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Q7(a)

"India's Nuclear policy is deeply influenced by its cultural beliefs and the pragmatic approach of its foreign policy." Discuss

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2023 · PSIR GS 2 · 20 marks · Recent developments in Indian Foreign policy

Recent developments in Indian Foreign policy: India's position on the recent crisis in Afghanistan, Iraq and West Asia, growing relations with US and Israel; vision of a new world order.

Core demand of the question

- Discuss India's nuclear policy as a mix of cultural beliefs and pragmatic foreign policy
- Write at 20-mark length

Revision summary

Moral and anti-colonial language made India a critic of nuclear inequality and a late tester.

China and Pakistan, plus a closed NPT, made weapons a pragmatic choice by 1998.

Credible minimum deterrence and **no first use** carry the cultural claim into doctrine.

The 2008 civil nuclear path was pragmatic normalisation, not NPT accession as a non-weapon State.

Defensive-realist security, not offensive hegemony, is the better fit for the declared doctrine.

Introduction

India's nuclear story runs from moral opposition to great-power weapons, through the 1974 peaceful explosion, to the 1998 tests and a declared doctrine of credible minimum deterrence and **no first use**. Cultural beliefs supplied the language of restraint. Pragmatic foreign policy supplied the arsenal, the doctrine, and the later search for civil nuclear commerce.

Body**Cultural and moral beliefs**

- Anti-colonial thought and Buddhist and Gandhian non-violence gave Indian public language a suspicion of nuclear weapons as civilisational failure.
- **Jawaharlal Nehru** backed civilian atomic science and world nuclear disarmament at the same time. Homi Bhabha's programme was scientific modernism inside that moral frame.
- The **Rajiv Gandhi Action Plan** of 1988 still spoke a disarmament idiom at the UN.
- After 1998, official doctrine kept **no first use** and minimum deterrence, which is a cultural-political choice not required by Mearsheimer's offensive-realist logic of maximum capability.

Pragmatic drivers

- China's 1964 test and the 1962 war created a security reason that moral language could not erase.

- Pakistan's programme and later declared weapons made a dyad that Indian planners could not ignore.
- **The NPT (1968) as a closed club pushed India toward an outsider path:** 1974 "peaceful nuclear explosion," then 1998 weapon tests after the extended NPT and CTBT pressures.
- Pragmatism after 1998 meant a doctrine, a command structure, a moratorium on further tests, and the 2008 civil nuclear opening with the United States and the NSG waiver.
- Export controls, IAEA safeguards on civilian reactors, and missile development (Agni series) are the practical State, not the ashram.

How the mix works

- Culture explains why India delayed, why it rejected the NPT as unequal, and why NFU was advertised as responsible stewardship.
- Pragmatism explains why India tested, why it built a triad path, and why it bargained for nuclear commerce without joining the NPT as a non-weapon State.
- **Defensive-realist reading:** nuclear weapons are for survival and for stopping blackmail, not for conquest. That fits NFU better than offensive realism.
- Diplomacy toward the Global South still uses disarmament talk even while India is a weapon State outside the NPT.

Tensions

- **No first use** is a political promise. Future doctrine debates, missile defence, and tactical-weapon talk can strain it.
- Moral exceptionalism is weaker when India also seeks great-power status with a nuclear portfolio.

Flow diagram

Disarmament moral language -> NFU minimum deterrence
 China Pakistan NPT club -> 1974 1998 tests
 1974 1998 tests -> NFU minimum deterrence
 NFU minimum deterrence -> NSG civil nuclear bargain

Conclusion

- **Indian nuclear policy is a mix:** a cultural claim to restraint and equal global rules, and a pragmatic arsenal built against China and Pakistan and then normalised through the NSG-era bargain. Neither half alone explains 1974, 1998, and NFU together.

Facts & figures

Pokhran 1974

Indian underground test described officially as a peaceful nuclear explosion.

Pokhran-II 1998

Series of tests after which India declared itself a nuclear-weapon State in fact, still outside NPT membership as such.

No first use

Declared doctrine that nuclear weapons would not be used first; a political restraint, not a physical law.

NSG waiver 2008

Nuclear Suppliers Group exception that allowed civil nuclear trade with India.

NPT 1968

Treaty that recognises only 1945-era weapon States plus later acknowledged P5; India refused to join as a non-weapon State.

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