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How to Unsettle an Alliance: Subordinate Extended Deterrence to Antiquated Arms Control Initiatives

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Russia's war in Europe and China's expansionist, militarist foreign policy, and the quasi-alliance of these two predators seeking to re-order the globe,¹ have put the long-standing U.S. goals of extended deterrence and allied assurance under considerable strain. A complicating factor in this challenging context is the continuing U.S. propensity to pursue initiatives that appear to show relative disregard for allied concerns regarding extended deterrence—occasionally, it appears, in an effort to reduce U.S. reliance on nuclear weapons; this at a time when opponents are placing ever greater prominence on their nuclear capabilities for coercive and war-fighting purposes.

Illustrative of this propensity are the cases of Washington's retirement of the 1980s vintage sea-based nuclear cruise missile, the Tomahawk Land Attack missile (TLAM-N), contemporary opposition to a new sea-based cruise missile, and repeated cycles of expressed interest in the adoption of "sole purpose" or "No-First-Use" (NFU) policies. In these cases, U.S. moves and expressions of policy goals conflict with repeatedly-expressed allied concerns that these U.S. initiatives threaten to degrade the credibility of the U.S. extended deterrent—a key to their



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security positions. These cases illustrate well allied perceptions and expectations regarding extended deterrence and Washington's apparent willingness to subordinate allies' concerns to American domestic political pressures. They underscore the need to improve two-way understanding and communication about the realities of extended deterrence and assurance requirements as Western security measures must adapt to a dynamic threat environment. Without such an understanding, smoothing out the "rollercoaster" of U.S. and allies' relations will be a matter of luck rather than a deliberate effort.

Washington faces ongoing, unprecedented challenges in understanding, shaping and meeting extended deterrence and assurance requirements in its bid to sustain its alliance system—which is critical for U.S. security. The United States must adapt its approach to extended deterrence and assurance and effectively communicate the credibility of that deterrent to allies who are in diverse threat contexts and hold equally diverse threat perceptions. Failing to do so could easily lead to the unraveling of the alliance system that Washington has sustained at great cost over generations. And, if some allies increasingly feel compelled to consider independent means of deterrence, it could also drive a cascade of nuclear proliferation that overturns the decades-long U.S. non-proliferation goal.

The following presents two post-Cold War case studies that illustrate well allied interpretations of the requirements for extended deterrence—and Washington's apparent occasional willingness to subordinate allied extended deterrence concerns to its pursuit of an "anti-nuclear" agenda that is, at best, dubious in the contemporary threat context.

Eliminating TLAM-N Despite Allied Concerns

Key allies highly valued the U.S. TLAM-N system for its contribution to extended deterrence and assurance—two enduring U.S. goals. Nevertheless, it was taken off Navy ships, attack submarines, and land-based naval aircraft after George H. W. Bush announced the first *Presidential Nuclear Initiative* in 1991.² While the Navy withdrew TLAM-N by mid-1992 and eliminated the nuclear mission for surface ships, it retained the ability to return TLAM-N to deployment on attack submarines,³ reportedly within 30 days, as a hedge against the potential deterioration in the security environment.⁴

The 2009 bipartisan Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States (the Perry-Schlesinger Commission) concluded that "extended deterrence relies heavily on the deployment of nuclear cruise missiles on some Los Angeles class attack submarines" and that "some U.S. allies in Asia would be very concerned by TLAM-N retirement."⁵ Japanese then-Foreign Minister Katsuya Okada wrote to then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton that, "...it is necessary that trust in this deterrence be backed up by sufficient capability" and expressed a desire "to receive ongoing explanations of your government's extended deterrence policy, including any impact this might have on extended deterrence for Japan and *how this could be supplemented*" should TLAM-N be retired.⁶ Okada's statement is indicative of the importance the Japanese Government attributed to TLAM-N for extended deterrence, even as it would not come out in its direct support, for understandable reasons.



