



THE PFD FILE



Resolved: The United States should adopt a declaratory nuclear policy of no first use.

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Topic Overview

Resolved: The United States should adopt a declaratory nuclear policy of no first use.

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I. Introduction

The November/December 2020 resolution asks the straightforward question of whether the US should adopt a declaratory nuclear policy of no first use. The meanings of the resolitional terms are clear, as is the topic question. Thus, the topic wording and potential topicality issues need no lengthy discussion. It will be far more important that teams understand the history of the topic, as well as the relatively recent developments in the US’s nuclear policy. We begin with the resolitional concepts.

II. Resolitional Concepts

The “United States” refers to the United States of America, and more specifically refers to the President of the United States, when viewed in context of the rest of the resolution. The President of the United States has the authority to declare the nuclear policy of the United States. While Congress retains authority to declare war, the President always retains the decision of whether and when to use nuclear weapons in a state of conflict. In other words, Congress cannot tell the President what military strategy and tactics to use because the President is constitutionally the Commander-in-Chief.

“Declaratory nuclear policy” refers to the circumstances under which the United States will and won’t use nuclear weapons. “Declaratory” is key in the phrase “Declaratory nuclear policy” because the US could always “adopt” a no first use nuclear policy, but never make it public. But what is essential to a no first use nuclear policy is that such a policy is declared, or made public, to the entire world, including our allies, other nuclear states, non-nuclear states, and non-state actors. Some nuclear states: (1) declare what their nuclear policy is; (2) have limited declarations of what their nuclear policy; or (3) have no declaratory nuclear policy.

“Nuclear states” refer to countries whose governments have nuclear weapons as part of their military. Nuclear states include the US, Russia, China, France, the United Kingdom,

India, Pakistan, North Korea, and Israel. Israel has never publicly confirmed it has nuclear weapons. Other countries are considered “non-nuclear states.”

A “no first use” nuclear policy means that the US would not be the first to use nuclear weapons in the event of a conflict. In other words, the US would not preemptively strike with a nuclear weapon, and in the event of an on-going, non-nuclear conflict, the US would not be the first to escalate the non-nuclear conflict into a nuclear conflict by being the first to use nuclear weapons. A no first use nuclear policy can be contrasted with a first strike nuclear policy, which authorizes the US to be the first to use nuclear weapons in a conflict. A first strike nuclear policy doesn’t mean that the US will use nuclear weapons first, only that it retains the option to do so.

Nuclear weapons should be contrasted with conventional weapons and other weapons of mass destruction. Conventional weapons are essentially non-nuclear weapons (planes, drones, non-nuclear bombs, guns, tanks, etc.). Other weapons of mass destruction include chemical and biological weapons. There are also cyber weapons, which are computer programs that attack and seek to destroy a target’s technological capacities.

III. Arguments & Tips for Debating on this Topic

Impact Calculus. This topic concerns US and international nuclear policy. Nuclear policy, which is part of the US’s foreign military, is very complex. Part of the reason for the complexity is that a lot nuclear policy is theoretical. This is problematic because nuclear weapons are so dangerous. If used, nuclear weapons could destroy life and civilization on Earth as we know it. Many have argued that nuclear war would permanently destroy all life on Earth; but others disagree. Thus, it is concerning that nuclear policy is all theoretical in terms of anticipating what is best going to deter nuclear conflict and non-nuclear conflict.

Central to most debates on this topic is going to be which side reduces the risk of nuclear war the most. In other words, the ultimate impact to avoid will be nuclear war or the use of nuclear weapons that could escalate to nuclear war. The evidence in this File relates to a few scenarios include (1) conflict with Russia, which the US has historically had the Cold War and other flashpoints in the past; (2) an arms race with China, which has a no first use nuclear policy, but could abandon its policy if the US does not adopt a no first use nuclear policy; and (3) war with North Korea, which lacks conventional weapons to take on the United States first with conventional warfare. There is evidence on both sides that adopting a no first use nuclear policy would reduce and increase the risk of war.

Other considerations include the risk of accidents, miscalculations, and proliferation. Because nuclear policies require military strategists and leaders to calculate and simulate losses in war, there is a risk of miscalculation that could result in the first use of nuclear weapons. Also, if nuclear weapons can be used first, there is an increased risk that accidents could cause accidental launches that are devastating.

Allied Proliferation & Modelling. One of the bigger concerns on this topic is how US allies would respond to the US adopting a no first use nuclear policy. Many US allies do not have nuclear weapons. But the US has promised to defend those allies if they were ever to be attacked. These security guarantees essentially place our allies under what is called the US's "nuclear umbrella." This means that while these countries do not have their own nuclear weapons, they are reliant on the US to potentially use nuclear weapons to defend them. There is conflicting evidence on both sides of this topic about whether, if the US adopts a no first use nuclear policy, US allies would feel sufficiently unsafe to acquire their own nuclear weapons. One of the biggest goals of international military policy is to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons, for various reasons. Thus, the issue of "allied proliferation" is significant on the topic of the US adopting a no first use nuclear policy.

Another consideration is whether other nuclear states would model the US's decision to adopt a no first use nuclear policy. Only China has declaratory nuclear policy of no first use. Other nuclear states have limited no first use nuclear policies, for example, that they won't use nuclear weapons first unless in the event of a chemical or biological weapons attack. There is conflicting evidence on both sides of the topic as to whether

Other Impacts. Nuclear weapons and nuclear war are not the only impacts to consider on this topic. Nuclear policy can influence the likelihood of conventional warfare and the use of chemical and biological weapons, and cyberattacks. There is conflicting evidence on both sides about whether a first strike nuclear policy prevents conventional conflicts between states, and whether a no first use nuclear policy would cause more or less conventional conflicts. Another argument is that the threat of a first strike nuclear policy in response to chemical and biological weapons deters the use of those weapons.

Solvency. Because nuclear policy is theoretical, and technically not legally binding on any country, the underlying mechanism for a no first use nuclear policy or a first strike nuclear policy being effective is truly the credibility of the country establishing the policy. There is conflicting evidence on both sides about whether the US's current first strike nuclear policy is credible; there is also conflicting evidence on both sides as to whether a US no first use nuclear policy would be credible. The credibility of policies is necessary to influencing the actions and conduct of other foreign governments. If the US is not credible, then the ultimate outcome of any particular nuclear policy is not fairly predictable.

Summary. It appears that this topic is relatively evenly balanced. Both sides have good offensive and defensive argument to make. The trick on this topic is going to be balancing solvency of a no first use nuclear policy, or the solvency of the status quo's first strike nuclear policy, against the risk of nuclear war and the use of non-nuclear weapons. The final speeches should focus on impact calculus in terms of who has the biggest, most likely impacts.

IV. Conclusion

This File contains sample cases, evidence on both sides of the topic, and blocks to arguments teams are likely to hear on the topic. TFF wishes you the best of luck in November/December 2020!

Definitions

United States

1. a federation of states especially when forming a nation in a usually specified territory

Source: Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary 2020

Should

1. Used to indicate obligation, duty, or correctness, typically when criticizing someone's actions
2. Indicating a desirable or expected state

Source: Oxford English Dictionary 2020

Should

1. Used to express obligation or duty:
2. Used to express probability or expectation

Source: American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language 2020

Should

1. used in auxiliary function to express obligation, propriety, or expediency

Source: Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary 2020

Adopt

1. Take up or start to use or follow (an idea, method, or course of action)
2. Take on or assume (an attitude or position):
3. Formally approve or accept (a report or suggestion):

Source: Oxford English Dictionary 2020

Adopt

1. To take and follow
2. To take up and make one's own:

Source: American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language 2020

Adopt

1. to take up and practice or use
2. to accept formally and put into effect

Source: Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary 2020

Declaratory

1. serving to declare, set forth, or explain
2. declaring what is the existing law declaratory statute
3. declaring a legal right or interpretation
4. to accept formally and put into effect

Source: Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary 2020

Declaratory

1. Say something in a solemn and emphatic manner.
2. Acknowledge possession of (taxable income or dutiable goods)
3. Announce that one holds (certain combinations of cards) in a card game

Source: Oxford English Dictionary Online 2020

Nuclear

1. Denoting, relating to, or powered by the energy released in nuclear fission or fusion.
2. Denoting, possessing, or involving weapons using nuclear energy.

