Nuclear Issue and India - Nuclear Policy of India UPSC

India has had a bumpy relationship with nuclear weapons. In the initial years after independence, Indian leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru were very public and vocal about his opinion against nuclear weapons. However, Pandit Nehru, being a modernist was also aware of the role nuclear technology could play in nation-building. He was also convinced, albeit to a lesser extent, of the role nuclear weapons could play in national defence if efforts at nuclear disarmament fail to bear results. These ambivalent and opposing shades are still visible in the current nuclear policy of India.

Aspirants would find this article very helpful while preparing for the UPSC 2021.

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Having said the above, let us be clear that India's nuclear policy is determined not just by Nehru's perspective. Other factors that influenced it were the domestic variables like the uncertain political climate of the country and the influence of the bureaucracy.

- The decision to build a nuclear force was taken only in the late eighties after evidence surfaced that Pakistan, with Chinese help, had made huge advancements in the nuclear weapons program.
- Bureaucratic influence came from some defence scientists who played a key part in keeping the nuclear weapons program alive even without political support, and facing opposition as well.
- Other bureaucrats developed political awareness about the country's dwindling nuclear options. Nevertheless, these variables suggest a moderate Indian approach to nuclear weapons and thus reinforce the dominant tendency towards a political rather a military approach to looking at nuclear weapons.
- They neither suggest any dramatic changes nor rapid advances in India's nuclear weapons programme.

The Purpose of India's Nuclear Weapons

Indian leaders have traditionally deemed nuclear weapons at best a necessary evil.

1. Former Prime Ministers Lal Bahadur Shastri and Rajiv Gandhi sought international solutions to avoid committing to nuclear weapons; former Prime Minister Morarji Desai shut down the weapons program for a while.
2. Even Prime Minister A B Vajpayee, who ordered the nuclear tests in 1998, was more ambivalent earlier, supporting Morarji Desai in voting against restarting the nuclear weapons program in 1979.
3. Increasing nuclear threats and a progressively unaccommodating global nuclear order forced GOI to shift towards a declared nuclear arsenal in the 1990s. This discomfort with nuclear weapons has defined the manner in which India has viewed nuclear weapons.

In the 1960s and 1990s, the debate was more about whether India should have nuclear weapons or not, not what she should do with them. It was only in the 1980s that some Indian strategists such as K. Subrahmanyam and General K. Sundarji started writing about what nuclear weapons might be useful for. This also coincided with greater attention among decision-makers to such questions.

1. Both Sundarji and Subrahmanyam argued that the kind of bloated nuclear arsenals that the US and the Soviet Union developed during the Cold War were needless and inefficient.
2. Nuclear deterrence could be had at a far cheaper cost, with a relatively small arsenal. In essence, as Tellis has argued, what Sundarji and Subrahmanyam were suggesting was a view of nuclear weapons that emphasized its political rather than military utility, its deterrence rather than war-fighting capability.
3. This view of the political utility of nuclear weapons is also reflected in arguments about nuclear weapons offering political space and strategic autonomy, arguments that former Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh has made.
4. Predictably, the eventual Indian nuclear deterrent emphasized small numbers and a capability to retaliate, instead of developing a restraining force that would have parity with other nuclear powers.

But the idea that nuclear weapons are political tools is chiefly about how India views the usability of nuclear weapons. It does not extend to India's views about how other states, particularly Pakistan, might view nuclear weapons.

1. In fact, Indian views about what nuclear weapons in another power's control might do are highly cynical, supposing tacitly that other states might not be as responsible as India is or has been.
2. India's view on nuclear proliferation is one pointer of this acutely pessimistic opinion that India has of the probability of nuclear weapons use by other states.
3. Though India objected to the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT), it has seen proliferation itself as a danger to international peace and stability and has time and again flaunted its "exemplary non-proliferation record of four decades and more."
4. Thus the Indian view of the spread of nuclear weapons is essentially unalike the 'more may be better' arguments of proliferation optimists like Kenneth Waltz, or even the drastic rejection of the non-proliferation concept by China before 1991.
5. Indian officials do not think that nuclear weapons have stabilized the region; rather they believe that nuclear weapons in Pakistani hands increase the nuclear risk in the region because Pakistan is seen as irresponsible. This fits a larger pattern of contradiction which assumes that other powers, Pakistan in particular, will not be as responsible as India has been.

Indian views about missile defences are a further symptom of the contradiction in Indian views about nuclear weapons.

1. If nuclear weapons are essentially political weapons, not usable in fighting wars, the logic of missile defenses seems difficult to understand.

2. Clearly missile defenses are desired only if one assumes that nuclear weapons are going to be used. Nevertheless, GOI has pursued a ballistic missile defence (BMD) system since at least the mid-1990s.
3. India's search for an appropriate BMD system appears linked to the growth of Pakistan's missile delivery capability, including the transfer of Chinese missiles such as the M-11. As with nuclear weapons, the search for a BMD system has continued despite changes of political leadership and ideology in New Delhi.
4. At various times, India has sought the Russian-built S-300, the Israeli-American Arrow, and the US-built Patriot ballistic missile defence systems.
5. India also has a domestic BMD system in development, built around the Akash Surface-to-Air missile (SAM).
6. New Delhi's decade-long search has been unsuccessful possibly because Indian decision-makers have not given sufficient thought to what kind of system India needs. Indeed, it is not clear how missile defenses will fit into the existing Indian nuclear doctrine.
7. India's official nuclear doctrine has made no mention of a missile defence system, and it is unlikely that the war-fighting orientation of missile defenses will sit well with the political/deterrence driven sentiment that dominates the nuclear doctrine.
8. None of the Indian governments that have been in power since 1995 have given any reason why they want missile defences, though the issue had created dissension among some of allies of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government when it included communist parties because New Delhi has been seeking to buy a US-built system based on the Patriot PAC-3.
9. Nuclear weapons are essentially political weapons and unusable militarily by India, but other states might not be as restrained. As a consequence, India both opposes the spread of nuclear weapons and pursues BMDs.