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TLAM-N remained in storage and potentially deployable until the Obama Administration announced a decision to retire and eliminate the missile altogether in its 2010 *Nuclear Posture Review Report* (NPR).⁷ That report stated, “this system serves a redundant purpose in the U.S. nuclear stockpile” and that “the deterrence and assurance roles of TLAM/N can be adequately substituted by these other means.”⁸ The elimination of TLAM-N was a subject of “controversy” in Japan and in Washington, with some arguing that the retirement of the system would undermine allied assurance and extended deterrence, and others praising President Obama for taking a unilateral step toward nuclear disarmament.⁹ Some allies were unprecedentedly open, and on occasion quite direct, in expressing concern both with the elimination of TLAM-N and the subsequent absence of any apparent new U.S. capabilities to replace the deterrent effect they attributed to TLAM-N.

The fact that TLAM-N was in storage rather than on surface ships reportedly came as an unwelcome surprise to U.S. allies in Asia, particularly in South Korea and Japan.¹⁰ Both countries reportedly “objected strenuously” to the announcement of a decision to retire TLAM-N because, in their eyes and in their assessments of Russia and China, alternative U.S. strategic systems with high yields, e.g., intercontinental-range ballistic missiles, were not sufficiently credible to provide extended deterrence reliably in the case of a regional conflict.¹¹ In short, some U.S. allies judged that TLAM-N provided a more credible deterrent capability, thus making it a valuable contributor to their assurance.¹² Despite allied concerns and the Obama Administration’s commitment to allied consultations prior to changes in U.S. nuclear posture, it moved forward with the decision to retire the TLAM-N, which the Navy finished executing in 2013.¹³

Only five years later, the Trump Administration’s 2018 NPR effectively reversed the decision to forego TLAM-N capabilities by calling for the development of a new low-yield, nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM-N).¹⁴ The NPR identified “the increasing need for flexible and low-yield options to strengthen deterrence and assurance” for allies among reasons for the reversal.¹⁵ Even before the 2018 NPR was made public, former senior officials, including from the Obama Administration, had called for the reintroduction of the TLAM-N capability as a response to Russia’s Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty violations.¹⁶ The Trump Administration reportedly valued a prospective new SLCM-N for strengthening assurance and extended deterrence.¹⁷

The Biden Administration has since sought strenuously to cancel the contemporary SLCM-N program, both in fiscal year (FY) 2023 and FY2024 budget requests, but Department of Defense and congressional support for the missile saved it in FY2023.¹⁸ The House version of the FY2024 National Defense Authorization Act mandates the Secretary of Defense to establish SLCM-N as a program of record, giving it a more permanent place in the Department of Defense acquisition cycle.¹⁹ Nevertheless, the future of the SLCM-N now appears problematic.²⁰

The TLAM-N and SLCM-N case is illustrative of Washington’s occasional, apparent subordination of allied views regarding extended deterrence and assurance—seemingly in favor of satisfying a domestic political constituency generally opposed to U.S. nuclear



capabilities. This case also illustrates the inconsistency with which the United States pursues capabilities that allies deem important – with Washington declaring them redundant at one time, necessary shortly thereafter, only to become the object of contemporary intra-governmental dispute. Such inconsistency “is a problem. It undermines extended deterrence, and it could undermine assurance too,” pointed out Sugio Takahashi, Head of the Defense Policy Division of the Policy Studies Department at the National Institute for Defense Studies in Tokyo, Japan.²¹ It diminishes U.S. credibility and creates avoidable challenges to assuring allies and extending deterrence.

NFU, “Sole Purpose,” and the 2010 *Nuclear Posture Review Report*

For over a decade, allies have consistently expressed sharp, substantive opposition to U.S. proposals for a NFU or “sole purpose” nuclear policy – two different titles for essentially the same policy constraint on U.S. deterrent strategies.²² This allied opposition appears to be based largely on understandable fears that the adoption of such policies would weaken extended deterrence²³ – a fear almost certain to be accurate in plausible circumstances.²⁴ Yet, some U.S. administrations have repeatedly expressed interest in NFU or “sole purpose” – raising questions among allies about U.S. intentions and the continuing credibility of the U.S. extended deterrent.

