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### **No First-Use Advocacy: Contradictions and Guesswork**

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On June 6, 2016, Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes announced that President Obama was considering additional steps before the end of his term to advance his “Prague Agenda” – the ultimate goal of which is global nuclear zero. One of the steps in this direction the White House reportedly is considering is a nuclear “no-first-use” policy. This would be a declaration to the world that the United States would never be the first to use nuclear weapons. Instead, the United States would reserve the option of nuclear employment only in response to an opponent’s first nuclear use.

The possibility that the White House would declare a US no-first-use policy (NFU) has sparked a lively debate about the wisdom of such a US policy. Numerous articles for and against NFU have established the basic parameters of this debate. NFU advocacy typically claims first that NFU would help stabilize deterrence, and secondly, defends NFU against critics’ charges that it could, instead, degrade deterrence.

The case against NFU centers on concern that US nuclear deterrence may be important to the prevention of non-nuclear attacks, including possible massive conventional, chemical and biological (CBW) attacks against the United States and allies. A US NFU policy would tell opponents that they could launch such attacks without fear of the US nuclear deterrent because the United States would



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never respond with nuclear weapons to an opponent's conventional, chemical or biological attack. NFU critics fear that so encouraging opponents to discount the US nuclear deterrence in their possible planning of highly-lethal, but non-nuclear, attacks logically would degrade the US capacity to deter them.

NFU advocates respond to this critique of NFU with a variety of counterarguments. An assessment of NFU advocacy reveals that much of it is internally contradictory, ignorant or disdainful of available evidence, and misleadingly presents self-serving speculation as if it is known truth. These characteristics of NFU advocacy are apparent in a recent lengthy article entitled "Rethink Oldthink On No First Use" by Daryl Kimball and Kingston Reif.<sup>1</sup> The case presented by Kimball and Reif is fairly standard fare at this point, and provides a useful opportunity to critique this type of advocacy.

### Internal Contradictions

NFU proponents like Kimball and Reif often label alternative views "oldthink" to suggest that alternative views are outdated left-overs from the Cold War—in contrast to their own more modern perspectives. But the logic underlying their argument in favor of NFU is itself from the early Cold War era. In 1960, Thomas Schelling famously argued that "stable" nuclear deterrence could be upset by "reciprocal fears of surprise attack," and suggested steps to avoid such fears.<sup>2</sup> Kimball and Reif's case for US NFU is derived from this vintage Cold War notion—the NFU debate is not "newthink" vs "oldthink."

More importantly, Kimball's and Reif's case for NFU is internally contradictory. For example, they claim that US adoption of NFU would allay Russian and Chinese fears of a "devastating US nuclear strike" and thereby reduce the chance that these states would feel pressured themselves to launch a pre-emptive nuclear first strike against the United States. As such, they claim, NFU should be deemed stabilizing.

The presumption of their NFU-is-stabilizing argument is that Russia and China would be so reassured by the US NFU declaration that they would stand back from a nuclear first strike that they otherwise would feel pressed to launch. In making this case, Kimball and Reif must posit that Russia and China so deeply believe the US commitment to NFU that they alter their views of nuclear conflict in a benign direction. This would be a powerful US declaration indeed. This argument for NFU collapses in the absence of great Russian and Chinese confidence in a US NFU commitment.

Yet, in the same article in which Kimball and Reif make this NFU-is-stabilizing argument, they also acknowledge that, "of course" countries could never be "sure that the United States would not use nuclear weapons first." With this acknowledgment, it would be difficult to find a more blatant example of the logical contradictions in Kimball's and Reif's advocacy: the supposed stabilizing assurance for Russia and China provided by their confidence in a US NFU pledge, according to Kimball and Reif, "of course" could not exist. This is not some minor lapse in their logic; it destroys their single main claimed benefit of a US NFU policy.

In addition to such internal contradictions, Kimball's and Reif's NFU advocacy misrepresents reality in self-serving ways. For example, they claim that a US NFU policy would not degrade deterrence because the United States and allies "have the means to counter any realistic nonnuclear military threat with superior conventional military, economic, and alliance capabilities." They double down on this heroic assertion of Western dominance with the similar claim that, "There is no conventional military contingency on the Korean peninsula that could not be quickly dealt with by US and South Korean conventional forces."



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Kimball's and Reif's assertions of global US and allied dominance are intended to demonstrate the much-reduced relevance of US nuclear deterrence; the West is so decisively superior conventionally that an NFU policy could have no ill-effect on deterrence.