Source: Oxford English Dictionary Online 2020

Nuclear

1. being a weapon whose destructive power derives from an uncontrolled nuclear reaction
2. of, produced by, or involving nuclear weapons the nuclear age nuclear war
3. armed with nuclear weapons

Source: Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary 2020

Nuclear

1. Of, using, or possessing atomic or hydrogen bombs: nuclear war; nuclear nations.

Source: American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language 2020

Policy

1. a definite course or method of action selected from among alternatives and in light of given conditions to guide and determine present and future decisions
2. high-level overall plan embracing the general goals and acceptable procedures especially of a governmental body

Source: Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary 2020

Policy

1. A course or principle of action adopted or proposed by a government, party, business, or individual.

Source: Oxford English Dictionary Online 2020

Policy

1. A plan or course of action, as of a government, political party, or business, intended to influence and determine decisions, actions, and other matters: American foreign policy; the company's personnel policy.
2. A course of action, guiding principle, or procedure considered expedient, prudent, or advantageous

Source: American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language 2020

No First Use

1. No first use (NFU) refers to a pledge or a policy by a nuclear power not to use nuclear weapons as a means of warfare unless first attacked by an adversary using nuclear weapons.

Source: Wikipedia 2020, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/No_first_use

Pro Case #1

We affirm the resolution. Resolved: The United States should adopt a declaratory nuclear policy of no first use. Our sole contention is that adopting a no first use nuclear policy would reduce the risk of nuclear war, which is the US's highest priority.

First: Preventing nuclear war is the most important goal for the US; a no first use nuclear policy would help prevent nuclear war. Nina Tannenwald, director of the International Relations at Brown University, M.A., Columbia School of International & Public Affairs, PhD, International Relations, Cornell University, 2019:¹

The most important goal for the United States today should be to prevent the use of nuclear weapons. Since the United States dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 — the only use of nuclear weapons in warfare — it has established a nearly 74-year tradition of not using nuclear weapons. This tradition is the single most important fact of the nuclear age. Today, the risks of nuclear war are increasing. Heightened geopolitical tensions, a more complex calculus of deterrence in a multipolar nuclear world, renewed reliance on nuclear weapons, technological arms races in nuclear and non-nuclear systems, the collapse of arms control, and the return of nuclear brinkmanship have all resulted in highly dangerous deterrence policies that, through miscalculation or accident, could plunge the United States into a nuclear war with North Korea, Russia, or China. The nuclear-armed states urgently need to step back from this dangerous situation by adopting a no-first-use policy that would significantly reduce the risk of nuclear war.

Second: A no first use nuclear policy is necessary for the US to promote norms, identity, and discourse that discourage nuclear war. Tannenwald 2019 continues:

Finally, constructivists, who focus on the role of norms, identity, and discourse, emphasize that a declared NFU policy is an important way to strengthen norms of nuclear restraint and the nearly 74-year tradition of non-use. Strong statements from leaders about the need to avoid using nuclear weapons can help reduce tensions, just as irresponsible tweets can increase them. In the constructivist view, an NFU policy is also a diplomatic tool that can be used to signal that a state is a responsible nuclear power. As Modi recently put it, “India is a very responsible state. We are the only country to have a declared NFU [sic]. It’s not because of world pressure, but because of our own ethos. We will not move away from this, whichever government comes to power.”¹¹ Indeed, India’s NFU pledge has proved useful for portraying Pakistan as a relatively irresponsible custodian of its nuclear arsenal. Likewise, Indian leaders use their NFU pledge as a way to resist pressures to sign any treaties that would restrict India’s nuclear arsenal.

¹ It’s Time for a U.S. No-First-Use Nuclear Policy, Texas National Security Review, Vol. 2, Issue 3, Aug. 1, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/its-time-for-a-u-s-no-first-use-nuclear-policy/>

Third: A no first use nuclear policy is supported by an objective cost-benefit and evidence-based analysis of the risks of nuclear war. Jon B. Wolfsthal, nuclear security expert, former Senior Director at the National Security Council for Nonproliferation and Arms Control, and member of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists Science and Security Board, writes in 2019:²

In today's nuclear landscape, the United States and its allies need to objectively consider the costs and benefits of maintaining a first-use nuclear posture. An evidence-based assessment heavily favors the United States adopting NFU and should motivate a broader effort, led by the United States, to convince other nuclear states to do the same, following India and China's example. American nuclear weapons should only be assigned the mission they can credibly carry out: deterring other states from using nuclear weapons against America and its allies through the threat of retaliation. Going beyond this strains credibility, decreases crisis stability, and undermines the believability of America's other defense commitments.⁵⁸ It also has little, if any, proven deterrent effect on potential adversaries.

For the foregoing reasons, we urge a Pro Ballot.

² Nuclear First-Use Is Dangerous and Unnecessary, Policy Roundtable: Nuclear First-Use and Presidential Authority, July 2, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-nuclear-first-use-and-presidential-authority/#essay3>

Pre-flow – Pro Case #1

- Our sole contention is that adopting a no first use nuclear policy would reduce the risk of nuclear war, which is the US's highest priority.

First: Preventing nuclear war is the most important goal for the US; a no first use nuclear policy would help prevent nuclear war. Nina Tannenwald, director of the International Relations at Brown University, M.A., Columbia School of International & Public Affairs, PhD, International Relations, Cornell University, 2019:

Second: A no first use nuclear policy is necessary for the US to promote norms, identity, and discourse that discourage nuclear war. Tannenwald 2019 continues:

Third: A no first use nuclear policy is supported by an objective cost-benefit and evidence-based analysis of the risks of nuclear war. Jon B. Wolfsthal, nuclear security expert, former Senior Director at the National Security Council for Nonproliferation and Arms Control, and member of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists Science and Security Board, writes in 2019:

Pro Case #2

We affirm the resolution. Resolved: The United States should adopt a declaratory nuclear policy of no first use. Our sole contention is that adopting a no first use nuclear policy is necessary to prevent a costly nuclear arms race with China.

First: The US should adopt a no first use nuclear policy to match China's, so as to avoid another arms race and cold war. Nina Tannenwald, director of the International Relations at Brown University, M.A., Columbia School of International & Public Affairs, PhD, International Relations, Cornell University, 2019:³

China's NFU policy, on the other hand, while consistent with its small nuclear force, is less well explained by asymmetries in conventional forces. China adopted an NFU policy at the time of its first atomic bomb test in 1964, when its peasant army was still transitioning to a modern military force. Part of the explanation for this decision has to do with Mao's thinking about the nuclear bomb as a "paper tiger," but Chinese leaders have primarily seen an NFU policy as an effective way to signal the purely defensive nature of the small Chinese nuclear arsenal and to avoid a U.S.-Soviet-style arms race.⁵ An NFU policy also conveys the spirit of "peaceful coexistence" to which China is committed.

Second: A no first use nuclear policy would ensure militarization is smaller and less threatening. Tannenwald 2019 continues:

This perspective thus emphasizes the value of an NFU pledge in structuring operational forces to make them smaller and less threatening. When Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, soon after entering office in 1961, sent a directive to the Joint Chiefs of Staff about strategic force requirements, he stated that the first assumption shaping requirements was that "we will not strike first with such weapons."⁸ McNamara's directive was undoubtedly partly an effort to stem Air Force demands for a first-strike capability and the vast procurement of weaponry it would require. This directive, in effect, repudiated the extended deterrent doctrine that the United States would respond to a Soviet conventional attack in Europe with nuclear weapons.

³ It's Time for a U.S. No-First-Use Nuclear Policy, Texas National Security Review, Vol. 2, Issue 3, Aug. 1, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/its-time-for-a-u-s-no-first-use-nuclear-policy/>

Third: The US's first strike nuclear policy has promoted arms races, which are costly to the US. Dr. John P. Holdren, S.B. and S.M. degrees from M.I.T. and a Ph.D. (1970) from Stanford in aerospace engineering and theoretical plasma physics, writes on 2020:⁴

When the United States deploys nuclear weapons of types and in postures intended to make first-use credible, it not only incentivizes non-nuclear-armed potential adversaries to get their own nuclear weapons; it also incentivizes this country's nuclear-armed potential foes to upgrade their nuclear forces to deny the United States any first-use advantage (or to gain such an advantage for themselves). As the Cold War demonstrated, this syndrome drives a potentially endless cycle of action and reaction, compounded by worst-case assessment on both sides. This arms racing is not only endlessly costly; it can actually increase the danger that a crisis will escalate to nuclear war when one side or the other perceives it would be better off going first.

