Militarism - Concept and relevance

Mains: *GS II – International issues*

Why in News?

The recent, NATO summit declaration states that the alliance's deterrence and defence rest on military capabilities and preparedness and this raises a broader question about militarism.

What is Militarism?

- **Militarism** – It is generally understood as the **belief that military strength and preparedness are the primary means of ensuring national security and achieving political objectives**.
- It advocates a prominent role for the armed forces in shaping state policy and often accords legitimacy to the use or threat of military force in resolving conflicts.
- Unlike military capability, which is a component of national defence, militarism represents a broader worldview in which military considerations increasingly influence political decision-making and societal values.

Militarism	Militarisation
• Refers to an ideology that considers military power central to national strength.	• Refers to the process by which civilian institutions, governance structures and social life adopt military values, practices and organisational models.
• Justifies extensive military preparedness and defence expenditure.	• Involves increasing military influence over public institutions, education, economy and culture.
• Promotes military solutions to political and security challenges.	• Reflects the growing integration of military norms into everyday life.

*Thus, **militarism** is primarily an ideology, whereas **militarisation** is the process through which that ideology becomes embedded in society.*

What is the historical evolution of militarism?

- The concept of militarism gained prominence during the **nineteenth century**.
- **Europe in the Nineteenth Century –** The term was initially used to describe states

where military institutions exercised overwhelming influence over politics and society, including:
    - France under **Napoléon III (1852–1870)**
    - Prussia
    - The German Empire after 1871
- These states viewed military strength as the principal instrument of national power and state-building.
- **Interwar Period –** During the period between the First and Second World Wars, militarism became closely associated with authoritarian and fascist regimes.
- This includes, Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany, Militarist Japan and Francoist Spain
- These governments glorified military values, expanded armed forces and pursued aggressive foreign policies.
- **Industrialisation and Militarism –** Modern scholars also associate militarism with, Industrialisation, Technological advancement, Expansion of defence industries, and Growth of the military-industrial complex.
- Industrial capacity enabled large-scale arms production and strengthened the political influence of defence establishments.

What are the various perspective of militarism?

- **Militarism as an Ideology –** Beyond military capability, scholars increasingly interpret militarism as an ideology.
- Under this perspective:
    - Military force is viewed as a legitimate instrument of statecraft.
    - National security becomes the dominant objective of governance.
    - Political disputes are increasingly addressed through coercive means.
    - Military values such as discipline, hierarchy and obedience receive greater social acceptance.
- Militarism therefore shapes how governments and societies perceive security, conflict and national identity.
- **Militarism as Social Relations –** Contemporary scholarship extends the concept further by examining militarism as a pattern of social relations.
- Rather than focusing only on armed forces, this approach analyses how military values penetrate civilian institutions and everyday life.
- Examples include:
- Greater public reverence for military institutions.
- Expansion of defence narratives in media.
- Increased military influence over education and research.
- Integration of defence priorities into economic planning.
- Public acceptance of military solutions to political problems.
- Thus, militarism gradually normalises the role of armed force within society.
- **Scholarly Perspectives on Militarism**
- **Michael Mann –** Sociologist **Michael Mann** defines militarism as:
- "A set of attitudes and social practices which regards war and the preparation for war as a normal and desirable social activity."
- His definition highlights two important dimensions:
    - Ideological acceptance of war.

    - Social practices that institutionalise military preparedness.
- Militarism, therefore, extends beyond defence policy into the cultural and social fabric of a nation.
- **Alfred Vagts –** German historian **Alfred Vagts**, in *A History of Militarism* (1937), offered one of the most influential definitions.
- According to Vagts, militarism refers to:

- Domination of military institutions over civilian authority.
- Excessive influence of military demands on governance.
- Priority accorded to military values in national life.
- His analysis warns against weakening democratic civilian control over the armed forces.
- **Yagil Levy –** Political sociologist **Yagil Levy** argues that militarism should be understood through patterns of social relations rather than simply military expenditure or force.
- According to Levy:
    - Militarism legitimises the use of force.
    - Military power becomes socially acceptable through political narratives.
    - States increasingly justify coercive policies in the name of national security.
- His framework explains how societies gradually normalise military solutions even during peacetime.
- **Militarism and the Modern State –** Drawing upon **Max Weber's** theory of the state, scholars argue that the state possesses the **legitimate monopoly over the use of physical force**.
- Governments derive legitimacy by:
    - Maintaining internal law and order.
    - Defending territorial integrity.
    - Protecting citizens against external threats.
- However, when national security narratives become dominant, states may increasingly rely on military power to justify political decisions, thereby reinforcing militaristic tendencies.

How NATO is related to Contemporary Militarism?

- **Recent declaration** – The recent NATO Summit Declaration reflects several characteristics associated with modern militarism.
- The declaration emphasises:
    - Collective defence under Article 5.
    - Military deterrence.
    - Expansion of defence capabilities.
    - Nuclear preparedness.
    - Missile defence.
    - Cyber and space security.
    - Increased military readiness.
- **Benefits** – From a strategic perspective, these measures respond to evolving security challenges, including great-power rivalry, cyber threats and regional conflicts.
- **Concerns** – However, from the perspective of militarism, such emphasis also reflects a

broader logic whereby military preparedness increasingly shapes international politics and security policy.
- It demonstrates how military capability becomes central not only to defence planning but also to political legitimacy and alliance cohesion.

What are the benefits and risks?

- **Potential Benefits**
- Strengthens national defence.
- Enhances deterrence against aggression.
- Protects sovereignty.
- Promotes technological innovation.
- Supports disaster relief and humanitarian operations.
- **Potential Risks**
- Excessive defence expenditure at the cost of social development.
- Arms races and regional instability.
- Militarisation of public institutions.
- Weakening of civilian supremacy.
- Increased likelihood of conflict through overreliance on force.
- Curtailment of democratic freedoms in the name of security.
- A balanced approach is therefore essential.

What lies ahead?

- Militarism is a multidimensional concept encompassing military capability, political ideology and social relations.
- It goes beyond the mere existence of armed forces to examine how military institutions, values and the legitimate use of force shape governance and society.
- The NATO Summit Declaration illustrates how contemporary security strategies increasingly rely on military preparedness in response to evolving geopolitical challenges.
- While strong defence capabilities remain indispensable in an uncertain international environment, sustainable security ultimately depends on maintaining democratic civilian control, preventing excessive militarisation of society and balancing military strength with diplomacy, international cooperation and peaceful conflict resolution.
- Understanding militarism in this broader sense is essential for analysing both national security policies and the changing nature of global politics.

Reference

[The Indian Express| Militarism]

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