Defence Minister's Statement on India's Nuclear Policy

Why in news?

Defence minister Rajnath Singh ascertained that while India had strictly followed its 'no first use' (NFU) nuclear doctrine, "circumstances" would determine what happens to this policy in the future.

What is India's nuclear doctrine?

- India's official nuclear doctrine is codified in a 2003 document, which takes cues from the 1999 draft doctrine.
- Since then, there has been no official communique about India's nuclear policy from the government.
- Since 2003, India's nuclear doctrine has had three primary components as below.
- **No First Use** - India will only use nuclear weapons in response to a nuclear attack on Indian territory or Indian forces.
- A caveat (warning) is made about their possible use in response to a chemical or biological attack.
- **Massive Retaliation** - India's response to a first strike will be massive, to cause 'unacceptable damage'.
- While the doctrine does not explicitly espouse a counter-value strategy (civilian targets), the wording implies the same.
- **Credible Minimum Deterrence** - The number and capabilities of India's nuclear weapons and delivery systems should merely be sufficient to ensure intolerable retaliation.
- This should also keep in mind first-strike survival of its relatively meagre arsenal.

How has India's nuclear stance been?

- The adoption of the nuclear doctrine came soon after Operation Parakram (2001-02).
- At that time, the threat of a nuclear exchange on the subcontinent had figured prominently in international capitals, if not in New Delhi and Islamabad.
- The public adoption of the doctrine was in part an attempt by New Delhi to restate its commitment to restraint and to being a responsible nuclear

power.
- India is one of the two countries (China being the other) that adheres to a doctrine of No First Use (NFU).

How has India's nuclear restraint helped?

- India's self-proclaimed restraint has formed the basis for its claims to belong to the nuclear mainstream.
- These include -
    i. the initial application for the waiver in 2008 from the Nuclear Suppliers Group in order to carry out nuclear commerce with the grouping
    ii. India's membership of the Missile Technology Control Regime, the Wassenaar Arrangement and the Australia Group
    iii. India's ongoing attempts to join the Nuclear Suppliers Group

Why is the current statement contentious?

- Nuclear doctrine, like any directive guiding national security, needs to be a dynamic concept that responds to changing circumstances.
- However, there is a danger that the minister's remark could spark off a nuclear arms race.
- Revoking NFU does not necessarily mean giving up restraint, but it leaves India's nuclear doctrine more ambiguous.
- Ambiguity, in turn, can lead to miscalculations from the potential adversaries of India.
- In this context, there is a possibility that nuclear weapons could fall into the hands of non-state actors in Pakistan.
- But, even in such scenarios that warrant pre-emptive action, a nuclear strike cannot be a viable option.
- For the Minister to state the future of 'no first use' is open is to say nothing and at once imply everything.
- In a nuclear circumstance, it is much better to convey the nature of the nuclear deterrence than to give ambiguous statements to the potential adversaries.

What should have been done?

- Nuclear weapons are seen not as war-fighting armaments but as weapons of last resort, meant to deter the threat and use of nuclear weapons.
- In this understanding and in the above respect, it is a good idea for the government to make public any periodic review in its strategic posture.
- The no-first-use policy comes with being a confident nuclear power.
- In matters of nuclear doctrine, it is important to be clear above all else, and

nothing must be left to interpretation.

Source: Firstpost, The Hindu