In 2009, President Obama famously emphasized America’s commitment to nuclear disarmament,²⁵ stating that Washington would take “concrete steps towards a world without nuclear weapons” and reduce “the role of nuclear weapons in our national security strategy.”²⁶ As one of these steps, the Obama Administration reportedly considered adopting an NFU or “sole purpose” declaratory policy during the lead-up to the 2010 NPR, and again toward the end of the administration.

Ultimately, the 2010 NPR itself rejected “a universal policy that deterring nuclear attack is the sole purpose of nuclear weapons” but stated that the administration “will work to establish conditions under which such a policy could be safely adopted.”²⁷ This approach included strengthening conventional forces and reducing the role of nuclear weapons in the U.S. national security strategy, strengthening regional security architectures, and eliminating chemical and biological weapons.²⁸ The 2010 NPR explicitly recognized the importance the administration attributed to allies in these decisions when it stated it would “consult with allies and partners regarding the conditions under which it would be prudent to shift to a policy under which deterring nuclear attack is the sole purpose of U.S. nuclear weapons.”²⁹ Allied concerns appear to have played a significant role in the administration’s rejection of the policy for the time.³⁰ Robert Einhorn, Special Advisor for Nonproliferation and Arms Control at the Department of State, said at a rollout event for the 2010 NPR, “In our discussions with allies and friends around the world – and we had many frequent contacts with those friends – they indicated to us that such a radical shift [sole purpose] in [sic] U.S. approach could be unsettling to them.”³¹



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Despite changes in governments, allied opposition to “sole purpose” and NFU policies remains remarkably consistent, even amid occasional rhetorical expressions in support of nuclear disarmament. In a 2009 letter, then-Foreign Minister Okada lauded President Obama’s calls for a world without nuclear weapons and expressed interest in commencing discussions about a “sole purpose” nuclear weapons policy.³² Yet, Japan has aggressive opponents and relies on the U.S. extended deterrent, “with nuclear deterrence at its core.”³³ Tokyo describes current threats as “an era of crisis” not seen since the Second World War.³⁴ Given the dangerous trends in Japan’s neighborhood, particularly including the Russian, Chinese, and North Korean promotion of nuclear capabilities and threats, successive Japanese governments *have rejected calls* for the United States to adopt an NFU or “sole purpose” declaratory policy, and occasionally expressed an interest in discussing the policy.³⁵

The Second Obama Administration

Toward the end of his second term, the Obama Administration reportedly again considered implementing an NFU declaratory policy. A group of Democratic Senators urged President Obama to adopt an NFU declaratory policy “to bolster U.S. national security and advance the commitment” the President made in Prague in 2009.³⁶ The idea again had significant support within the disarmament community, disappointed by President Obama’s rejection of NFU and “sole purpose” in his first term.³⁷ By then, however, it was blatantly clear that the “restart” the Obama Administration attempted with Russia had come to naught as Moscow invaded yet another country, this time Ukraine, in 2014. The invasion was Russia’s second in six years (Russia invaded Georgia in 2008) and reflected the worsening security environment that made “sole purpose” or NFU policies less likely to gain traction.

It is, therefore, unsurprising that the administration’s reconsideration ran into opposition from U.S. allies and reportedly prompted several of them, including Japan, South Korea, France and the United Kingdom, to lobby the Obama Administration against the change.³⁸ While nuclear disarmament advocate Joe Cirincione mocked these allies as “nervous nellys,” as if they did not understand their own security requirements,³⁹ the Obama Administration’s continued rejection of a “sole purpose” or NFU declaration had extensive support among experts and policy-makers in allied countries and the United States.

For example, the administration’s proposal reportedly was opposed by several high-level cabinet officials, including the then-Secretaries of Defense, Energy, and State.⁴⁰ Then-Secretary of the Air Force Deborah Lee James also publicly expressed concerns about the policy, and several other high-level military officials rejected it.⁴¹ Allies reportedly learned about the administration’s discussion of potentially implementing an NFU declaratory policy from the news, which, if true, indicates poor communication on the U.S. side despite the 2010 NPR’s explicit commitment to improving communications about these matters with allies.⁴² Japan, under a different government than during President Obama’s first term, and South Korea, remained opposed to the NFU nuclear weapons declaratory policy and, according to experts, “would likely have deep concerns about a sole purpose commitment.”⁴³



In January 2017, then-Vice President Joseph Biden stated he believed the administration had “made enough progress that deterring—and if necessary, retaliating against—a nuclear attack should be the *sole purpose* of the U.S. nuclear arsenal.”⁴⁴ While the outgoing Obama Administration ultimately again decided against significant changes in the U.S. declaratory policy, the Biden Administration returned to the cause four years later.

