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Naive Nuclear Proposals for a Dangerous World

Liquidating America's ICBMs and declaring a 'no-first-use' policy would embolden enemies abroad.

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The White House announced in June that it is considering new initiatives to advance President Obama's goal of nuclear disarmament. The U.S. has already reduced its deployed nuclear arsenal by about 80% since the Cold War ended. The announcement inspired a flurry of proposals for further reductions and limitations, including calls for a no-first-use nuclear policy—which some in Congress endorsed this week—and the elimination of America's intercontinental ballistic-missile force.

These two proposals are being promoted by antinuclear activists and some former senior officials, including former Defense Secretary William Perry. Yet their adoption would encourage opponents' provocations, degrade our ability to deter large-scale wars, undermine the security of already-frightened U.S. allies in Europe and Asia, and contribute to the further proliferation of nuclear weapons. That's why every Republican and Democratic president for 70 years has opposed declaring to the world that the U.S. will never use nuclear weapons except in response to an opponent's first use.

Advocates of no-first-use charge that if the U.S. rejects that policy, it must then embrace a nuclear *first*-use policy, about which they then rail. But this charge falsely posits only two possible policy options—no-first-use or first-use. There's a third option: Continue the current policy of purposeful ambiguity regarding the U.S. use of nuclear weapons.

U.S. nuclear ambiguity compels enemies to consider the possibility that even their massive use of conventional force, or chemical and biological weapons, could lead to a U.S. nuclear response. By raising the potential cost of aggression against the U.S. and its allies, our policy of nuclear ambiguity has helped prevent highly lethal attacks. After the Gulf War, Iraqi Gen. Wafic Al Sammarai, the former head of Iraqi Military Intelligence, [said](#) that Saddam Hussein did not use chemical or biological weapons because: "The warning was quite severe and quite effective, the allied troops were certain to use nuclear arms and the price will be too dear and too high."

Before the establishment of nuclear deterrence, the great powers of Europe often went to war against one another many times a century. Even the catastrophic losses of World War I could not deter World War II. For the seven decades since 1945 nuclear

deterrence has helped prevent the repeat of this ugly cycle.

Adopting no-first-use would give opponents a path to using massive force, including chemical and biological weapons, while avoiding the U.S. nuclear deterrent. This would be an especially risky step at a time when Russia and China are expanding aggressively in Central Europe and Asia, and when the U.S. capability to defeat massive attacks in those areas is problematic. They must be deterred, which is why some of America's allies have expressed strong opposition to no-first-use, especially those allies endangered by Russian, North Korean and Chinese threats.

A no-first-use policy would compel some of those allies to consider acquiring their own deterrent. South Korea already is embroiled in a domestic debate about its lack of nuclear capabilities. A no-first-use decision in Washington now could be the straw that settles that debate in favor of a South Korean nuclear capability, with a consequent cascade of nuclear proliferation in Asia.

The proposal to eliminate America's ICBMs is equally misguided. The antinuclear activists' favorite arguments against ICBMs are that they are unnecessary for deterrence, too expensive, and on a "hair-trigger" that could accidentally start World War III.

But the ICBM force fills two critical deterrence roles. First, it denies opponents the option of neutralizing much of the U.S. nuclear deterrent via a first strike against the very small number of U.S. bomber and submarine bases. Conversely, the elimination of America's ICBMs would make such a strategy plausible and enable opponents to focus on countering U.S. submarines and bombers.

Second, the existence of more than 400 ICBMs denies opponents any realistic expectation that a limited nuclear attack against the U.S. homeland could avoid a devastating reply. The knowledge that the U.S. could still strike back helps to deter all such first-use strategies.

Given the modest cost of the U.S. ICBM force—less than 1% of the defense budget annually—why threaten the effectiveness of deterrence by eliminating it at a time when Russia and China are pursuing significant expansions of their nuclear capabilities, and Russia boasts about having a nuclear first-use policy?

Finally, U.S. ICBMs are not on a hair trigger, as their opponents claim. To protect against the possibility of an accidental strike, the U.S. entered into agreements in the 1990s with other nuclear powers to replace actual targets with broad ocean sites as the targets in their missiles' guidance computers. The U.S. continues this practice—an inconvenient fact rarely acknowledged by hair-trigger critics.

Recent advocacy for U.S. adoption of a no-first-use policy and the elimination of America's ICBMs ignores all such real-world considerations. These are naive proposals—suited to a benign world that does not exist and offered by activists who

have yet to figure that out.

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