



The Ethics of Nuclear Weapons

The **2024 Nobel Peace Prize** awarded to **Nihon Hidankyo**, an **organisation** representing survivors of the **Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings**, has **renewed global conversations** on the ethical challenges posed by nuclear weapons. The catastrophic impact of the atomic bombings and the continued threat of nuclear war call for a deep ethical examination. While some argue for **nuclear deterrence as a necessity for peace**, others see the possession of such destructive power as **inherently immoral**. This ethical debate is not limited to global powers but **resonates strongly in countries like India**, which faces its own nuclear dilemmas.

What are Ethical Dimensions of Nuclear Weapons?

- **Nuclear Weapons as Unethical:** Nuclear weapons are widely regarded as **unethical** due to their **catastrophic consequences**, both in terms of immediate destruction and long-term environmental and human harm.
- **Humanitarian Consequences:** The horror of **Hiroshima and Nagasaki** shows the terrible humanitarian cost of nuclear weapons. These bombs killed tens of thousands of people instantly and **caused long-term suffering for survivors**. Even today, the effects of radiation are still felt.
 - This suggests that nuclear weapons **go far beyond any ethical standards** because they **harm civilians** and cause suffering that lasts for generations.
- **Violation of Just War Theory:** Critics argue that nuclear weapons violate the principles of Just War Theory, especially the **rules of proportionality and discrimination**.
 - The Just War Theory **outlines a set of principles** to determine when it is justifiable to engage in war and how war should be conducted ethically. The theory is divided into two main parts:
 - **Jus ad Bellum (When to Go to War):** Determines the **conditions** under which **war can be justly declared**, such as just cause, right authority, and last resort.
 - **Jus in Bello (Conduct in War):** Governs how war should be conducted ethically, ensuring **proportionality**, distinction between combatants and civilians, and humane treatment of prisoners.
 - Nuclear weapons fail on both counts. They **kill without distinction** and cause **more harm than necessary** to achieve any military objective.
- **Preemptive Strikes and Preventive War:** Another ethical dimension is the **idea of preemptive strikes**. Should a country use nuclear weapons if it believes it is about to be attacked?
 - This brings up **moral questions**. How can we be sure the **threat is real**? If a country strikes first, it **risks killing innocent people** based on fear. The ethical concern here is that acting out of fear, rather than fact, could **lead to unjust wars**.

What are the Ethical Dimensions of Nuclear Deterrence?

- **Morality of Threats:** The ethical question revolves around whether it is morally right to use the threat of nuclear weapons, which can **cause immense destruction** and civilian deaths, even if the intent is to prevent war.
 - While the goal of nuclear deterrence is to prevent conflict, the **threat itself signals a willingness to commit** acts that may be ethically unacceptable if deterrence fails.

- **Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD):** MAD suggests that any nuclear **conflict will result in total destruction**, raising the ethical issue of maintaining peace through the potential for mass annihilation.
 - The ethical question is whether it is acceptable to base global security on a system that could potentially wipe out humanity if deterrence fails.
- **Accidental or Unauthorised Launch:** The possibility of **accidental or unauthorised nuclear launches** due to technical or human errors brings up ethical concerns about the risks of unintended nuclear conflict.
 - There are ethical questions about who is responsible for the consequences of such accidental incidents, and whether these **risks undermine the moral justification** for nuclear deterrence.
- **Security and Global Stability:** While nuclear deterrence may provide security for some countries, it **creates instability for others**, raising ethical questions about whether this unequal security is justified.
 - It raises an ethical question of whether it is fair for nuclear-armed nations to dominate global security, leaving non-nuclear states more vulnerable.
- **Nuclear Arms Race and Disarmament:** Many believe that there is an ethical duty for nations to pursue disarmament to **prevent global catastrophe**, as maintaining large arsenals increases the threat.
 - The arms race driven by deterrence policies leads to an **unchecked buildup of weapons**, raising ethical concerns about responsibility for promoting peace instead of escalation.
- **Nuclear Deterrence vs. Peaceful Coexistence:** Nuclear deterrence relies on **maintaining peace through fear**, leading to ethical debates over whether peace based on threats can be morally justified and sustainable.
 - Ethical arguments often suggest that peaceful coexistence through **diplomacy and cooperation is a better**, morally sound alternative to relying on nuclear threats for maintaining order.

What are the Philosophical Perspectives on Global Nuclear Governance?

- **Cosmopolitanism:** Cosmopolitanism believes that we all belong to **one global community**, regardless of nationality. From this view, nuclear weapons are a **threat to all humans**, not just certain countries.
 - Cosmopolitans argue that the moral duty to protect human life globally requires **getting rid of nuclear weapons** entirely. They believe **global cooperation**, not national power, should be the **guiding principle**.
- **Liberal Internationalism:** Liberal internationalism supports the idea that **global security** can only be achieved through **international cooperation**. This theory backs treaties like the Nuclear **Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)**, which **limits the spread** of nuclear weapons.
- **Constructivism:** Constructivists focus on how **global norms and values shape** the way nations think about nuclear weapons. In the past, having nuclear weapons was seen as a **sign of strength**. But now, many see **disarmament as a moral goal**. The shift in thinking about nuclear weapons shows how changing norms can lead to more ethical governance.
- **Global Justice Theories:** Global justice theories argue for **fairness in international relations**. From this view, **nuclear weapons create inequality**. Some nations can protect themselves with nuclear weapons, while others are left vulnerable. Global justice **calls for disarmament** so that no country can dominate others with the threat of nuclear attack.

