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Once Again: Why a “No-First-Use” Policy is a Bad, Very Bad Idea

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The Obama Administration reportedly is seriously considering adopting a “No-First-Use” (NFU) nuclear policy.¹ A prospective NFU policy would be a US commitment never to be the first to use nuclear weapons—as opposed to existing policy that retains some ambiguity regarding when and if the US would use nuclear weapons. An NFU policy would eliminate that ambiguity for US adversaries. It sounds warm and progressive, and has long been a policy proposal of disarmament activists. NFU has, however, been rejected by all previous Democratic and Republican administrations for very sound reasons, most recently by the Obama Administration in 2010. The most important of these reasons is that retaining a degree of US nuclear ambiguity helps to deter war while adopting an NFU policy would undercut the deterrence of war.

How so? Under the existing policy of ambiguity, potential aggressors such as Russia, China, North Korea or Iran must contemplate the reality that if they attack us or our allies, they risk possible US nuclear retaliation. There is no doubt whatsoever that this risk of possible US nuclear retaliation has deterred war and the escalation of conflicts. In fact, the percentage of the world population lost to war has fallen dramatically since US nuclear deterrence was established after World War II.² That is an historic accomplishment.

The fatal flaw of the warm and progressive-sounding NFU proposal is that it tells would-be aggressors that they do not have to fear US nuclear retaliation even if they attack us or our allies with

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advanced conventional, chemical, and/or biological weapons. They would risk US nuclear retaliation only if they attack with nuclear weapons. As long as they use non-nuclear forces, a US NFU policy would provide aggressors with a free pass to avoid the risk now posed by the US nuclear deterrent.

Promising potential aggressors that they can use modern conventional, chemical or biological weapons against us or our allies without fear of possible US nuclear retaliation will encourage some to perceive greater license to do precisely that. Numerous historical case studies demonstrate without a doubt that some aggressors look for such openings to undertake their military moves to overturn a status quo they deem intolerable. They do not need to see a risk-free path to pursue aggression, only a path that allows them some vision of success, however improbable that vision may seem to others. The great advantage of current US nuclear policy is that the US nuclear deterrent helps to shut down the possibility that would-be aggressors contemplate such paths.

A US NFU policy would be particularly dangerous at a time when both Russia and China may be armed with chemical and biological weapons and are pursuing expansionist policies in Europe and Asia, respectively, to overturn the status quo.³ Russia is by far the strongest military power in Europe. It has moved repeatedly against neighboring states since 2008, forcibly changing established borders in Europe for the first time since World War II and issuing explicit nuclear first-use threats in the process. Only several months ago, Russia reportedly rehearsed the invasion of Norway, Finland, Sweden and Denmark in a military exercise involving 33,000 troops.⁴ In Asia, China is the strongest military power and is expanding its reach against US allies, including by building and militarizing islands in the South China Sea. At a time when key US allies face unprecedented threats from powerful neighbors, the US should not reduce the calculation of risks Russia and China must confront in their respective expansionist drives by adopting a US NFU policy. Indeed, saying so should be considered a breathtaking understatement in a world in which aggressors still exist, as do advanced conventional, chemical and possibly biological weapons, and another world war using “only” such modern non-nuclear weapons could cause death levels far beyond the 80-100 million souls lost in World Wars I and II.

In addition, the Obama Administration declares nuclear nonproliferation to be its highest nuclear policy goal.⁵ Yet, US adoption of an NFU policy would mean that the United States could no longer assure allies with its nuclear umbrella. No longer would their foes confront the deterring risk of US nuclear retaliation should those foes consider a devastating conventional, chemical or biological attack on US allies and partners. Pulling down the US nuclear umbrella so precipitously would compel some allies and partners who have foregone nuclear weapons in the past, on the basis of the promised US nuclear deterrence umbrella, to consider acquiring their own nuclear weapons. This could include South Korea and Japan. As such, additional nuclear proliferation is virtually an inevitable consequence of a US NFU policy.

Now is not the time for US adoption of an NFU policy; the risks of doing so are too great. Such was the unanimous conclusion of the bipartisan Congressional Strategic Posture Commission in its 2009 report: the United States, “should not abandon calculated ambiguity by adopting a policy of no-first-use,” because doing so “would be unsettling to some U.S. allies. It would also undermine the potential contributions of nuclear weapons to the deterrence of attack by biological weapons.”⁶ In 2010, the Obama Administration’s *Nuclear Posture Review* explicitly agreed with this conclusion. Why change now? Since then, global security threats facing the United States and allies have only increased, as, correspondingly, have the reasons for continuing the decades-long Republican and Democratic consensus against an NFU policy.



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