

The No First Use (NFU) policy has been one of the hallmarks of India's status as a responsible nuclear power, but the idea isn't all idealistic in nature, in fact, if anything, it was a [realistic](#) proposition. The phraseology of the [draft nuclear doctrine](#) shows how the doctrine would be of credible minimum deterrence, and 'retaliation only'. It is clear in mentioning how in the absence of global nuclear disarmament, having an effective nuclear credible deterrence, and more importantly, retaliatory capability (should deterrence fail), is extremely vital to safeguard India's interests.

Post the release of this draft doctrine, things were further clarified in a [press release](#) in 2003 where it was categorically mentioned that use of nuclear weapons will not be limited to just an attack of similar kind but also as a response towards biological and chemical attack not just on India, but on Indian forces anywhere in the world. The retaliatory nuclear attack would also be massive. These specifics leave enough wiggle room and doesn't make India's policy of No First Use too rigid. [Manpreet Sethi argues](#) that possible advantages of having a No First Use policy include the onus of escalation being put on the adversary, and the need to not invest in expensive hardware that would otherwise be required. The reasons of having such a policy were also pragmatic because the west wouldn't have been too kind to a possible active nuclear weapons policy, with the threat of potential economic retaliation as was the case during the early development stages of India's [nuclear](#) and [space](#) programmes.



Image source: TOI

The perception problem, and a strong re-emergence of Sino-India border dispute

A strong No First Use policy allows the adversary to not be on a hair-trigger alert assuming of course that they take their opponent' nuclear policy seriously. This is where the perception problem comes in. With the rapid advances in technology, the diffusion of light weapons and the spread of sub-conventional warfare, it has been easy for nations to inject proxies into their adversary's territory for nefarious purposes. With Pakistan, J&K and Punjab come to mind. Ranging from weapons to drugs, to money, to militants themselves, crossing over the porous borders is all too familiar.

The Kargil war of 1999 was the last major conflict between the two nuclear powers, although smaller conflicts have not ceased since then. Insurgency in Kashmir has continued throughout, and with major terror attacks happening on the Indian soil since then, the [troop deployment across the border has increased](#) during delicate situations. It isn't the case with just Pakistan. China too has been on the offensive with its dispute over boundary lines.

The much recent standoff and belligerence from China's side is a testament, of how even in the time of a pandemic, they're willing to flex their military might. The face-offs along the *Galwan* valley, the attack and [subsequent death of 20 Indian troops](#) close to the LAC, points to a rather delicate situation that has seemed to develop along the border. While the arguments from within India as to the exact nature of India's accepted boundary and positions where the PLA troops have camped vary, all seem to agree that such an aggressive posture, if not dealt appropriately through diplomatic channels, would be a recipe for disaster in the long run. The PLA has been building bunkers and roads along with the possible intrusion points in *Galwan* valley and *Pangong Tso*.

Ajai Shukla contends that the actions look awfully similar to the ones back in '62. [Artillery guns](#) also seem to be visible in support from PLA for its troops at *Pangong Tso* and *Galwan valley*. This does certainly bring up an interesting situation to watch unfold as two nuclear power countries, both of which have a No First Use policy, engage in a confrontation across the border; and as long as both the countries are able to engage under the threshold of what could be considered by either to merit a stronger militarily charged response, the threat of a nuclear war doesn't seem imminent. However, this only works because both the countries hold a No First Use posture.

The debate over Rajnath Singh's 2019 comments

Pokhran is the area which witnessed Atal Ji's firm resolve to make India a nuclear power and yet remain firmly committed to the doctrine of 'No First Use'. India has strictly adhered to this doctrine. What happens in future depends on the circumstances.

— Rajnath Singh (@rajnathsingh) [August 16, 2019](#)

Rejecting the No First Use policy would be actively declaring that one is committed to launching the first strike and in a highly tumultuous South Asia region, it doesn't bode well

with 2 other nuclear powers in such proximity. Pakistan takes India's No First Use policy with a pinch of salt already, and their scepticism would only be further proven if the policy is tinkered with. [Comments](#) made by Rajnath Singh in his position as the Defence Minister back in 2019 did not help.

It created a huge discussion in the academic and strategic community, and while proponents of both sides (whether it was a way of further injecting ambiguity or not) argue whether it was needed and if it signalled some changes that would come, most agreed that it would be a bad move. The likes of Rajesh Rajagopalan and Manpreet Sethi are of the firm view that too much was read into the comments. Rajagopalan also stated that it was fine for Rajnath Singh to be making such comments because such policies are dynamic anyway and hold true as long as the government in power says it is. While someone like a Vipin Narang was rather cautious and considered these statements to be more serious than most of his counterparts would think.

Need to let NFU be

Rejecting the No First Use policy will also make India invest heavily in defence acquisitions and developments. The arc of a No First Use policy stance and first-use policy stance are vastly different, and if the No First Use policy is rejected, the threat of escalation of an arms race in South Asia is quite possible. The massive undertaking (across the lines of logistics, personnel, weaponry, and the entire defence architecture) that would be required to have a strong first use policy is simply something that isn't economically viable for India, especially in the COVID-19 situation where all countries, including India, are seeing their GDP drop. The moral superiority as a responsible nuclear power-wielding nation would also be lost in such a situation which in turn could make India a nuclear pariah.

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South Asia

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