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Learning the Right Lessons from China's Nuclear 'No First Use' Policy

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Critics of current U.S. nuclear policy are pressuring the Biden administration to adopt a nuclear “no first use” (NFU) policy, without precedent in U.S. history, that would state the United States will never employ nuclear weapons first, and only in response to another state’s employment of nuclear weapons. As an example, U.S. Senator Elizabeth Warren (D-MA), in conjunction with House Armed Services Committee Chairman Adam Smith (D-WA), introduced a single sentence bill that states, “It is the policy of the United States to not use nuclear weapons first.”¹ While similar bills have not found success in the past, the Biden administration may find increased pressure to reconsider the idea as a way to differentiate itself from the Trump administration and implement its declared policy of reducing the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. defense strategy.

The debate within the U.S. nuclear policy community of adopting a nuclear NFU policy, however, should shift from questions about the prudence of such a decision to analyzing the effects of other states having adopted their own nuclear NFU policies. In fact, the United States simply needs to look across the Pacific Ocean to China and consider the (perhaps apocryphal) words of Otto von Bismarck: “Fools pretend that one learns only at his own expense; I have



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always striven to learn at the expense of others.” China presents the perfect test case for the wisdom of adopting a nuclear NFU policy – that is, if its proponents are right, then China should be reaping all the supposed benefits a nuclear NFU policy brings. Yet even a cursory overview of China’s experience demonstrates this is not the case.²

In 1964, China tested its first nuclear weapon and immediately issued a statement pledging that it would never be the first to use nuclear weapons in a conflict, only in retaliation to a nuclear attack. Since then, it has kept its nuclear force numbers far below those of the United States and the Soviet Union, and subsequently Russia. In fact, the U.S. Department of Defense notes that, “...China almost certainly keeps the majority of its nuclear force on a peacetime status – with separated launchers, missiles, and warheads...” – precisely the posture that NFU advocates promote as indicative of a credible NFU policy.³ In short, China’s nuclear NFU policy – according to the standards set by NFU advocates – should be the most credible and believable because it has been long-standing policy since 1964, and the Chinese nuclear force is relatively small and de-alerted. If there was ever a country that embodied what a “credible” nuclear “no first use” policy is supposed to look like, it is China.

Therefore, the question is, has China benefited from its NFU policy in the ways predicted by NFU proponents – and should the United States then emulate Chinese policy? The answer to each question is “no,” as evidenced by the following points.

Nuclear NFU and Nonproliferation

First, proponents claim that adopting a nuclear NFU policy would increase the credibility of the U.S. stance against nuclear proliferation.⁴ That is, if the United States adopted a nuclear NFU policy, it could more credibly lead the world in efforts to prevent nuclear proliferation. Yet China’s NFU policy has produced no such boost in its credibility or had any discernable effect on proliferation, or the force posture and policy decisions of other states. Proponents of NFU regularly cite the nonproliferation advantages such a policy could bring, and yet China – which seemingly has the right mixture of force posture and policies to project NFU credibility – has not assumed a leadership position in nuclear nonproliferation. It is difficult to identify any Chinese nuclear nonproliferation effort that has been aided by its nuclear NFU policy that would not have occurred otherwise. Indeed, China has for years been a significant proliferator of nuclear weapons technologies, reportedly confirmed by no less than Pakistan’s most (in)famous proliferator, A.Q. Khan.⁵

In a similar manner, it is difficult to identify any U.S. nuclear nonproliferation priority that has been thwarted by the lack of a U.S. nuclear NFU policy.⁶ It seems inherently self-defeating if a state were considering supporting a U.S. nonproliferation effort, such as sanctioning North Korea for violating United Nations resolutions, but chose not to support that nonproliferation goal as a protest vote against the United States not adopting a nuclear NFU policy. Critics may



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state that if the United States adopted a nuclear NFU policy, it would have more moral standing to entice a state like China to join arms control negotiations or become more transparent on its programs and doctrine. Yet, the United States has already greatly reduced the size and salience of its nuclear stockpile, is the most transparent member of the NPT on its nuclear programs and doctrine, and regularly participates in nuclear arms control negotiations. Critics have yet to show, and it remains to be seen, how the United States issuing a nuclear NFU policy would be a turning point.