For the foregoing reasons, we urge a Pro Ballot.

⁴ The overwhelming case for no first use, Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, Volume 76, Jan. 13, 2020, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00963402.2019.1701277>

Pre-flow – Pro Case #2

- Our sole contention is that adopting a no first use nuclear policy is necessary to prevent a costly nuclear arms race with China.

First: The US should adopt a no first use nuclear policy to match China's, so as to avoid another arms race and cold war. Nina Tannenwald, director of the International Relations at Brown University, M.A., Columbia School of International & Public Affairs, PhD, International Relations, Cornell University, 2019:

Second: A no first use nuclear policy would ensure militarization is smaller and less threatening. Tannenwald 2019 continues:

Third: The US's first strike nuclear policy has promoted arms races, which are costly to the US. Dr. John P. Holdren, S.B. and S.M. degrees from M.I.T. and a Ph.D. (1970) from Stanford in aerospace engineering and theoretical plasma physics, writes on 2020

Pro Case #3

We affirm the resolution. Resolved: The United States should adopt a declaratory nuclear policy of no first use. Our sole contention is that adopting a no first use nuclear policy would reduce the risk of nuclear war through accidents and miscalculations.

First: A no first use nuclear policy would reduce the US's risk of accidental, unauthorized, and preemptive use of nuclear weapons. Nina Tannenwald, director of the International Relations at Brown University, M.A., Columbia School of International & Public Affairs, PhD, International Relations, Cornell University, 2019:⁵

Implementing these steps would significantly reduce the risk of accidental, unauthorized, mistaken, or preemptive use. The removal of threats of a nuclear first strike would also strengthen strategic and crisis stability.²⁷ Of perhaps equal importance, adopting an NFU policy would help address humanitarian concerns and reduce the salience of nuclear weapons.²⁸ Likewise, it would “be more consistent with the long-term goal of global nuclear disarmament and would better contribute to US nuclear non-proliferation objectives.”²⁹

Second: A no first use nuclear policy would reduce the risk of nuclear miscalculation by other nuclear states. Tannenwald 2019 continues:

As Kingston Reif and Daryl Kimball of the Arms Control Association have argued, “a clear U.S. no-first-use policy would reduce the risk of Russian or Chinese nuclear miscalculation during a crisis by alleviating concerns about a devastating U.S. nuclear first-strike.”²⁴ This would mean that the United States would rely on nuclear weapons only to deter nuclear attacks. Adopting this approach would involve more than “cheap talk,” for it would require meaningful doctrinal and operational changes.²⁵ Specifically, it would allow the United States to adopt a less threatening nuclear posture. It would eliminate first-strike postures, preemptive capabilities, and other types of destabilizing warfighting strategies. It would emphasize restraint in targeting, launch-on-warning, alert levels of deployed systems, procurement, and modernization plans. In other words, it would help shape the physical qualities of nuclear forces in a way that renders them unsuitable for missions other than deterrence of nuclear attacks.²⁶

⁵ It's Time for a U.S. No-First-Use Nuclear Policy, Texas National Security Review, Vol. 2, Issue 3, Aug. 1, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/its-time-for-a-u-s-no-first-use-nuclear-policy/>

Third: A no first use nuclear policy would improve stability and reduce the risk of nuclear accidents and miscalculations. Jon B. Wolfsthal, nuclear security expert, former Senior Director at the National Security Council for Nonproliferation and Arms Control, and member of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists Science and Security Board, writes in 2019:⁶

Despite statements from the Defense Department to the contrary, adopting an NFU posture would improve stability and reduce the risks of nuclear conflict through deliberate action, accident, or miscalculation. When states maintain first-use postures and position their forces to carry out such threats, the pressure to preempt grows, as does the risk of accidental use. Changes in declaratory policy that rejects first-use, backed by operational changes designed to make first-use options less credible — such as de-alerting and de-mating — would increase decision time and reduce the risks of accidental or unintended nuclear escalation. Of course, neither America nor its adversaries can be totally certain that the first use of nuclear weapons is off the table based on policy statements alone, which is why such a statement needs to be matched by changes to nuclear operations that make first-use less plausible. Thus, any move to reconsider nuclear first-use would be observable, raising the nuclear threshold, reducing the dangers of sudden escalation, and giving decision-makers more time to de-escalate a potential nuclear crisis. Given today's dangers, such changes are urgently needed.

For the foregoing reasons, we urge a Pro Ballot.

⁶ Nuclear First-Use Is Dangerous and Unnecessary, Policy Roundtable: Nuclear First-Use and Presidential Authority, July 2, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-nuclear-first-use-and-presidential-authority/#essay3>

Pre-flow – Pro Case #3

- Our sole contention is that adopting a no first use nuclear policy would reduce the risk of nuclear war through accidents and miscalculations.

First: A no first use nuclear policy would reduce the US's risk of accidental, unauthorized, and preemptive use of nuclear weapons. Nina Tannenwald, director of the International Relations at Brown University, M.A., Columbia School of International & Public Affairs, PhD, International Relations, Cornell University, 2019:

Second: A no first use nuclear policy would reduce the risk of nuclear miscalculation by other nuclear states. Tannenwald 2019 continues:

Third: A no first use nuclear policy would improve stability and reduce the risk of nuclear accidents and miscalculations. Jon B. Wolfsthal, nuclear security expert, former Senior Director at the National Security Council for Nonproliferation and Arms Control, and member of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists Science and Security Board, writes in 2019

Pro Case #4

We affirm the resolution. Resolved: The United States should adopt a declaratory nuclear policy of no first use. Our sole contention is that adopting a no first use nuclear policy would result in a nuclear conflict with Russia.

First: The risk of nuclear war is as high today, if not higher than, it was during the Cold War because current world leaders misunderstand the risks of nuclear weapons. Jon B. Wolfsthal, nuclear security expert, former Senior Director at the National Security Council for Nonproliferation and Arms Control, and member of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists Science and Security Board, writes in 2019:⁷

Some experts believe the risk of nuclear use is as high today as during the worst days of the Cold War.⁵⁹ This danger, however, remains widely underappreciated and misunderstood by both the public and national leaders. Sadly, too many nuclear practitioners, officials, and experts similarly discount the dangers of accidental use and other risks associated with nuclear weapons generally, and with first-use strategy specifically. For nuclear first-use proponents, nuclear weapons are seen as affordable and low-risk assets,⁶⁰ despite repeated accidents, incidents, and spiraling costs. Even the officials and officers assigned the task of managing American nuclear operations often overestimate their own ability to avoid mistakes and control nuclear dangers.⁶¹

Second: The US's lack of a no first use nuclear policy has caused Russia to radicalize its nuclear policy to adopt a policy of preemption. Wolfsthal 2019 continues:

We are seeing this play out already. Russian experts have recently begun raising the possibility that the demise of the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty could lead Russia to adopt a policy of preemption.⁶⁵ Ignoring for a moment that Russia violated that treaty and bears the bulk of the blame for its demise, that Russian officials are talking about a nuclear preemption strategy further demonstrates the growing instability in Europe and the increased nuclear risks that come with it. Recent moves by the Trump administration and NATO to address the loss of the treaty — including increasing overflights of nuclear-capable aircraft and building a new generation of ground-based, nuclear-capable missile systems — do nothing to reduce these risks and in some ways make them worse.

