

Dangerous Nuclear Policy Idea No. 2: A U.S. Policy of No First Use or Sole Purpose

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

President Biden has expressed support for a no-first-use (NFU) nuclear declaratory policy, meaning that the U.S. pledges never to use nuclear weapons first.

Such a policy carries real risk, including eroding deterrence against adversary aggression as well as allies' confidence in extended U.S. deterrence commitments.

The Administration should reject calls to adopt an NFU policy and continue the long-standing nuclear declaratory policy of calculated ambiguity.

President Joe Biden and some congressional Democrats have expressed support for establishing a nuclear declaratory policy of no first use (NFU) or “sole purpose.” Under an NFU policy, the United States pledges never to use nuclear weapons first in a conflict. This functionally means the same as declaring that the sole purpose of nuclear weapons is to deter or retaliate only against *nuclear* attack—precluding the possibility of using nuclear weapons in response to chemical, biological, cyber, or conventional attacks, regardless of their magnitude.¹

U.S. nuclear declaratory policy has consistently been one of calculated ambiguity, stating that the United States would only use nuclear weapons in “extreme circumstances,” including “significant non-nuclear strategic attacks.”² Not only have compelling arguments for adopting an NFU policy not

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been made, but NFU would carry real risk, including eroding deterrence against adversary aggression as well as allies' confidence in extended deterrence commitments.

Moreover, while the United States faces advancing threats and increasing challenges to its nonproliferation objectives, there is no evidence that current U.S. declaratory policy is driving these trends, nor that changing policy would have a moderating effect. For these reasons, the Obama Administration, Congress, senior military leaders, and U.S. allies have all opposed an NFU policy.³ The Biden Administration should similarly reject calls to adopt an NFU policy and continue the long-standing declaratory nuclear policy of calculated ambiguity.

Why It's Dangerous

The U.S. should reject the self-limitation of an NFU or sole-purpose policy because it:

Erodes Deterrence Against Adversary Aggression. An NFU policy would assure adversaries they are at no risk of nuclear attack if they launched a chemical, biological, cyber, or conventional attack against the United States no matter how devastating. The more certainty that adversaries have about U.S. plans to use nuclear force, the easier they can plan their aggression to remain below the nuclear threshold. Adversaries could become emboldened to use conventional forces against early warning or nuclear command-and-control assets as preparation for a nuclear strike. China might become emboldened in its quest to overtake Taiwan if a nuclear response is off the table. Proponents argue that NFU would decrease the risk of a war escalating to the nuclear level, but the United States should aim to deter fighting completely. Nuclear forces—meaning the real possibility that they could be employed—deter war more effectively than conventional forces, especially as the United States loses conventional superiority in some domains.⁴ For example, during the Cold War, the United States used the threat of nuclear force to deter a conventional attack on NATO, convincing Moscow that such an attack could trigger nuclear war.⁵

Ultimately, NFU erodes deterrence because it gives adversaries one less response to consider—and to fear—as they weigh the benefits and costs of taking aggressive actions. As former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Joseph Dunford summarized, the “current policy [of calculated ambiguity] is one that complicates an adversary’s decisionmaking process, and I wouldn’t recommend any change to simplify an adversary’s

decisionmaking calculus.”⁶ The President should have all tools at his disposal to deter and respond to attacks that have the potential to inflict major damage against U.S. populations and critical strategic assets.

Erodes Allies’ Confidence in U.S. Extended Deterrence Commitments. An NFU policy effectively communicates to U.S. treaty allies that the United States will not use nuclear force in their defense no matter how deadly a conventional attack or one using weapons of mass destruction. Allies have repeatedly agreed not to acquire their own nuclear weapons because they can rely on the United States to defend them from existential threats. NFU could lead to nuclear weapons proliferation if allies doubt U.S. security guarantees, an outcome that would degrade the United States’ long-standing commitment to nonproliferation.⁷ For these reasons, allies have opposed an NFU policy in the past.⁸ Sole-purpose proponents argue that nuclear deterrence is no longer credible against conventional attacks⁹—but if correct, the solution is to modernize the U.S. nuclear deterrent, not to undo the promise of the U.S. nuclear umbrella.¹⁰

Will Not Influence Adversaries. Russia declares that it reserves the right to use nuclear force in response to non-nuclear attacks, and recent doctrine indicates a greater willingness to use tactical nuclear weapons first on the battlefield.¹¹ China’s NFU policy is too ambiguous to take seriously.¹² As long-time senior defense official Frank Miller described, to think that adversaries will mimic a U.S. NFU declaration “suggests a strong degree of cultural arrogance.”¹³ The United States has maintained a restrained nuclear posture for the past few decades, yet Russia and China have been building new nuclear weapons. Proponents have provided no evidence that NFU or sole purpose would reverse this behavior.

What Key U.S. Senior Leaders Say

Recent commanders of U.S. Strategic Command (STRATCOM), including General Robert Kehler,¹⁴ General John Hyten, and Admiral Charles Richard, have consistently opposed adopting an NFU policy. Last year, Admiral Richard stated, “My best military advice would be to not adopt a ‘no first use’ policy.... [It] would have a significant negative effect on our commitment to our allies.”¹⁵

When he was STRATCOM Commander, General Hyten explained that “anything that simplifies an enemy’s decision-making calculus would be a mistake and that’s exactly what [no first use] would do. That would create an environment where an adversary could think that crossing the line would be okay and that the United States would not respond to whatever the situation was.”¹⁶

President Barack Obama’s former Cabinet officials, Secretaries Ash Carter, John Kerry, and Ernie Moniz, all reportedly *opposed* adopting an NFU policy due to concern from allies.¹⁷ As Carter explained, “It has been the policy of the United States for a long time to extend its nuclear umbrella to friends and allies and thereby contribute to the deterrence of conflict and the deterrence of war and many of our friends and allies have benefited from that over time.”¹⁸

In a spring 2020 *Foreign Affairs* article, then-candidate Joe Biden expressed his support for sole purpose, and said that he would “work to put that belief into practice, in consultation with the U.S. military and U.S. allies.”¹⁹ If President Biden follows through on his commitment to consult with the military and allies, then clearly, he should reach the same conclusion as they did, and as previous Presidents have, to oppose an NFU or sole-purpose policy.