What is the India's Nuclear Doctrine Policy?

- **Nuclear Doctrine Policy:** India's Nuclear Doctrine Policy is based on the principles of maintaining a **credible minimum deterrence**, with an emphasis on restraint and responsibility. The doctrine was first **officially outlined in 1999** by **India's National Security Advisory Board** and was later adopted by the **Indian government in 2003**.
 - **No First Use Policy:** India's No First Use policy is framed as an **ethical stance in nuclear deterrence**, ensuring that nuclear weapons will only be used in retaliation.
 - This policy positions **India as a responsible nuclear power**, committed to minimising the threat of nuclear conflict. However, critics argue that even this restrained policy **does not fully address the moral risks** of possessing such

weapons.

- **Credible Minimum Deterrence:** India's Credible Minimum Deterrence doctrine focuses on maintaining a **minimal but effective nuclear arsenal** for deterrence, with a No First Use policy and the **capability for massive retaliation**.
- **Commitment to Global Disarmament:** India has consistently **supported global nuclear disarmament** at forums like the **United Nations** and continues to call for a **phased and verifiable reduction** of nuclear arsenals worldwide.
 - While maintaining its nuclear arsenal for security reasons, India argues that **global disarmament** is the **ultimate ethical solution** to the nuclear dilemma.
- **Perspectives on India's Nuclear Policy :**
 - **Mahatma Gandhi's Pacifism:** Gandhi, a staunch advocate of non-violence, **strongly opposed nuclear weapons**. In using the bomb, he said, humanity as a whole had **let go of something** essential from a **moral perspective**.
 - His philosophy **aligns with the pacifist tradition** in Indian thought, which holds that weapons of mass destruction are **incompatible** with the **values of non-violence** and **human dignity** .
 - **K. Subrahmanyam's Strategic Approach:** K. Subrahmanyam, a leading Indian strategist, offered a contrasting perspective, **advocating for nuclear deterrence** as a **necessary evil** for ensuring national security.
 - His views emphasise the ethical responsibility of maintaining nuclear weapons **solely for deterrence**, ensuring that India remains committed to a **No First Use (NFU) policy** .
 - **Homi Bhabha's Pragmatic Vision:** Homi Bhabha, the father of India's nuclear program, justified the development of nuclear capabilities by emphasising the **need for India to protect itself** in a world where other major powers possessed nuclear weapons.
 - His perspective reflects a **prudential view** where nuclear capability is seen as a **means of securing peace**, not promoting conflict .

Way Forward

- **Strengthen International Legal Frameworks:** A legally binding framework for the phased reduction of nuclear arsenals, with **clear timelines** and **verification mechanisms**, should be established to ensure accountability.
- **Create a Global Nuclear Restraint Regime:** Nations should collaborate to establish a global nuclear restraint regime that **prioritises transparency**, the **de-escalation** of nuclear tensions, and mutual trust-building.
- **Promote Ethical Leadership and Disarmament Diplomacy:** Countries with nuclear weapons must take ethical leadership by **promoting diplomacy over deterrence**.
 - Diplomatic initiatives such as **global conferences** on the ethical and humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons could shift international opinion toward disarmament.
- **Invest in Nuclear Risk Reduction Technologies:** Global efforts should be made to minimise the risk of accidental nuclear war through technological safeguards.
 - This includes **developing fail-safe mechanisms** for nuclear command and control systems, **improving AI and communication protocols** to reduce misunderstandings, and conducting regular risk assessments of nuclear arsenals.
- **Engage Civil Society in Disarmament Efforts:** Governments and international organisations should **involve civil society** in the global debate on nuclear disarmament encouraging grassroots movements, and facilitating the involvement of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in **treaty negotiations and global forums**.
- **Develop Humanitarian Impact Assessments:** International bodies should conduct comprehensive studies on the **long-term humanitarian impact** of nuclear weapons use, similar to the work done by **Nihon Hidankyo**, to build a **stronger case for disarmament** based on ethical, not just strategic, considerations.
- **Create New Nuclear-Free Zones:** Nations should push for the **creation of additional nuclear-weapon-free zones**, particularly in regions where nuclear tensions are high, such as the **Middle East and South Asia**.
- **Increase Accountability and Transparency:** International nuclear governance must **prioritise transparency**. Multilateral verification mechanisms should be established to monitor compliance with disarmament treaties and hold nuclear-armed states accountable for their commitments.

Conclusion

- From an ethical perspective, nuclear weapons **inherently violate principles of human dignity** and justice. While they serve as deterrents, the potential for mass destruction and the loss of innocent lives makes their **existence morally indefensible**. A secure global future must prioritise disarmament, built on cooperation and respect for life, rather than fear and destruction. Achieving a **world free from nuclear** threats is **not just a strategic need**, but an **ethical obligation for humanity**.

Drishti Mains Question:

Q1. Critically examine the ethical dimensions of nuclear deterrence, considering its implications on global security, and the principles of Just War Theory. (15 marks)

Q2. Discuss the Indian perspective on nuclear weapons with respect to its No First Use policy and commitment to global disarmament. (15 marks)

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