⁷ Nuclear First-Use Is Dangerous and Unnecessary, Policy Roundtable: Nuclear First-Use and Presidential Authority, July 2, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-nuclear-first-use-and-presidential-authority/#essay3>

Third: A first use nuclear policy is not effective to deter Russian aggression.
Wolfsthal 2019 continues:

In the oft-cited scenario of Russian aggression against a NATO ally, it is not clear that American nuclear first-use is needed or would be credible. In the case of a conflict in a Baltic state stoked by Russian agents and actions, nuclear weapons would play no credible role. If a conflict escalates to a full conventional conflict between Russia and NATO, the consequences are unpredictable to a point. There is, of course, real concern about how long it would take NATO to stop and repel a Russian conventional attack. But in a purely conventional scenario, NATO forces over time would be able to defeat any Russian attack on NATO territory. Russia appears to believe this as well, which is why until now it has avoided a direct conventional attack against NATO (this rationale is at least as credible, if not more, as the idea that Russia is deterred from such attacks by the threat of a NATO nuclear first-strike). It is also why Russia has put forward a nuclear escalation strategy that would counter conventional losses with a first nuclear strike to protect the existence of the Russian state. It remains unclear under what scenario it would make sense for NATO to escalate to the nuclear level when such a move would lead to a Russian nuclear response either in Europe, against the United States, or both. This remains true even given concerns about Russian cyber and unconventional attacks on U.S. command-and-control and early warning assets. By using nuclear weapons first, NATO would make it harder to prevail conventionally and, thus, such action should be avoided. Of course, should Russia initiate a nuclear attack to avoid conventional defeat, all options would be legitimately on the table and no-first-use constraints would be lifted. Furthermore, if Russia were the aggressor against NATO, U.S. nuclear use would limit if not eliminate the ability of Washington to rally the global community to condemn and punish Russia for its actions. The world would not be concerned with Russia's aggression and would instead focus on the United States crossing the nuclear threshold for the first time in more than 70 years. Moreover, some would see Russia's inevitable retaliation as legitimate.

For the foregoing reasons, we urge a Pro Ballot.

Pre-flow – Pro Case #4

-Our sole contention is that adopting a no first use nuclear policy would result in a nuclear conflict with Russia.

First: The risk of nuclear war is as high today, if not higher than, it was during the Cold War because current world leaders misunderstand the risks of nuclear weapons. Jon B. Wolfsthal, nuclear security expert, former Senior Director at the National Security Council for Nonproliferation and Arms Control, and member of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists Science and Security Board, writes in 2019:

Second: The US's lack of a no first use nuclear policy has caused Russia to radicalize its nuclear policy to adopt a policy of preemption. Wolfsthal 2019 continues:

Third: A first use nuclear policy is not effective to deter Russian aggression. Wolfsthal 2019 continues

Pro Responses to Con Contentions

Responses To: No Modeling

They argue that “Other nuclear states won’t model a US no first use nuclear policy.” My responses are:

1. By adopting a no first use nuclear policy, the US can promote multilateral efforts that allows other nuclear states to follow the US’s lead.

Nina Tannenwald, director of the International Relations at Brown University, M.A., Columbia School of International & Public Affairs, PhD, International Relations, Cornell University, It’s Time for a U.S. No-First-Use Nuclear Policy, Texas National Security Review, Vol. 2, Issue 3, Aug. 1, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/its-time-for-a-u-s-no-first-use-nuclear-policy/>

The United States ought to unilaterally adopt an NFU policy, and ask other nuclear-armed states to do the same. This would constitute the formal adoption of what is already essentially de facto U.S. policy.³³ A U.S. NFU policy would create political space for Russia to follow suit: For Russia to consider NFU, its concerns about U.S. ballistic missile defenses, imbalances in conventional forces, and issues of NATO enlargement would need to be addressed. The United States would also need to tackle the issue of extended deterrence with its allies and move toward conventional extended deterrence.³⁴ India and Pakistan would need a *modus vivendi* on Kashmir, while the United States and North Korea would need to sign a non-aggression pact. In fact, the United States could actually negotiate a mutual NFU agreement with North Korea. The United States is extremely unlikely to use nuclear weapons first on North Korea, therefore an agreement that provided a basis for imposing some restraint on the North Korean arsenal would be in America’s interest.³⁵

2. The US can encourage others to follow the US’s lead, by the US following the lead of other nuclear states with no first use nuclear policies. Tannenwald 2019 continues:

Doctrinal and operational changes would need to follow such a declaration. China’s restrained nuclear arsenal provides the best example of an NFU pledge implemented in practice. Unlike the United States and Russia, China keeps its warheads and missiles separated. It has not developed precision-strike nuclear war-fighting capabilities, such as tactical nuclear weapons, and it does not keep its forces on “launch-on-warning” alert. China has also invested heavily in conventional military modernization so that it would not have to consider nuclear escalation in a conventional war.³⁶ India, too, keeps its warheads and missiles separate in support of its NFU pledge, though some analysts argue that India’s NFU policy does not run especially deep and that it “is neither a stable nor a reliable predictor of how the Indian military and political leadership might actually use nuclear weapons.”³⁷ Nevertheless, both countries’ operational postures reflect (to some degree) their NFU policies.³⁸ The United States and the other nuclear powers should move in this direction.

Pro Response to Con Contentions

Responses To: A no first use nuclear policy is unenforceable.

They argue that “A no first use nuclear policy is not legally enforceable.” My responses are:

1. This is nonunique: This means our first strike policy is not legally enforceable if a president didn’t want to strike first.
2. All international law is not legally enforceable; that doesn’t mean we should care about what international law and foreign policies, especially when they directly relate to prevent global nuclear war.
3. **Just because no first use nuclear policies are legally unenforceable doesn’t mean they’re not beneficial.**

Nina Tannenwald, director of the International Relations at Brown University, M.A., Columbia School of International & Public Affairs, PhD, International Relations, Cornell University, It’s Time for a U.S. No-First-Use Nuclear Policy, Texas National Security Review, Vol. 2, Issue 3, Aug. 1, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/its-time-for-a-u-s-no-first-use-nuclear-policy/>

A second theoretical perspective, “liberal institutionalism,” emphasizes the role of rules and institutions, both domestic and international, in stabilizing expectations and behavior. According to this theory, even if no-first-use pledges are unenforceable, they are not necessarily meaningless. To be meaningful, an NFU pledge must be built into domestic institutions, that is, the structure of operational military capabilities.⁷ A genuine NFU policy would require that nuclear forces be consistent with an “assured retaliation” posture that eschews counterforce objectives — the ability to destroy an adversary’s nuclear arsenal before it is launched.

Pro Response to Con Contentions

Responses To: Ally Proliferation

They argue that “our allies will acquire nuclear weapons.” My responses are:

1. Normal means of implementing a no first use nuclear policy would include consultation with allies.

Jon B. Wolfsthal, nuclear security expert, former Senior Director at the National Security Council for Nonproliferation and Arms Control, and member of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists Science and Security Board, Nuclear First-Use Is Dangerous and Unnecessary, Policy Roundtable: Nuclear First-Use and Presidential Authority, July 2, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-nuclear-first-use-and-presidential-authority/#essay3>

Of course, any significant change to American nuclear policy should not be imposed by fiat, but must come through sustained consultation with American allies. As the United States moves over the coming years to repair its damaged alliances and reinforce deterrence, NFU advocates must be aware that such a move could be seen by some allies — as well as adversaries — as a weakening of America’s commitment to their security. An NFU decision, therefore, needs to be met with a concerted set of other adjustments to reaffirm U.S. defense commitments and deterrence threats. Because there is a significant security benefit to be gained — in the form of reduced risk of a nuclear accident or exchange — and because the United States and its allies can take political and conventional military actions to counter any such perception, America ought to adopt a policy of no-first-use and work with its allies to make it a credible reality. Such a change can be effectively pursued if done right.

2. US allies don’t really rely on the US’s first strike nuclear policy.

Jon B. Wolfsthal, nuclear security expert, former Senior Director at the National Security Council for Nonproliferation and Arms Control, and member of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists Science and Security Board, Nuclear First-Use Is Dangerous and Unnecessary, Policy Roundtable: Nuclear First-Use and Presidential Authority, July 2, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-nuclear-first-use-and-presidential-authority/#essay3>

U.S. allies and adversaries know that, in the absence of a threat to America’s national existence or that of an ally, an American decision to initiate nuclear war against a nuclear adversary is highly doubtful. It is far more credible, and thus effective, to promise to respond to conventional aggression with America’s and its allies’ combined conventional capabilities, and to reserve the role of nuclear weapons to deter, and if necessary retaliate against, a nuclear attack against an American ally. This as much as anything else argues in favor of adopting a no-first-use policy — to make a nuclear retaliatory threat all the more credible.