NFU, “Sole Purpose,” and the Biden Administration

Candidate Biden continued to support an NFU nuclear declaratory policy during his presidential campaign for the 2020 elections. In 2019, two prominent Democrats, the House Armed Services Committee Chairman, Adam Smith and Senator Elizabeth Warren, a Senate Armed Services Committee member, introduced a “No First Use Act,” which would have legally prohibited the United States from using nuclear weapons first in a conflict.⁴⁵ The bill did not make it into law but it was an indication that a “sole purpose” policy would become a prominent part of the 2020 Democratic Party platform.

President Biden’s team members spoke in favor of an NFU or “sole purpose” declaratory policy prior to joining the administration, including then-nominated (and later confirmed) Ambassador Bonnie Jenkins, Undersecretary of State for Arms Control and International Security.⁴⁶ President Biden himself reiterated his belief that “*the sole purpose* of the U.S. nuclear arsenal should be deterring—and, if necessary, retaliating against—a nuclear attack.”⁴⁷ He said he would “work to put that belief into practice, in consultation with the U.S. military and U.S. allies.”

During the preparation of the 2022 NPR, the Biden Administration reportedly sent a questionnaire to allies asking them about their views regarding U.S. adoption of “sole purpose” and “NFU” policies.⁴⁸ Allied responses apparently were overwhelmingly negative, including from the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Japan, and Australia.⁴⁹ As noted, successive Japanese governments have opposed U.S. initiatives to adopt such declaratory policies.⁵⁰ Discussing the issue, an Australian expert noted that when “doubts have arisen about US commitments in the past, Taiwan, Japan, South Korea, and even Australia have toyed with their own nuclear weapons programs,” and that there “is no reason to assume they will not do so again.”⁵¹ Jüri Luik, Estonia’s permanent representative to NATO, publicly commented that in Estonia’s opinion, the present nuclear posture should be maintained, i.e., the United States should continue to reject NFU or “sole purpose.”⁵² Ben Wallace, British Secretary of State for Defence, spoke out specifically against changes in U.S. declaratory nuclear policy toward NFU and “sole purpose.”⁵³

To its great credit, the Biden Administration did not adopt NFU or “sole purpose” in its 2022 NPR, despite apparent domestic pressure to do so and endorsement in the 2020 party platform. Negative allied and public responses appear to have contributed to the administration’s foregoing NFU or “sole purpose.” Nevertheless, and undoubtedly to some allies’ distress, the 2022 NPR identified a “sole purpose” policy as a continuing U.S. goal⁵⁴—signaling an enduring aspiration that seems wholly obtuse to repeatedly-expressed allied



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concerns – and to the need to *reinforce* credible extended deterrence in the contemporary threat context.

From a U.S. perspective, the apparent fact that over years Washington has seriously considered the adoption of NFU or “sole purpose,” but on each occasion ultimately did not do so, may be seen as exemplary U.S. deference to allied concerns. From an allied perspective, however, it can only be disturbing that the same policy battle with Washington must be fought again and again to stem an initiative that so obviously is contrary to the need for credible extended deterrence and allied assurance – an initiative that continues to be a stated U.S. policy aspiration. Allies must consider their options if they are unsuccessful the next time this familiar cycle reemerges.

