



No Alternative in Sight

Keith Payne, The Cipher Brief, October 6, 2016, <https://www.thecipherbrief.com/article/north-america/no-alternative-sight-1091>

Since June 2016, there has been a spirited debate in Washington regarding the U.S. adoption of a No-First-Use (NFU) policy. A NFU policy would be a U.S. declaration that it would never be the first to use nuclear weapons; their use would be limited to a possible U.S. response to an opponent's first-use of nuclear weapons. U.S. adoption of NFU would be a departure from the long-established policy of ambiguity regarding nuclear use.

Every Democratic and Republican administration for seven decades, including the Obama Administration to date, has rejected a NFU policy. This rejection has most recently been re-emphasized by the U.S. Secretaries of Defense, State, and Energy. There are serious and substantive reasons for rejecting NFU.

For example, the United States and many allies rely on nuclear deterrence to help prevent opponents from attacking with massive conventional, chemical, or biological forces. With the existing policy of nuclear ambiguity, opponents considering such highly-lethal, but non-nuclear attacks must include in their calculations the deterring possibility that their aggression could lead to a U.S. nuclear response.

There is ample historical evidence that this nuclear deterrent posture has helped to prevent opponents from using massive conventional, chemical, and biological weapons. For example, the most comprehensive open analyses of the First Gulf War have concluded that U.S. nuclear deterrence helped prevent Saddam Hussein's use of chemical or biological weapons. Iraqi General Wafic Al Sammarai, then head of Iraqi Military Intelligence, said after the war that Saddam did not use chemical or biological specifically 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." This is a real-world illustration of nuclear deterrence preventing highly-lethal, non-nuclear attacks.

In contrast, a U.S. NFU policy would be intended to assure opponents that the United States would withhold its nuclear deterrent in response to highly-lethal but non-nuclear attacks. As such, an NFU policy could easily degrade deterrence by removing or reducing the U.S. nuclear deterrent effect from opponents' calculations. Consequently, an NFU policy could increase the prospects for highly-lethal, non-nuclear war.

The prospect of so degrading deterrence is no small concern. The past seven decades of nuclear deterrence have seen the elimination of great power war and a dramatic decline in the percentage of the world's population killed in war. Indeed, the early decades of the 20th Century prior to nuclear deterrence included two world wars that took the lives of up to 100 million people in fewer than 15 combined years of warfare. The 70 years since have witnessed nothing remotely comparable. Nuclear deterrence certainly appears to have stopped the constant resort to great wars that filled earlier centuries. The U.S. adoption of NFU would threaten to reverse this invaluable and unprecedented transformation of international relations.

A primary claim of NFU advocates is that the West has an overwhelming preponderance of conventional power *globally* and no longer needs to rely on nuclear deterrence to deter massive conventional, chemical, or biological attacks. Opponents supposedly would not dare to launch a massive non-nuclear attack given Western global superiority, so U.S. nuclear deterrence is unnecessary for this purpose, and the adoption of a NFU policy could not undercut deterrence.

Unfortunately, the claim of a global Western preponderance, which provides all needed deterrence effect against non-nuclear threats, is problematic in some geographic areas, with little hope for a turn around. Those problematic geographical areas include key U.S. allies and friends on Russia's Western border. Recent open studies have concluded that Russia could occupy some NATO states well before a concerted NATO response. President Vladimir Putin himself has said that Russian troops could be in five NATO capitals within two days.

The possibility that NATO might have to fight a highly destructive, protracted non-nuclear war to recover lost NATO territory does not appeal to the U.S. or allies—particularly following the massive bloodletting of the 20th Century. They now, understandably, much prefer to deter such attacks in the first place, and consequently, many allies actively oppose U.S. adoption of a NFU policy.

NFU advocates frequently claim that a U.S. NFU policy is *preferred* by U.S. allies or soon would be. Yet, there is abundant evidence that many allies are sharply opposed to a U.S. NFU policy. Several, reportedly including South Korea, recently have argued strongly against NFU in Washington. Allies who face security threats from great-power neighbors understandably attach considerable importance to the deterrence of highly-lethal, non-nuclear attack provided by the U.S. "nuclear umbrella" and see great value in preserving it for this purpose.

Another reason for opposing a U.S. NFU policy follows from this allied concern about the future of deterrence. Many U.S. allies agreed to the 1968 Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty based on their confidence in the extended U.S. nuclear umbrella. Degradation of that deterrent could easily increase the motivation among some to acquire their own deterrent capabilities, including nuclear.

NFU proponents typically deny that nuclear proliferation is a possible result of a U.S. NFU policy. But public opinion polls in South Korea and statements by leading politicians there already show significant support for an independent nuclear capability. U.S. adoption of a NFU policy now would exacerbate the security fears driving those views.

In conclusion, the preference for effective deterrence has been shared by Democratic and Republican presidents for seven decades and is a main reason why they have consistently rejected a NFU policy. Until highly-lethal, non-nuclear threats against us and our allies no longer exist or can be addressed absent nuclear deterrence, the U.S. must sustain its policy of nuclear ambiguity. Unfortunately, we do not live in a benign world, and despite idealistic yearnings, no alternative to nuclear deterrence is in sight.