Pro Response to Con Contentions

Responses To: Conflict Escalation

They argue that “A first strike nuclear policy prevents conflict escalation.” My responses are:

1. A first strike nuclear policy doesn’t prevent conflict escalation because US conventional forces are superior.

Nina Tannenwald, director of the International Relations at Brown University, M.A., Columbia School of International & Public Affairs, PhD, International Relations, Cornell University, It’s Time for a U.S. No-First-Use Nuclear Policy, Texas National Security Review, Vol. 2, Issue 3, Aug. 1, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/its-time-for-a-u-s-no-first-use-nuclear-policy/>

First, a policy of calculated ambiguity is unnecessary. Today, there are very few missions that the United States could not accomplish with conventional weapons. Indeed, U.S. conventional capabilities are more than sufficient to deter and respond to anything but a nuclear attack. None of the United States’ most likely adversaries — Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran — can hope to defeat the United States and its allies in a protracted non-nuclear conflict.

2. A first strike nuclear policy doesn’t prevent conflict escalation because threats of first use increase the likelihood of escalation to nuclear war.

Nina Tannenwald, director of the International Relations at Brown University, M.A., Columbia School of International & Public Affairs, PhD, International Relations, Cornell University, It’s Time for a U.S. No-First-Use Nuclear Policy, Texas National Security Review, Vol. 2, Issue 3, Aug. 1, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/its-time-for-a-u-s-no-first-use-nuclear-policy/>

Second, threats of first use are dangerous. As Michael Gerson has argued, they undermine crisis stability in multiple ways.¹⁵ The large, highly accurate U.S. nuclear arsenal, along with missile defenses and new dual-use precision-strike weapons, may lead leaders in Russia and China to believe that the United States is capable of conducting a disarming first strike against them. Furthermore, the entanglement of nuclear and conventional weapons in deterrence strategies could inadvertently increase the chance of nuclear war, while new, smaller nuclear warheads, along with doctrines of “escalate to de-escalate” appear to be lowering the threshold for nuclear use.¹⁶ In a crisis, Russian or Chinese leaders might come to believe that the United States might attempt a disarming strike, forcing them, in turn, to contemplate acting preemptively.

Pro Response to Con Contentions

Responses To: Nuclear Deterrence Good

They argue that “A first strike nuclear policy is necessary for nuclear deterrence.” My responses are:

1. Conventional deterrence is more effective than the attempted nuclear deterrence of a first strike nuclear policy.

Nina Tannenwald, director of the International Relations at Brown University, M.A., Columbia School of International & Public Affairs, PhD, International Relations, Cornell University, It's Time for a U.S. No-First-Use Nuclear Policy, Texas National Security Review, Vol. 2, Issue 3, Aug. 1, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/its-time-for-a-u-s-no-first-use-nuclear-policy/>

As for threatening to use nuclear weapons first in support of extended deterrence commitments, such a policy lacks credibility because the costs of starting a nuclear war would vastly outweigh the benefits. As Henry Kissinger once said, “Great powers don’t commit suicide for their allies.”²² Thus, as a number of analysts have persuasively argued, extended deterrence based on a conventional military response to a conventional threat is much more credible. Moreover, constantly arguing that nuclear weapons are necessary reduces the credibility of the United States’ more usable conventional deterrent.

2. A no first use nuclear policy should be adopted because the US already maintains sufficient conventional deterrence.

Ankit Panda, adjunct senior fellow at the Federation of American Scientists, graduate of the Princeton School Public and International Affairs at Princeton University, ‘No First Use’ and Nuclear Weapons, Council on Foreign Relations, July 17, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/background/no-first-use-and-nuclear-weapons>

Proponents of a U.S. NFU declaration have argued that not only does the United States already maintain a de facto NFU policy but that U.S. superiority in conventional weapons is sufficient to deter significant nuclear, biological, chemical, and conventional threats. Additionally, as Kingston Reif of the Arms Control Association has argued, “a clear U.S. no-first-use policy would reduce the risk of Russian or Chinese nuclear miscalculation during a crisis by alleviating concerns about a devastating U.S. nuclear first-strike.” In nuclear strategy, a first strike refers to a nuclear attack that seeks to disarm a nuclear-armed enemy before it can employ its weapons.

3. Adopting a no first use nuclear policy would not undermine nuclear deterrence.

Dr. John P. Holdren, S.B. and S.M. degrees from M.I.T. and a Ph.D. (1970) from Stanford in aerospace engineering and theoretical plasma physics, The overwhelming case for no first use, Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, Volume 76, Jan. 13, 2020, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00963402.2019.1701277>

As recently argued in a powerful analysis by Steve Fetter and Jon Wolfsthal (2018), moreover, A no first use policy would in no way reduce deterrence of nuclear attack against the United States or its allies. [And] nuclear weapons are not an effective deterrent against non-nuclear attack because there are few if any scenarios in which a US threat to use nuclear weapons first in response to non-nuclear aggression against the United States or its allies would be credible. For all these reasons, embracing no first use would be advantageous to the United States whether or not any other nuclear-armed nations (besides China and India, both of which announced no-first-use stances shortly after their first nuclear tests) decide to do the same. There would be no logic in holding out for a no-first-use treaty. We should get on with it – unilaterally.

Pro Response to Con Contentions

Responses To: North Korea

They argue that “A no first use nuclear policy would increase risk of conflict with North Korea.” My responses are:

1. The US’s first use policy increases the risk of nuclear war with North Korea.

Jon B. Wolfsthal, nuclear security expert, former Senior Director at the National Security Council for Nonproliferation and Arms Control, and member of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists Science and Security Board, Nuclear First-Use Is Dangerous and Unnecessary, Policy Roundtable: Nuclear First-Use and Presidential Authority, July 2, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-nuclear-first-use-and-presidential-authority/#essay3>

In the case of smaller nuclear states like North Korea, U.S. threats to “go nuclear” first might be seen as credible because North Korea lacks the ability to destroy all of the United States in retaliation. But threats to “go nuclear” first may make Kim Jong Un more, not less, likely to rely on rapid nuclear launch decisions because of the possible vulnerability of his country’s nuclear forces and leadership to nuclear strike. First-use threats in the Korean context, in which America continues to have massive conventional advantages, actually increase the likelihood of North Korea launching a nuclear weapon first. Most informed analysts believe Kim sees nuclear weapons as an insurance policy, to be used only to prevent his destruction. If his destruction seems increasingly imminent, so too would his own willingness to “go nuclear.” As the United States adjusts to the reality of a nuclear standoff with North Korea, this reality has to be taken more seriously, and the risks of nuclear-crisis instability on the Korean peninsula more carefully considered.

2. The US’s first strike nuclear policy increases the risks of nuclear war with North Korea.

Jon B. Wolfsthal, nuclear security expert, former Senior Director at the National Security Council for Nonproliferation and Arms Control, and member of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists Science and Security Board, Nuclear First-Use Is Dangerous and Unnecessary, Policy Roundtable: Nuclear First-Use and Presidential Authority, July 2, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-nuclear-first-use-and-presidential-authority/#essay3>

Yet, to be effective, an American nuclear strike would need to be able to stop the use of chemical and biological weapons or be credible enough to convince North Korea’s leaders not to cross that line. However, the United States does not have anything close to perfect intelligence about North Korea’s capabilities or the location of its chemical and biological weapons production, storage, and employment sites. Even if it did, the use of multiple nuclear weapons to neutralize North Korea’s use of chemical or biological weapons remains a scenario that is hard to envision. Moreover, North Korea knows the

United States has and continues to threaten nuclear use to deter or retaliate for the use of chemical and biological weapons. Should Pyongyang be in a situation where it would consider using such weapons, then it would automatically also have to consider its own preemptive use of nuclear weapons, ratcheting up the nuclear cycle of escalation and making it more, not less, likely that a smaller conflict would escalate into a broader nuclear exchange. In these two different scenarios, it remains hard to identify the benefits of nuclear first-use, while it is clear that the posture carries with it significant risks. Thus, when it comes to the question of whether America needs to threaten first-use, it seems that not only are its conventional capabilities sufficient, but that threatening first-use lacks military or political utility or credibility, and actually risks significant escalation in most scenarios that do not benefit American or allied interests.