The rise of revisionist nuclear-armed states, Russia’s February 2022 invasion of Ukraine and the prominent, coercive role Russia’s nuclear weapons play in this conflict (including shaping U.S. and allied choices with respect to the kinds of weapons they provide to Ukraine and when), hopefully will finally bring to an end consideration of NFU and “sole purpose” policies. The conflict makes obvious Russia’s coercive nuclear threats intended to provide cover for an expansionist war on a scale not seen in Europe since World War II – and Moscow’s potential willingness to employ nuclear weapons. Significant asymmetries in U.S. and Russia’s nuclear forces, particularly in short-range nuclear weapons, and China’s own nuclear threats and effort to reach parity or more on the strategic level, call into question whether the current and planned U.S. nuclear force posture is sufficient to sustain credible deterrence of adversaries and assure allies in the coming years. Amid these developments, the perennial political pressure for “sole purpose” or NFU in the United States can only be described as an archaic vestige of a time when a benign “new world order” and great power amity were fully expected.⁵⁵ Suffice to say that the actual world order now contrasts sharply with Washington’s past sanguine expectations.

Conclusion

The TLAM-N/SLCM-N case study illustrates well the frequent differences in U.S. and allied perspectives regarding the requirements for extended deterrence and assurance, and Washington’s occasional apparent willingness to subordinate allies’ views – seemingly in deference to domestic political constituencies. Further illustrative of this tendency is the fact that some presidential administrations continue to show interest in NFU or “sole purpose” nuclear policies – despite the fact that U.S. allies and partners strongly oppose them as being detrimental to extended deterrence. Continued U.S. attraction to antiquated “anti-nuclear” initiatives likely to degrade extended deterrence clearly is not the only source of the U.S.-Allied incongruence, but it surely is an avoidable cause.

The different U.S. and allied perceptions and expectations regarding assurance and extended deterrence require an improved two-way understanding of the contemporary realities of deterrence and assurance. Mutual recognition of those realities and their requirements would contribute both to the continued viability of the U.S. alliance structure and



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to the goal of nuclear non-proliferation. The alternative contributes to unforced errors and alliance strains.

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³ Paul Kerr and Mary Beth Nikitin, “Nuclear-Armed Sea-Launched Cruise Missile (SLCM-N),” In Focus, *Congressional Research Service*, Updated December 16, 2022, p. 1, available at <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF12084>.

⁴ John Harvey and Robert Soofer, “Strengthening Deterrence with SLCM-N,” *Atlantic Council Issue Brief*, November 5, 2022, p. 4, available at <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Strengthening-Deterrence-with-SLCM-N.pdf>.

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⁶ Katsuya Okada, “Letter to the US State Secretary Hillary Clinton,” December 24, 2009, available at https://icnndngo-japan.files.wordpress.com/2010/01/20091224_okada_letter_en.pdf. (Emphasis added).

⁷ Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review Report*, April 2010, pp. 28, 46, available at https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/features/defenseReviews/NPR/2010_Nuclear_Posture_Review_Report.pdf.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁹ Yukio Satoh, *U.S. Extended Deterrence and Japan’s Security*, Livermore Papers on Global Security, No. 2, October 2017, p. 38, available at <https://cgsl.llnl.gov/content/assets/docs/satoh-report-final.pdf>.

¹⁰ Kevin Chilton, “On US Nuclear Deterrence,” *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (Winter 2017), p. 9, available at https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/26271631.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A669bccdfe65c13b65f9589cec42c45b7&ab_segments=&origin=&initiator=&acceptTC=1.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹³ Kerr and Nikitin, p. 1, op. cit.

¹⁴ Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review Report*, 2018, p. 54, available at <https://media.defense.gov/2018/Feb/02/2001872886/-1/-1/1/2018-NUCLEAR-POSTURE-REVIEW-FINAL-REPORT.PDF>.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

¹⁶ Sandy Winnefeld and James Miller, “Bring Back the Nuclear Tomahawks,” *Proceedings*, Vol. 143, No. 4 (May 2017), available at <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2017/may/bring-back-nuclear-tomahawks>.



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²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review Report*, April 2010, pp. viii, 16, available at https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/features/defenseReviews/NPR/2010_Nuclear_Posture_Review_Report.pdf.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 17, 47.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

³⁰ Brad Roberts, "Debating Nuclear No-first-use, Again," *Survival*, Vol. 61, No. 3 (June-July 2019), p. 43, available at <https://cgsr.llnl.gov/content/assets/docs/Debating-Nuclear-No-first-use-Again.pdf>.

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³⁹ *Ibid.*

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