

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.