Reduced Risk of First Strike and Nuclear NFU

Proponents of a nuclear NFU policy also claim that when a country rules out a nuclear first strike, it will have a calming effect in crises and lower the overall risk of misperception.⁷ Again, however, China's experience in this arena is instructive. The obvious assumption behind the supposed calming effects of nuclear NFU policies is that other states will believe them, but the evidence for this assumption is severely lacking. Multiple U.S. defense publications repeatedly question whether China would actually adhere to its nuclear NFU policy, in all situations, even the most desperate.⁸ A particularly colorful example of U.S. disbelief in China's stated policy is U.S. Strategic Command's Commander, ADM Charles A. Richard, who said "... I think I could drive a truck through [the holes in] that no-first-use policy."⁹ Again, China by far should have the most "believable" nuclear NFU policy due to its force size and long-standing pledge, yet many in the U.S. defense establishment do not believe it - thus throwing the prudence of nuclear NFU pledges into question.

It is not just U.S. officials who doubt China's nuclear NFU policy however, there is also evidence that Indian officials have serious doubts about China's supposed commitment to never employing a nuclear weapon first.¹⁰ If Indian officials, who also have proclaimed a nuclear NFU policy, have doubts about the Chinese NFU policy, it seems all the more certain that if the United States adopted a NFU policy - with its larger nuclear arsenal and lack of history with the policy - then other states would not believe the United States, thus negating any possible benefit of reduced risk of a nuclear first strike. Proponents of a U.S. nuclear NFU policy, however, recognize this possibility and seek to strengthen potential U.S. credibility by advocating for radical, and often unilateral, nuclear force reductions - often promoted in the guise of "halting the arms race."

Nuclear NFU and Halting the Arms Race

One final benefit that nuclear NFU proponents often promote is that adopting such a policy could bring a halt to the "nuclear arms race."¹¹ According to this logic, if a state adopts a nuclear NFU policy, then it will not develop or modernize nuclear weapons that could be employed in a nuclear first strike. Categorizing weapons as "first strike" is inherently subjective however as just about any nuclear weapon could be employed first in a conflict. For example, if, as then-



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Secretary of Defense Ash Carter stated, a scenario involving an adversary escalating a failed conventional conflict through limited nuclear first use is more likely than a bolt-out-of-the-blue massive first strike, then perhaps nuclear weapons with limited ranges would be considered “first strike.”¹² Yet, others would likely argue that prompt intercontinental-range nuclear weapons that could theoretically be employed in a decapitation strike are a “first strike” danger.

This inherently ambiguous category of what weapons are compatible with a nuclear NFU policy works to the benefit of those who seek to reduce U.S. nuclear weapons unilaterally – which may be their unspoken goal.¹³ Proponents of nuclear NFU will likely use the legitimate fears that other states will not believe a U.S. nuclear NFU policy to recommend the United States vastly reduce its nuclear weapons arsenal and make radical changes to its force posture to make its policy more credible. U.S. disarmament groups would then achieve their end goal of vast U.S. nuclear reductions not through shifting threat perceptions and arms control negotiations, but via a change in U.S. policy.

Yet, there are no such disarmament groups in China to advocate for reigning in its projected nuclear weapon expansion to conform with its stated nuclear NFU policy – nor is it clear that the Chinese government views its policy as restrictive on its nuclear weapon expansion plans, the types of weapons it deploys, and how those choices are perceived by the United States. What is considered a Chinese “retaliatory” or “second strike” capability to the United States in peacetime may turn into a nuclear “first strike” possibility in wartime. If, for example, the United States announced that it would defend Taiwan against an impending Chinese invasion, a Chinese capability to strike Guam with nuclear missiles to disrupt U.S. assistance to Taiwan would transform from a likely second strike capability to a possible first strike threat. One can easily imagine the flip side of the argument, that states like China and Russia would call for the United States to eliminate the nuclear systems that they fear most, ostensibly because it would be incompatible with a U.S. nuclear NFU policy.