Pro Response to Con Contentions

Responses To: The US doesn't have conventional superiority.

They argue that "A first strike nuclear policy is needed because the US is losing conventional superiority." My responses are:

1. If the US cannot maintain conventional superiority with its oversized military budget, then there are bigger security problems for the US than a no first use nuclear policy would create.

Jon B. Wolfsthal, nuclear security expert, former Senior Director at the National Security Council for Nonproliferation and Arms Control, and member of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists Science and Security Board, Nuclear First-Use Is Dangerous and Unnecessary, Policy Roundtable: Nuclear First-Use and Presidential Authority, July 2, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-nuclear-first-use-and-presidential-authority/#essay3>

There is, of course, much discussion about whether America's conventional advantage can be maintained.⁶⁷ However, if America, with a defense budget more than four times as large as that of China,⁶⁸ cannot maintain a conventional military advantage, then there is a larger problem with America's defense and security strategy that no amount of nuclear weapons or threats can overcome. The core of deterrence and reassurance among allies rests not in making threats to initiate nuclear disaster, but in harnessing a collective political will to ensure that America can collectively maintain the political, military, and economic capabilities needed to defend its interests and security.

2. Even if the US's conventional capabilities are not always superior, the risks of a first strike nuclear policy outweigh the minimal benefits of such a policy.

Dr. John P. Holdren, S.B. and S.M. degrees from M.I.T. and a Ph.D. (1970) from Stanford in aerospace engineering and theoretical plasma physics, The overwhelming case for no first use, Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, Volume 76, Jan. 13, 2020, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00963402.2019.1701277>

Of course, it will likely always be true that the United States (or NATO) cannot be immediately superior on the ground, in the air, or at sea at every location where need for conventional force projection might arise. The real question is whether the explicit threat to use nuclear weapons first in such a circumstance is a sensible way to deal with that reality. I believe that making this threat brings a very small benefit at a very large cost to our nonproliferation goals, as well as to arms-race stability and crisis stability in cases where the prospective adversary is a nuclear-weapon state. The benefit is small because – whatever an adversary's estimate of the probability that the United States, under our current declaratory policy and posture, would actually use nuclear weapons against a conventional attack – the propensity to worst-case assessment means that the adversary's estimate of that probability won't be a whole lot smaller under a US no-first-use stance. That is, the mere existence of US nuclear weapons induces a non-negligible degree of

caution on the part of adversaries contemplating aggression, irrespective of US declaratory policy and the details of posture. Besides, there are better remedies for the problem: Some are already in hand (such as conventional precision strike), and some are attainable at a more favorable ratio of benefit to cost and risk than that of our first-use stance (such as increasing our capacity to deploy troops, weapons, and supply chains rapidly to wherever they are needed).

Pro Response to Con Contentions

Responses To: No Credibility

They argue that “A no first use nuclear policy would not be credible.” My responses are:

1. Our current first-strike nuclear policy is not a credible threat.

Jon B. Wolfsthal, nuclear security expert, former Senior Director at the National Security Council for Nonproliferation and Arms Control, and member of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists Science and Security Board, Nuclear First-Use Is Dangerous and Unnecessary, Policy Roundtable: Nuclear First-Use and Presidential Authority, July 2, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-nuclear-first-use-and-presidential-authority/#essay3>

If a first-use posture were safe and made America more secure, it might be worth keeping. However, it is neither of these things. Nor is there much to suggest that U.S. threats to use nuclear weapons first against other nuclear-weapon states — a threat that would be certain to bring about nuclear retaliation — are seen as credible by America’s main nuclear adversaries, including Russia and China.

2. US allies know the US will never use nuclear weapons first.

Jon B. Wolfsthal, nuclear security expert, former Senior Director at the National Security Council for Nonproliferation and Arms Control, and member of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists Science and Security Board, Nuclear First-Use Is Dangerous and Unnecessary, Policy Roundtable: Nuclear First-Use and Presidential Authority, July 2, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-nuclear-first-use-and-presidential-authority/#essay3>

Just as America is right to assume that its large, diverse, and highly-capable nuclear forces are able to deter nuclear attacks against itself and its allies, so too is Russia right to assume that its forces are able to deter a nuclear attack by the United States in the absence of a nuclear provocation. It is not clear why the United States believes now, let alone in the past, that it can credibly threaten a nuclear first-strike on Russia or its forces and then control or prevent a response or escalation. Russia plainly is aware that its conventional capabilities are no match for those of the United States and NATO, which is why it relies on a first-strike posture and has invested in and is expanding its hybrid and disinformation capabilities. The United States has no such need, and yet it maintains a first-use posture for anachronistic political reasons, which carry with them real and observable political and financial costs, as well as costs to stability. In other words, the United States believes that it is the one who will and can control nuclear escalation, but that Russia will not and cannot. A dangerous bet, with no real facts on which to base it.

3. A US President will likely never use nuclear weapons first.

Jon B. Wolfsthal, nuclear security expert, former Senior Director at the National Security Council for Nonproliferation and Arms Control, and member of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists Science and Security Board, Nuclear First-Use Is Dangerous and Unnecessary, Policy Roundtable: Nuclear First-Use and Presidential Authority, July 2, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-nuclear-first-use-and-presidential-authority/#essay3>

Does the United States need to rely on nuclear first-use to respond to non-nuclear threats from a nuclear state? If not, then the United States can adopt a policy where the role of nuclear weapons is limited solely to nuclear deterrence. It is far from certain that America must rely on nuclear weapons in such situations. Indeed, the scenarios identified by first-use advocates, while plausible, do not make a compelling case for a nuclear first-use policy and generally ignore its risks.⁷² Among these scenarios, the most prominent are the risks of a conventional attack by a state like Russia or a chemical or biological weapons attack by a nuclear state such as North Korea. A careful step-by-step review of these scenarios suggests that it is very hard, if not impossible, to imagine that the conditions would come about that would lead an American president to initiate a nuclear conflict, while it is easy to see how threatening first-use does more to increase the danger to America and its allies than to decrease it.

Pro Extensions

The original reasons for a first strike nuclear policy no longer exist; the US should adopt a no first use nuclear policy.

Nina Tannenwald, director of the International Relations at Brown University, M.A., Columbia School of International & Public Affairs, PhD, International Relations, Cornell University, It's Time for a U.S. No-First-Use Nuclear Policy, Texas National Security Review, Vol. 2, Issue 3, Aug. 1, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/its-time-for-a-u-s-no-first-use-nuclear-policy/>

Beginning in the early days of the Cold War, the United States has relied on the threat to use nuclear weapons first as a way to deter both nuclear and non-nuclear attacks. Yet, the world has changed significantly since then. In the contemporary era, the dangers and risks of a first-strike policy outweigh the hoped-for deterrence benefits. The United States should join China and India in adopting a declared no-first-use policy and should encourage the other nuclear-armed states to do likewise. A no-first-use policy means that the United States would pledge to use nuclear weapons only in retaliation for a nuclear attack. The sole purpose of U.S. nuclear weapons would then be to deter — and, if necessary, respond to — the use of nuclear weapons against the United States and its allies and partners. To be credible, this declaratory pledge would need to be reflected in a retaliatory-strike-only nuclear force posture.

Other nuclear states have adopted no first use nuclear policies to reduce the threat of nuclear war due to asymmetry conventional superiority.

Nina Tannenwald, director of the International Relations at Brown University, M.A., Columbia School of International & Public Affairs, PhD, International Relations, Cornell University, It's Time for a U.S. No-First-Use Nuclear Policy, Texas National Security Review, Vol. 2, Issue 3, Aug. 1, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/its-time-for-a-u-s-no-first-use-nuclear-policy/>

But some states — India, China, and the Soviet Union for a period — have nevertheless pledged no-first-use and, in the cases of India and China, have attempted to make those pledges credible. What explains these choices? The empirical record suggests that a state's choice regarding a nuclear first-use policy tends to be strongly influenced by asymmetries in the conventional military balance between nuclear-armed adversaries. Nuclear-armed states that face a conventionally superior military adversary will threaten to use nuclear weapons first because they depend more heavily on nuclear threats to defend themselves. In contrast, nuclear-armed states that possess overwhelming conventional superiority are more likely to declare an NFU policy because it privileges their conventional advantage on the battlefield and might help to keep the conflict non-nuclear.

