pragmatic approach of its foreign policy.” Discuss.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 security alone never explained the bomb → two roots: cultural aversion (restraint) + pragmatism (arsenal) **R2** moral repugnance from the freedom movement vs hard security necessity → culture restrains, pragmatism arms

Body flow

freedom-movement tradition (Gandhi / Nehru / Tagore) + NFWF → **Rajagopalan** “necessary evil” → **Hall’s** Nehruvian “restraint, stability, minimalism” → **Menon**: NFU a cultural choice → security triggers (China 1964, Pakistan, lost Soviet umbrella) → **Raja Mohan’s** calculated choice → **Pant’s** strategic ambiguity → 2003 doctrine embodies both (CMD / de-mated / NFU = restraint; NCA / SFC / triad = capability) → realism = hedge, constructivism = identity → post-Pahalgam 2025 Operation Sindoor “new normal” → Chauhan: high threshold, space below → **Raja Mohan**: ambiguity vs full-spectrum deterrence → NFU still intact

Counter-view

pragmatism straining the cultural restraint: expansionist pull to dilute NFU / doctrinal ambiguity / counterforce — set against the enduring moral aversion and the NFWF ideal

Conclusion routes

R1 principled realism → culture gives restraint + vision, pragmatism gives weapons + diplomacy **R2** not either half but the balance (**Hall**: realism tempered by moral belief) → that synthesis defines India’s path

India's nuclear conduct has never rested on security alone. It grows from two roots: a cultural aversion that treats these weapons as morally repugnant, and a pragmatism unwilling to leave it exposed.

The moral strand runs from the freedom movement, when Gandhi, Nehru & Tagore opposed nuclear weapons as against the spirit of humanity and Nehru pressed for a nuclear-weapon-free world. Rajesh Rajagopalan argues that Indian leaders have treated the bomb "at best a necessary evil".

Ian Hall views this as a Nehruvian strategic culture built on restraint, stability & minimalism, in which possessing weapons is tolerated only to deter existential threats.

C. Raja Mohan describes the 1998 tests as a calculated choice balancing security with strategic autonomy, while Haresh V. Pant shows how strategic ambiguity reconciled security with disarmament.

The 2003 doctrine holds both: credible minimum deterrence, a de-mated posture & NFU for restraint. The National Command and a triad for capability.

India's CDS, General Anil Chauhan states that the nuclear threshold stays high, leaving room for conventional operations below it. Raja Mohan urges doctrinal ambiguity against Pakistan's full-spectrum deterrence, though NFU itself remains intact.

India's policy is best read as principled realism. Culture supplies restraint & the weapon free world vision; pragmatism supplies the weapons & diplomacy.

As Hall puts it, India's realism is tempered by a belief in moral progress.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2024 · 15 marks

Critically examine India's persistent refusal to sign the nuclear non-proliferation treaty (NPT) despite being recognized as a de facto nuclear power.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 de facto power (2008 deal + NSG waiver + MTCR/Wassenaar/AG) → still outside NPT → refusal principled, not obstinate **R2** recognition without accession → objection is to the treaty's design, not to disarmament

Body flow

NPT discriminatory (1967 freeze → weapon-states vs the rest) → **Jaswant Singh** "nuclear apartheid" → realist ground (won't cap while China armed → survival first) → structural flaw (no disarmament obligation, no timeframe → non-proliferation, not disarmament) → charge borne out: SIPRI modernisation + US-Russia collapse + New START lapse (Feb 2026) + 2026 RevCon third failure → India reframes "responsibility" as equality (**Chacko & Davis**) → norm kept, treaty refused

Counter-view

integration incomplete: NSG blocked (China links to Pakistan) → de facto ≠ formal recognition → critics: treaty-like benefits without binding obligations → strain on the regime

Conclusion routes

R1 realism tempered by a normative claim → demand for a universal, verifiable, non-discriminatory order **R2** not freedom to test but a fairer bargain → the time-bound disarmament the NPT never delivered

India is now a recognised *de facto* nuclear power. The 2008 civil nuclear deal & NSG waiver ended its isolation & MTCR, Wassenaar and Australia Group membership placed it in the export-control mainstream.

India's first objection to NPT is that it is discriminatory. It freezes the 1967 line, splitting the world into recognised weapon states and the rest. Jaswant Singh called it "nuclear apartheid". India would not cap its programme while a nuclear China stood armed.

The treaty binds no weapon state to disarm and sets no timeframe, so it advances non-proliferation, not disarmament. SIPRI reports all 9 nuclear armed states modernising their arsenals, US-Russia arms control has all but collapsed, New START lapsed in February 2026, and the 2026 Review Conference closed without consensus.

India therefore reframed the terms. Priya Chacko & Alexander Davis show how it redefined "responsibility" as a demand for equality. Keeping the non-proliferation norm through a clean record & export controls, while refusing the unequal treaty.

The paradox, though, is unresolved. NSG membership stays blocked, China tying it to Pakistan's, so de facto acceptance is not formal recognition. Critics argue that India won treaty-like benefits without binding obligations, straining the regime it declined to join.

India's refusal is therefore realism tempered by a normative claim i.e. not a wish to test, but a demand for the universal, verifiable, non-discriminatory order the NPT never delivered.

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