In terms of numbers of nuclear warheads, China’s nuclear NFU policy has not prevented it from being the only original nuclear-armed signatory of the NPT to increase the overall size of its nuclear arsenal from 2000-2021. Current U.S. military estimates project that China will at least double, if not triple or quadruple according to ADM Richard, its nuclear arsenal over this decade.¹⁴ The Soviet Union’s nuclear NFU policy that it adopted in 1982 was similarly ineffective in reducing the overall number of its nuclear weapons. After 1982, the Soviet Union continued to invest in major nuclear delivery systems that one could consider “first strike” capable and even increased the number of strategic re-entry vehicles.¹⁵ In short, there is little evidence that if a state issues a nuclear NFU pledge that it will lower its procurement of nuclear systems – except perhaps if the United States adopted such a policy, pro-disarmament groups would demand the United States radically reduce its nuclear stockpile to fit its new policy, their ultimate goal in the first place.



Conclusion

Should the United States seriously consider adopting a nuclear no first use policy in its ongoing Nuclear Posture Review, it need only examine the case of China to see the supposed benefits of such a policy are illusory and would likely be harmful to U.S. interests. Nuclear NFU proponents typically promote three benefits such a policy can bring: aiding nuclear nonproliferation efforts, reducing the chance for a nuclear first strike against the proposing state, and halting the nuclear arms race. China has maintained a nuclear NFU policy since 1964, with the prototypical nuclear forces and posture normally associated with such a policy, but there is very little evidence that China has benefitted in the three ways that nuclear NFU proponents say they should have. In reality, China's nuclear NFU policy has not led to greater gains in nuclear nonproliferation, its commitment to its nuclear NFU policy is widely questioned among the states the policy is aimed at influencing, and its nuclear NFU policy has not restrained its nuclear arms buildup. Further analysis will demonstrate that if the United States adopts a nuclear NFU policy, not only would the benefits be even less certain, but the harm could be even greater.¹⁶ Yet, in the meantime, China's example alone with its nuclear no first use policy should be instructive enough to discourage the United States from adopting such a policy.

1. Elizabeth Warren, "Warren, Smith, Colleagues Introduce "No First Use" Bill for Nuclear Weapons," *Warren.Senate.gov*, April 15, 2021, available at <https://www.warren.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/warren-smith-colleagues-introduce-no-first-use-bill-for-nuclear-weapons>.
2. One should note that China is not the only example of the failure of nuclear NFU policies to live up to their proponents' claims of effectiveness. The Soviet Union in 1982, for example, declared a nuclear NFU policy but senior U.S. defense officials near-uniformly dismissed it as either propaganda or as not credible.
3. U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, 2020), p. 88, available at <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Sep/01/2002488689/-1/-1/1/2020-DOD-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT-FINAL.PDF>.
4. See, for example, John P. Holdren, "The Overwhelming Case for No First Use," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 76, No. 1 (2020), p. 3.; and, James E. Cartwright and Bruce G. Blair, "End the First-Use Policy for Nuclear Weapons," *The New York Times*, August 14, 2016, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/15/opinion/end-the-first-use-policy-for-nuclear-weapons.html/>; and, Jon B. Wolfsthal, "Nuclear First-Use is Dangerous and Unnecessary," *Texas National Security Review*, July 2, 2019, available at <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-nuclear-first-use-and-presidential-authority/#essay3>.
5. "Pakistan Received Chinese Nuclear-Weapon Assistance, Khan Letter Asserts," *Nuclear Threat Initiative*, September 24, 2009, available at <https://www.nti.org/gsn/article/pakistan-received-chinese-nuclear-weapon-assistance-khan-letter-asserts/>.