But, who finds these assertions of decisive Western global dominance valid? Even Kimball and Reif, apparently, do not believe their claims, as they acknowledge later in the same article: "It is also clear that in certain areas and in a few scenarios – such as conflict with China over Taiwan or the South China Sea, or a confrontation with Russia in the Baltic region – the United States and its allies could have difficulty promptly countering a conventional attack with conventional weapons."

Unfortunately, these "certain areas" where Kimball and Reif now acknowledge that Western conventional dominance is problematic are where US nuclear deterrence may actually be tested as Russia and China confront key US allies who are individually much less militarily powerful than Russia or China and thus consider themselves dependent on the US "nuclear umbrella." With this, Kimball and Reif essentially contradict their own earlier assertion that NFU poses no problem for US deterrence goals because global Western conventional dominance is sure to prevail – apparently not in key areas by their own acknowledgement. Again, Kimball's and Reif's NFU advocacy is betrayed by internal contradictions.

### **Conflating Deterrence and War-fighting**

Kimball and Reif, following a now-standard line of NFU advocacy, also claim that nuclear deterrence is unnecessary to deter any but nuclear attack because the United States and its allies could wage a long and "protracted" conventional war to recover lost territories. In their efforts to dismiss the potential value of nuclear deterrence, they confuse and conflate deterrence and war-fighting with the assertion of a global Western capability to win horrific non-nuclear wars and follow with the non sequitur that this capability essentially obviates the potential value of nuclear deterrence to prevent such wars.

In addition to the counterpoint already discussed that the West may not have the capabilities Kimball and Reif claim, it surely is a reasonable goal that the United States and allies *prevent* such a long, protracted, and inevitably highly-destructive war to recover lost territories, even if the West were so capable of ultimate victory. It is far better to deter such attacks in the first place and the US nuclear deterrent appears in the past to have been valuable for the deterrence of war and its escalation – and it may be so again in the future. In their efforts to dismiss the potential value of nuclear deterrence, they seem ready to turn a blind eye to the enormous costs a large-scale non-nuclear war would claim in blood (including non-combatants) and national treasures.

### **Guesses Masquerading as Truths**

In addition, in their efforts to rationalize NFU, Kimball and Reif repeatedly present highly-speculative guesses as if those guesses are known truths. They assert these guesses without any caveat or attempted demonstration of validity. Their guesses masquerade as truths. This is no small matter because much of their case for NFU is wrapped in this "buyer beware" type of advocacy.

For example, Kimball and Reif claim that while allies such as Japan, South Korea, Britain and France "might initially have concerns about the transition to a US no first use policy, they are highly likely to accept such a decision...." Correspondingly, they also assert that, "the claim that some US allies might acquire their own nuclear weapons if Washington abandons the first use option is pure hyperbole."

It deserves to be noted, however, that there is no "might" about these countries' opposition to NFU and that they have made their opposition to NFU known to Washington at high levels. And, there is no



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apparent evidence available or offered by Kimball and Reif to support their claim that these allies “are highly likely” to embrace NFU in the future, only their guesswork. Allies do have other options.

For example, several allies have indicated quite openly that they see the credibility of the US nuclear deterrent as key to their security in a dangerous world and that the degradation of that credibility could compel them to find alternative security measures. In this regard, Kimball and Reif claim that concern that some allies may rethink their commitments to remaining non-nuclear is “pure hyperbole.” It should be noted that their backhanded dismissal of this potential for NFU to motivate nuclear proliferation is not shared by senior US officials with insight into this possibility. For example Deputy Secretary of State, Tony Blinken, recently expressed the belief that some allies could indeed decide to develop their own nuclear weapons if they lose confidence in the US nuclear deterrent.<sup>3</sup>

Kimball and Reif also claim to know that US nuclear deterrence threats against non-nuclear attack are *incredible*, and thus of little value: “The [US] threat of first use also lacks credibility, since the costs of such use would greatly outweigh the benefits.” This is an extremely important claim. If true, then US adoption of NFU is unlikely to degrade an already incredible US deterrent – nothing would be lost.

The problem with this claim, however, is that Kimball and Reif have *no idea* how different current and future foes will judge the credibility of the US nuclear deterrent – those foes’ judgments are likely to vary over time – depending on the opponent, the context and the stakes involved. In some cases, the US nuclear deterrent may indeed be judged credible; in other cases not. Kimball and Reif literally cannot know how a variety of current and future foes will judge the credibility of the US nuclear deterrent, but their NFU advocacy in this regard acknowledges no such doubt or limitation.