Recommendations for the U.S.

The Biden Administration should:

- **Not adopt a no-first-use or sole-purpose declaratory policy for nuclear weapons.** The Administration should continue the long-standing policy of calculated ambiguity.

Congress should:

- **Reject any efforts to legislate a no-first-use or sole-purpose policy.** Congress should remain focused on nuclear modernization.

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Endnotes

1. See Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, “No First Use: Frequently Asked Questions,” <https://armscontrolcenter.org/issues/no-first-use/no-first-use-frequently-asked-questions/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CSole%20purpose%E2%80%9D%20refers%20to%20a,%2C%20biological%2C%20or%20cyber%20attacks> (accessed January 26, 2021), and Report of the International Commission on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament, *Eliminating Nuclear Threats: A Practical Agenda for Global Policymakers*, Canberra/Tokyo, November 2009, p. 173, http://www.icnnd.org/reference/reports/ent/pdf/ICNND_Report-EliminatingNuclearThreats.pdf (accessed January 29, 2021). The report establishes that NFU and sole-purpose use are the same idea formulated in different ways.
2. U.S. Department of Defense, *2018 Nuclear Posture Review*, February 2018, p. 21, <https://media.defense.gov/2018/Feb/02/2001872886/-1/-1/1/2018-NUCLEAR-POSTURE-REVIEW-FINAL-REPORT.PDF> (accessed November 19, 2020).
3. Josh Rogin, “U.S. Allies Unite to Block Obama’s Nuclear ‘Legacy,’” *The Washington Post*, August 14, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/allies-unite-to-block-an-obama-legacy/2016/08/14/cdb8d8e4-60b9-11e6-8e45-477372e89d78_story.html?utm_term=.c0e0d6c4d694 (accessed December 22, 2020).
4. For example, “China has already achieved parity with—or even exceeded—the United States in several military modernization areas, including shipbuilding, landbased conventional ballistic and cruise missiles, and integrated air defense systems.” See Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2020: Annual Report to Congress*, September 2020, p. 38, <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Sep/01/2002488689/-1/-1/1/2020-DOD-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT-FINAL.PDF> (accessed January 29, 2021).
5. Franklin C. Miller, “Sole Purpose: A Policy Without a Purpose,” *Real Clear Defense*, September 19, 2020, https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2020/09/19/sole_purpose_a_policy_without_a_purpose_577999.html (accessed January 26, 2021).
6. U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, “Hearing to Receive Testimony on the Department of Defense Budget Posture in Review of the Defense Authorization Request for Fiscal Year 2020 and the Future Years Defense Program,” March 14, 2019, p. 27, <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/19-25-03-14-19.pdf> (accessed February 1, 2021).
7. South Korea has toyed with the idea of acquiring its own nuclear forces. See Michelle Ye Hee Lee, “More than Ever, South Koreans Want Their Own Nuclear Weapons,” *The Washington Post*, September 13, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/09/13/most-south-koreans-dont-think-the-north-will-start-a-war-but-they-still-want-their-own-nuclear-weapons/> (accessed January 26, 2021).
8. Rogin, “U.S. Allies Unite to Block Obama’s Nuclear ‘Legacy,’” *The Washington Post*, August 14, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/allies-unite-to-block-an-obama-legacy/2016/08/14/cdb8d8e4-60b9-11e6-8e45-477372e89d78_story.html (accessed January 26, 2021).
9. Steven Pifer, “Nuclear Weapons: It’s Time for Sole Purpose,” Stanford University Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies, September 15, 2020, <https://fsi.stanford.edu/news/nuclear-weapons-it%E2%80%99s-time-sole-purpose> (accessed January 26, 2021).
10. Patty-Jane Geller, “The Biden Administration Must Prioritize Extended Deterrence,” *The National Interest*, December 28, 2020, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/biden-administration%C2%A0must-prioritize-extended-deterrence-175269> (accessed January 26, 2021).
11. Cynthia Roberts, “Revelations About Russia’s Nuclear Deterrence Policy,” *War On The Rocks*, June 19, 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/06/revelations-about-russias-nuclear-deterrence-policy/#:~:text=The%20Russian%20Federation%20reserves%20the,very%20existence%20of%20the%20state> (accessed January 27, 2021).
12. Admiral Richard stated: “I think I could drive a 15 truck through that no-first-use policy.” See U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, “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,” February 13, 2020, p. 61, https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/20-04_02-13-2020.pdf (accessed January 27, 2021).
13. Miller, “Sole Purpose: A Policy Without a Purpose.”
14. U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, “Hearing to Receive Testimony on Nuclear Policy and Posture,” February 28, 2018, p. 43, https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/19-18_02-28-19.pdf (accessed January 26, 2021).
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18. Brian W. Everstine, “Carter: No Plans for No First Use,” *Air Force Magazine*, September 29, 2016, <https://www.airforcemag.com/Carter-No-Plans-for-No-First-Use/> (accessed January 26, 2021).
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