The US should follow other nuclear states and adopt a no first use nuclear policy.

Nina Tannenwald, director of the International Relations at Brown University, M.A., Columbia School of International & Public Affairs, PhD, International Relations, Cornell University, It's Time for a U.S. No-First-Use Nuclear Policy, Texas National Security Review, Vol. 2, Issue 3, Aug. 1, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/its-time-for-a-u-s-no-first-use-nuclear-policy/>

Thus India, which possesses a much larger conventional military than Pakistan, declared an NFU policy in 1999, following its nuclear test in 1998. Pakistan, which relies heavily on its nuclear deterrent for its defense against India, has rejected Indian calls to adopt a no-first-use pledge.³ This logic also helps explain why, in 1993, Russia dropped its NFU pledge first made in 1982. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, as Russian conventional military forces deteriorated and the United States declined to reciprocate the NFU pledge, Russian leaders felt they had to rely more heavily on nuclear weapons.

The US is in the reverse situation now as far conventional superiority, as opposed to when it first announced a first strike nuclear policy.

Nina Tannenwald, director of the International Relations at Brown University, M.A., Columbia School of International & Public Affairs, PhD, International Relations, Cornell University, It's Time for a U.S. No-First-Use Nuclear Policy, Texas National Security Review, Vol. 2, Issue 3, Aug. 1, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/its-time-for-a-u-s-no-first-use-nuclear-policy/>

Consistent with this logic, during the Cold War, the United States relied on a first-use threat to offset and counter the overwhelming conventional superiority of the Soviet conventional military threat in Europe. Today, the situation is reversed. The United States possesses overwhelming conventional superiority while Russia's conventional military has declined. Because U.S. conventional military power now vastly exceeds that of its largest adversaries, Russia and China, many argue that America's first-use policy is now unnecessary to deter conventional threats.

Just because no first use nuclear policies are legally unenforceable doesn't mean they're not beneficial.

Nina Tannenwald, director of the International Relations at Brown University, M.A., Columbia School of International & Public Affairs, PhD, International Relations, Cornell University, It's Time for a U.S. No-First-Use Nuclear Policy, Texas National Security Review, Vol. 2, Issue 3, Aug. 1, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/its-time-for-a-u-s-no-first-use-nuclear-policy/>

A second theoretical perspective, “liberal institutionalism,” emphasizes the role of rules and institutions, both domestic and international, in stabilizing expectations and behavior. According to this theory, even if no-first-use pledges are unenforceable, they are not necessarily meaningless. To be meaningful, an NFU pledge must be built into domestic institutions, that is, the structure of operational military capabilities.⁷ A genuine NFU policy would require that nuclear forces be consistent with an “assured retaliation” posture that eschews counterforce objectives — the ability to destroy an adversary’s nuclear arsenal before it is launched.

Institutionalism reveals a first strike nuclear policy promotes the value of nuclear weapons and encourages nuclear proliferation.

Nina Tannenwald, director of the International Relations at Brown University, M.A., Columbia School of International & Public Affairs, PhD, International Relations, Cornell University, It's Time for a U.S. No-First-Use Nuclear Policy, Texas National Security Review, Vol. 2, Issue 3, Aug. 1, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/its-time-for-a-u-s-no-first-use-nuclear-policy/>

At the international level, liberal institutionalists emphasize the value of rules and institutions to prevent nuclear war. They argue that NFU has become a de facto norm anyway and therefore should be declared publicly and multilaterally. As Morton Halperin, who later became deputy assistant secretary of defense for arms control, wrote as early as 1961, “There now exists a powerful informal rule against the use of nuclear weapons,” and it would be advantageous to the United States to transform this tacit understanding into a formal agreement.⁹ Indeed, the “negative security assurances” first issued by the United States and the other P5 countries in 1978 and renewed periodically — commitments to non-nuclear states that are members of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty not to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against them — already constitute a partial NFU regime. Liberal institutionalists would also point out that constantly touting the value of a nuclear threat for security sends signals that nuclear weapons are useful and undermines nonproliferation goals.

A first strike nuclear policy doesn't prevent conflict escalation because US conventional forces are superior.

Nina Tannenwald, director of the International Relations at Brown University, M.A., Columbia School of International & Public Affairs, PhD, International Relations, Cornell University, It's Time for a U.S. No-First-Use Nuclear Policy, Texas National Security Review, Vol. 2, Issue 3, Aug. 1, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/its-time-for-a-u-s-no-first-use-nuclear-policy/>

First, a policy of calculated ambiguity is unnecessary. Today, there are very few missions that the United States could not accomplish with conventional weapons. Indeed, U.S. conventional capabilities are more than sufficient to deter and respond to anything but a nuclear attack. None of the United States' most likely adversaries — Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran — can hope to defeat the United States and its allies in a protracted non-nuclear conflict.

A first strike nuclear policy doesn't prevent conflict escalation because threats of first use increase the likelihood of escalation to nuclear war.

Nina Tannenwald, director of the International Relations at Brown University, M.A., Columbia School of International & Public Affairs, PhD, International Relations, Cornell University, It's Time for a U.S. No-First-Use Nuclear Policy, Texas National Security Review, Vol. 2, Issue 3, Aug. 1, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/its-time-for-a-u-s-no-first-use-nuclear-policy/>

Second, threats of first use are dangerous. As Michael Gerson has argued, they undermine crisis stability in multiple ways.¹⁵ The large, highly accurate U.S. nuclear arsenal, along with missile defenses and new dual-use precision-strike weapons, may lead leaders in Russia and China to believe that the United States is capable of conducting a disarming first strike against them. Furthermore, the entanglement of nuclear and conventional weapons in deterrence strategies could inadvertently increase the chance of nuclear war, while new, smaller nuclear warheads, along with doctrines of “escalate to de-escalate” appear to be lowering the threshold for nuclear use.¹⁶ In a crisis, Russian or Chinese leaders might come to believe that the United States might attempt a disarming strike, forcing them, in turn, to contemplate acting preemptively.

There is no evidence showing a first strike nuclear policy would prevent conflict escalation.

Nina Tannenwald, director of the International Relations at Brown University, M.A., Columbia School of International & Public Affairs, PhD, International Relations, Cornell University, It's Time for a U.S. No-First-Use Nuclear Policy, Texas National Security Review, Vol. 2, Issue 3, Aug. 1, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/its-time-for-a-u-s-no-first-use-nuclear-policy/>

Third, although supporters of calculated ambiguity fervently believe it maximizes deterrence, the evidence for such a claim is hardly definitive. Nuclear weapons did not deter the 9/11 attacks; the rise of the Islamic State; Russian interventions in Georgia, Ukraine, or Syria; or North Korean nuclear and ballistic missile tests. Nor have Indian and Pakistani nuclear weapons deterred risky conventional crises between the two countries over Kashmir, most recently in February 2019. The calculated ambiguity argument gained some support from the perception that during the 1991 Gulf War a U.S. nuclear threat had helped deter Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein from using chemical weapons against U.S. and coalition forces or Israel.¹⁸ As Scott Sagan has persuasively argued, however, it is highly unlikely that a nuclear threat in fact deterred Saddam from using chemical weapons.¹⁹ Indeed, recent research suggests that the threat to use nuclear weapons first against non-nuclear states has little credible coercive power.

A first strike nuclear policy doesn't prevent conflict escalation because first use policies open a Pandora's box that would lead to uncontrolled escalation.

Nina Tannenwald, director of the International Relations at Brown University, M.A., Columbia School of International & Public Affairs, PhD, International Relations, Cornell University, It's Time for a U.S. No-First-Use Nuclear Policy, Texas National Security Review, Vol. 2, Issue 3, Aug. 1, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/its-time-for-a-u-s-no-first-use-nuclear-policy/>

Fourth, even in the very small number of scenarios where nuclear weapons might seem to be necessary — for example, knocking out North Korean mobile missiles or underground command centers — opening the Pandora's box of nuclear use would likely lead to uncontrolled escalation. There is no scenario in which using nuclear weapons first can make a bad situation better. As James Doyle, a former staffer at Los Alamos National Laboratory, has argued, “It is folly to believe that the use of nuclear weapons could de-escalate a conflict.”