Another such Kimball and Reif guess masquerading as truth is the following: “Removing the threat of [US] nuclear first use does not make it more likely that Russia, China and North Korea will attempt to take advantage of local or regional conventional imbalances vis-à-vis the United States or its allies.” This claim, if true, is a critical point in favor of NFU because it means again that an NFU policy would not degrade the US deterrent against these countries. Again, nothing would be lost.

Yet, again, Kimball and Reif do not and cannot know what they claim to help justify NFU. They may be right in some cases, wrong in others; they have no idea which is more likely because they do not know and cannot know how a US NFU policy would affect future Russian, Chinese and North Korean calculations of cost and benefit, and their future willingness to exploit their respective regional conventional power advantages. It is preposterous to make such uncaveated claims in this regard, yet they are a continuing mainstay of Kimball’s and Reif’s NFU advocacy. Their guess might be correct on occasion, but should we be willing to accept a possibly greater risk of regional war on this basis? More importantly, are allies likely to accept the risk that Kimball’s and Reif’s guess is wrong? Prudence suggests not.

Another such claim masquerading as fact is the following: “Moscow understands very well that any territorial gains it might be able to accrue in the short-term in a conflict involving a NATO member state would be reversed by a determined and sustained NATO conventional military counterattack.” We can all hope Kimball and Reif are correct in the beliefs they attribute to Moscow. If true, it would indeed suggest less reliance on the US nuclear deterrent.

Here Kimball and Reif confidently claim to know in important detail what “Moscow understands very well,” but offer no supporting evidence whatsoever. It is fair to say that Kimball and Reif do not know if Moscow has the important understanding they claim. Nevertheless, they again offer uncaveated claims of knowledge that are key to their NFU advocacy. It is relevant here to note that such evidence that does exist in this regard in the form of open Russian statements, military doctrine, writings and exercises suggests no such Russian “understanding.”<sup>4</sup>





Another important Kimball and Reif assertion masquerading as fact is, “Conventional alternatives [to nuclear weapons] are far more practical, credible and effective means to deter or respond to potential conventional attacks, and even chemical or biological attack...” This is a breathtaking claim of knowledge that, if true and enduring, would indeed be an important point in favor of NFU. It would mean that US conventional forces as a rule are more credible for deterrence purposes, and thus US nuclear threats are unnecessary for deterring conventional, chemical or biological attack. Again, the claim is that nothing with regard to deterrence would be lost with a US NFU policy.

Again, however, Kimball and Reif do not and cannot know with such specificity how current, much less future opponents will judge the credibility of different US deterrence threats. Kimball and Reif may believe US conventional forces to be a more credible deterrent against non-nuclear threats and their unsupported claim in this regard certainly backs their NFU advocacy. But, their beliefs about US deterrence credibility are irrelevant because it is not Kimball and Reif that the United States must deter. The audiences that may need deterring now and in the future are varied and occasionally surprising – likely including Russia, China and North Korea. It is these audiences’ judgements about the credibility of US nuclear deterrence threats that matter, and it is fair, again, to say that Kimball and Reif do not know what those judgments are now or what they will be in the future.

Indeed, what limited historical evidence is available in this regard suggests that on some occasions US *nuclear* deterrence has been important to the deterrence of non-nuclear threats. For example, the most informed and comprehensive analyses of primary sources indicate that US nuclear deterrence at least contributed to the deterrence of Saddam Hussein’s use of CBW in the 1991 Gulf War.<sup>5</sup> Kimball and Reif simply dismiss or ignore these analyses when they claim as a sweeping rule that nuclear deterrence is unnecessary to deter threats that it, in fact, appears to have helped deter in 1991. In addition, it should be noted that from the founding of the nation state system in 1648 through 1945, the major powers in Europe went to war with each other an average of seven times per century; not even the recent memory of the catastrophic losses of World War I were sufficient to deter World War II. After 1945 and the establishment of nuclear deterrence, this history has not repeated itself and the percentage of the world’s population lost to war has declined dramatically. This does not “prove” the effectiveness of nuclear deterrence per se, but the association in time at least suggests the powerful limiting effect of nuclear deterrence on humanity’s willingness to go to war. The world was long at the nuclear zero “mountain top.” It most recently looked like World Wars I and II.

