

Once Again: Why a ‘No First Use’ Nuclear Policy Is a Very Bad Idea

It would reduce the potential cost of using conventional, chemical, and biological attacks for would-be aggressors.

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The Obama administration reportedly is [seriously considering](#) adopting a “no first use” (NFU) nuclear-weapons policy. A prospective NFU policy would be a U.S. commitment never to be the first to use nuclear weapons — as opposed to existing policy, which retains some ambiguity regarding when and if the U.S. would use nuclear weapons. An NFU policy would eliminate that ambiguity for U.S. 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 U.S. nuclear ambiguity helps to deter war, while adopting an NFU policy would undercut that deterrence.

How so? Under the existing policy of ambiguity, potential aggressors such as Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran must contemplate the reality that if they attack us or our allies, they risk possible U.S. nuclear retaliation. There is no doubt whatsoever that this risk of possible U.S. 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 U.S. nuclear deterrence was established after World War II. That is a 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 U.S. nuclear retaliation as long as they attack us or our allies with advanced conventional, chemical, and/or biological weapons. They would risk U.S. nuclear retaliation only if they attack with nuclear weapons.

Numerous historical case studies demonstrate without a doubt that some aggressors look for such openings to undertake military moves they deem critical. 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 U.S. nuclear deterrent helps to shut down the possibility that would-be aggressors will contemplate such paths.

A U.S. NFU policy would be particularly dangerous at a time when Russia and China may be armed with [chemical](#) and [biological](#) weapons and are pursuing expansionist policies in Europe

and Asia, respectively. 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. In Asia, China is the strongest military power and is expanding its reach against U.S. allies, with tactics that include building and militarizing islands in the South China Sea. At a time when key U.S. allies face unprecedented threats from powerful neighbors, the U.S. should not reduce the calculation of risks that Russia and China must confront in their respective expansionist drives by adopting an NFU policy. Indeed, this is a breathtaking understatement in a world in which aggressors still exist, as do advanced conventional, chemical, and possibly biological weapons, and in which another world war using “only” such modern non-nuclear weapons could cause death levels far beyond the 80 to 100 million lost in World Wars I and II.

In addition, the Obama administration [declares nuclear nonproliferation](#) to be its highest nuclear-policy goal. Yet U.S. adoption of an NFU policy would mean that the United States could no longer reassure allies with its nuclear umbrella. No more would their foes confront the risk of U.S. nuclear retaliation when considering a devastating attack on U.S. allies and partners. Pulling down the U.S. nuclear umbrella would compel some allies and partners who have forgone nuclear weapons in the past, on the basis of the promised U.S. nuclear-deterrence umbrella, to consider acquiring their own nuclear weapons. This could include South Korea and Japan. For this reason, additional nuclear proliferation is virtually an inevitable consequence of a U.S. NFU policy.

Now is not the time for U.S. 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.” 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 its 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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