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6. For example, President Barack Obama seemed very pleased with the progress his administration made in nuclear nonproliferation – despite the United States not issuing a nuclear NFU pledge. See, Barack Obama, “Obama: How We Can Make Our Vision Of a World Without Nuclear Weapons a Reality,” *The Washington Post*, March 30, 2016, available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/obama-how-we-can-make-our-vision-of-a-world-without-nuclear-weapons-a-reality/2016/03/30/3e156e2c-f693-11e5-9804-537defcc3cf6_story.html.
7. See, for example, Cartwright and Blair, “End the First-Use Policy for Nuclear Weapons,” op. cit.; and, McGeorge Bundy, George F. Kennan, Robert S. McNamara, and Gerard Smith, “Nuclear Weapons and the Atlantic Alliance,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 60, No. 4 (Spring, 1982), p. 765.
8. U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments*, op. cit., p. 86.
9. Charles A. Richard, as quoted in, United States Senate, *Hearing to Receive Testimony on United States Northern Command and United States Strategic Command in Review of the Defense Authorization Request for Fiscal Year 2021 and the Future Years Defense Program* (Washington, D.C.: Senate Armed Services Committee, February 13, 2020), p. 61, available at https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/20-04_02-13-2020.pdf.
10. See, for example, Kartik Bommakanti and Suyash Desai, *China’s Nuclear Ambiguity and Implications for India* (New Delhi, India: Observer Research Foundation, April 2021), p. 24, available at https://www.orfonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/ORF_OccasionalPaper_309_ChinaAmbiguity.pdf; and, Lora Saalman, “India’s No First Use Dilemma: Strategic Consistency or Ambiguity Towards China and Pakistan,” *SIPRI*, December 2, 2020, available at <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/blog/2020/indias-no-first-use-dilemma-strategic-consistency-or-ambiguity-towards-china-and-pakistan>; and, Ankit Panda, “India’s Rethink on ‘No First Use’ Nuclear Policy Won’t Surprise China or Pakistan,” *South China Morning Post*, August 25, 2019, available at <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3024256/indias-rethink-no-first-use-nuclear-policy-wont-surprise-china>.
11. See, for example, Holdren, “The Overwhelming Case for No First Use,” op. cit., p. 3.; and, Ramesh Thakur, “Why Obama should declare a no-first-use policy for nuclear weapons,” *TheBulletin.org*, August 19, 2016, available at <https://thebulletin.org/2016/08/why-obama-should-declare-a-no-first-use-policy-for-nuclear-weapons/>; and, Nina Tannenwald, “It’s Time for a U.S. No-First-Use Nuclear Policy,” *Texas National Security Review*, July 2, 2019, available at <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-nuclear-first-use-and-presidential-authority/#essay2>; and, Jon B. Wolfsthal, “Nuclear First-Use is Dangerous and Unnecessary,” op. cit.
12. Ash Carter, “Remarks by Secretary Carter to troops at Minot Air Force Base, North Dakota,” *Defense.gov*, September 26, 2016, available at <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/956079/remarks-by-secretary-carter-to-troops-at-minot-air-force-base-north-dakota/>.
13. See, for example, the citations in endnote #11.
14. U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments*, op. cit., p. ix.; and, Charles A. Richard, “Forging 21st Century Strategic Deterrence,” *Proceedings*, February 2021, available at <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2021/february/forging-21st-century-strategic-deterrence>.
15. U.S. Department of Defense, *Soviet Military Power 1990* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, September 1990), p. 67, available at <http://edocs.nps.edu/2014/May/SovietMilPower1990.pdf>.
16. I am writing a net assessment of the United States adopting a “sole purpose” or nuclear “no first use” policy, examining the supposed benefits and costs of such a policy against a historical background of other states that have adopted nuclear NFU in the past. National Institute anticipates publishing it as an Occasional Paper, tentatively titled, *A Net Assessment of Adopting Nuclear ‘No First Use’ and ‘Sole Purpose’ Policies*, within the next two months.



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