Another small but telling final example of Kimball’s and Reif’s employment of supposed facts in their NFU advocacy is their use of a seemingly supportive 2007 quotation from now-Defense Secretary Ashton Carter and Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz. If Kimball and Reif wish to cite Secretaries Carter and Moniz on the subject of NFU, it would seem more honest to acknowledge that they, as serving Secretaries, along with Secretary of State Kerry, have reportedly argued *against* NFU adoption.<sup>6</sup>

### **Summary and Conclusion: NFU as the Prelude to Further Deep US Nuclear Reductions**

In summary, Kimball’s and Reif’s assurances that NFU would be stabilizing and pose no risk to deterrence are based on contradictory arguments and speculative guesswork masquerading as known facts. Their promises in this regard typically are about points that they do not know and cannot know. Correspondingly, they offer no supporting evidence whatsoever to buttress their speculative guesses and in their advocacy attach no caveats to their confident assertions of these supposed facts. To be sure, there is some speculation on both sides of the NFU debate. That is the nature of the subject matter. But Kimball and Reif offer internally contradictory arguments and sheer guesswork as uncaveated truths,



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and then proceed to build their case for NFU on this basis. This appears to be the foundation of their NFU advocacy.

It also should be mentioned here that NFU advocacy often appears targeted for deeper purposes than US declaratory policy alone. Kimball and Reif, and other NFU advocates identify further deep US nuclear force reductions and limitations as the logical extension of an NFU policy.<sup>7</sup> Their corresponding advocacy of reduced readiness for the US deterrent and the elimination of programs required to replace existing US systems seems oblivious to emerging threats. At a time when opponents are fielding new ICBMs, nuclear-carrying submarines and missiles, and bomber weapons, and practicing “snap nuclear exercises,” steps that threaten to undercut the credibility of the US nuclear deterrent are particularly imprudent.

While, as noted, there must be a level of speculation on both sides of the NFU debate, the deterrence of war involving massive conventional and possible weapons of mass destruction warrants the greatest prudence. NFU opponents cannot prove that NFU would destroy deterrence in the future. But there is ample evidence that NFU would significantly degrade the important assurance of allies. And, we continue to believe that ambiguity with regard to the application of the US nuclear deterrent is a more prudent approach to deterrence than telling opponents via NFU that they may consider launching a massive conventional, chemical or biological attack without fear of the US nuclear deterrent. Our belief regarding what is and is not prudent is based *not* on nostalgia for the past, but on the multiple threads of contemporary opponents’ nuclear and non-nuclear threats, their expanding nuclear capabilities (and persistent Russian cheating on arms control agreements), Russian and Chinese aggressive and expansionist territorial drives, growing Western conventional force limitations, the enormous value of deterrence, and historical evidence suggesting the great value of US nuclear capabilities for deterrence purposes.



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1. This and all subsequent quotes by these authors are drawn from, Daryl Kimball and Kingston Reif, "Rethink Oldthink on No First Use," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, August 29, 2016, at <http://thebulletin.org/rethink-oldthink-no-first-use9816>.
2. Thomas Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), pp. 207-229, 231; see also, Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966), p. 225.
3. Chang Jae-soon, "Blinken: U.S. protections prevents S. Korea, Japan from going nuclear," *Yonhap News Agency*, June 30, 2016, available at <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/national/2016/06/30/26/0301000000AEN20160630000200315F.html>.
4. See Keith Payne, John Foster, et al., *Russian Strategy: Expansion, Crisis and Conflict* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2016).
5. Charles A. Duelfer, testimony, Senate Armed Services Committee, Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities: *The Weapons of Mass Destruction Program of Iraq*, Senate Hearing 107-573, 107th Cong., 2nd Sess. (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2002), pp. 92-93, at [http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=107\\_senate\\_hearings&docid=f:80791.pdf](http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=107_senate_hearings&docid=f:80791.pdf). See also the work by Kevin Woods, task leader of the Iraqi Perspectives Project at the Institute for Defense Analyses, and David Palkki, deputy director of National Defense University's Conflict Records Research Center. They presented their respective views on this subject as described at a Policy Forum Luncheon by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, "Knowing the Enemy: Iraqi Decisionmaking Under Saddam Hussein," September 20, 2010. This forum can be found at <http://www.cspanarchives.org/program/id/233237>.
6. Paul Sonne, Gordon Lubold, and Carol E. Lee, "'No First Use' Nuclear Policy Proposal Assailed by U.S. Cabinet Officials, Allies," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 12, 2016, available at <http://www.wsj.com/articles/no-first-use-nuclear-policy-proposal-assailed-by-u-s-cabinet-officials-allies-1471042014>.
7. Kimball and Reif, op. cit. See also, Tom Collina, "America Would Never Be the First to Use Nukes. So Why Say We Might?" *The National Interest*, July 28, 2016, at <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/american-would-never-be-the-first-to-use-Nukes-so-why-say-we-17168?page+show>.

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