Conventional deterrence is more effective than the attempted nuclear deterrence of a first strike nuclear policy.

Nina Tannenwald, director of the International Relations at Brown University, M.A., Columbia School of International & Public Affairs, PhD, International Relations, Cornell University, It's Time for a U.S. No-First-Use Nuclear Policy, Texas National Security Review, Vol. 2, Issue 3, Aug. 1, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/its-time-for-a-u-s-no-first-use-nuclear-policy/>

As for threatening to use nuclear weapons first in support of extended deterrence commitments, such a policy lacks credibility because the costs of starting a nuclear war would vastly outweigh the benefits. As Henry Kissinger once said, "Great powers don't commit suicide for their allies."²² Thus, as a number of analysts have persuasively argued, extended deterrence based on a conventional military response to a conventional threat is much more credible. Moreover, constantly arguing that nuclear weapons are necessary reduces the credibility of the United States' more usable conventional deterrent.

By adopting a no first use nuclear policy, the US would join a multilateral effort that would improve international relations.

Nina Tannenwald, director of the International Relations at Brown University, M.A., Columbia School of International & Public Affairs, PhD, International Relations, Cornell University, It's Time for a U.S. No-First-Use Nuclear Policy, Texas National Security Review, Vol. 2, Issue 3, Aug. 1, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/its-time-for-a-u-s-no-first-use-nuclear-policy/>

A multilateral NFU pledge would have even more benefits. It would move Russia and Pakistan away from their high-risk doctrines and reduce a source of Russia-NATO tensions. A common NFU policy would help anchor the existing NFU policies of China and India and implicitly acknowledge their leadership in this area, a virtue when middle-power states are feeling disenfranchised from the global nuclear order.

Even in potential wars with conventionally weak nuclear states, like North Korea, a no first use nuclear policy would reduce crisis instability.

Nina Tannenwald, director of the International Relations at Brown University, M.A., Columbia School of International & Public Affairs, PhD, International Relations, Cornell University, It's Time for a U.S. No-First-Use Nuclear Policy, Texas National Security Review, Vol. 2, Issue 3, Aug. 1, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/its-time-for-a-u-s-no-first-use-nuclear-policy/>

Some analysts have questioned whether, in an asymmetric conflict, an American NFU policy would actually help reduce the risk of nuclear escalation by an adversary. The United States is so conventionally dominant, they argue that, in a crisis, a country like North Korea might employ nuclear weapons preemptively because the United States could take out North Korean targets even with just conventional weapons.³⁰ It is true that an NFU policy might make no difference in such a situation. Still, it might nevertheless remove at least one source of crisis instability. Most importantly, however, in an era of “multi-front” deterrence, North Korea is not the only adversary and a U.S. NFU policy would remain valuable in less asymmetric conflicts.

Although a no first use nuclear policy would promote counter-value targeting, counterforce targeting would increase the risk of nuclear strikes causing civilian casualties.

Nina Tannenwald, director of the International Relations at Brown University, M.A., Columbia School of International & Public Affairs, PhD, International Relations, Cornell University, It's Time for a U.S. No-First-Use Nuclear Policy, Texas National Security Review, Vol. 2, Issue 3, Aug. 1, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/its-time-for-a-u-s-no-first-use-nuclear-policy/>

A second concern is that a real NFU strategy would require a greater commitment to a counter-value targeting strategy — targeting civilians rather than nuclear silos — and thus run up against moral and legal rules prohibiting the direct targeting of civilians.³¹ This is a legitimate point. However, current U.S. counterforce targeting policy will likely result in massive civilian casualties as “collateral damage,” making the risk to civilians of an NFU strategy little different.³²

By adopting a no first use nuclear policy, the US can promote multilateral efforts that allows other nuclear states to follow the US's lead.

Nina Tannenwald, director of the International Relations at Brown University, M.A., Columbia School of International & Public Affairs, PhD, International Relations, Cornell University, It's Time for a U.S. No-First-Use Nuclear Policy, Texas National Security Review, Vol. 2, Issue 3, Aug. 1, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/its-time-for-a-u-s-no-first-use-nuclear-policy/>

The United States ought to unilaterally adopt an NFU policy, and ask other nuclear-armed states to do the same. This would constitute the formal adoption of what is already essentially de facto U.S. policy.³³ A U.S. NFU policy would create political space for Russia to follow suit: For Russia to consider NFU, its concerns about U.S. ballistic missile defenses, imbalances in conventional forces, and issues of NATO enlargement would need to be addressed. The United States would also need to tackle the issue of extended deterrence with its allies and move toward conventional extended deterrence.³⁴ India and Pakistan would need a *modus vivendi* on Kashmir, while the United States and North Korea would need to sign a non-aggression pact. In fact, the United States could actually negotiate a mutual NFU agreement with North Korea. The United States is extremely unlikely to use nuclear weapons first on North Korea, therefore an agreement that provided a basis for imposing some restraint on the North Korean arsenal would be in America's interest.³⁵

The US can encourage other nuclear states to follow the US's lead, by the US following the lead of other nuclear states with no first use nuclear policies.

Nina Tannenwald, director of the International Relations at Brown University, M.A., Columbia School of International & Public Affairs, PhD, International Relations, Cornell University, It's Time for a U.S. No-First-Use Nuclear Policy, Texas National Security Review, Vol. 2, Issue 3, Aug. 1, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/its-time-for-a-u-s-no-first-use-nuclear-policy/>

Doctrinal and operational changes would need to follow such a declaration. China's restrained nuclear arsenal provides the best example of an NFU pledge implemented in practice. Unlike the United States and Russia, China keeps its warheads and missiles separated. It has not developed precision-strike nuclear war-fighting capabilities, such as tactical nuclear weapons, and it does not keep its forces on "launch-on-warning" alert. China has also invested heavily in conventional military modernization so that it would not have to consider nuclear escalation in a conventional war.³⁶ India, too, keeps its warheads and missiles separate in support of its NFU pledge, though some analysts argue that India's NFU policy does not run especially deep and that it "is neither a stable nor a reliable predictor of how the Indian military and political leadership might actually use nuclear weapons."³⁷ Nevertheless, both countries' operational postures reflect (to some degree) their NFU policies.³⁸ The United States and the other nuclear powers should move in this direction.

Adopting a no first use nuclear policy would represent an important declaration of nuclear restraint.

Nina Tannenwald, director of the International Relations at Brown University, M.A., Columbia School of International & Public Affairs, PhD, International Relations, Cornell University, It's Time for a U.S. No-First-Use Nuclear Policy, Texas National Security Review, Vol. 2, Issue 3, Aug. 1, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/its-time-for-a-u-s-no-first-use-nuclear-policy/>

Adoption of an NFU policy will require close consultation with allies, but the U.S. administration should begin this task. As an initial step on the way to NFU, U.S. leaders should consider the recent proposal by Jeffrey Lewis and Scott Sagan that the United States should declare it will not use nuclear weapons “against any target that could be reliably destroyed by conventional means.”⁴³ This policy would not solve the problem posed by highly asymmetric crises, as noted above. Nevertheless, it would represent an initial important declaratory statement of nuclear restraint.

Adopting a no first use nuclear policy is essential to promoting the US's most important goal of preventing nuclear war.

Nina Tannenwald, director of the International Relations at Brown University, M.A., Columbia School of International & Public Affairs, PhD, International Relations, Cornell University, It's Time for a U.S. No-First-Use Nuclear Policy, Texas National Security Review, Vol. 2, Issue 3, Aug. 1, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/its-time-for-a-u-s-no-first-use-nuclear-policy/>

The most important goal of the United States today is to prevent the use of nuclear weapons. The policy of relying on the threat to use nuclear weapons first is an outdated legacy of the Cold War. As even card-carrying realists such as the “four horsemen” recognized, given U.S. conventional capabilities, there are no circumstances in which the United States ought to start a nuclear war.⁴⁴ Relying on the pretense that it might do so in order to deter a conventional threat unacceptably increases the chances of nuclear escalation. Moving toward declared NFU policies is the best way to reduce the risks of nuclear war.

A no first use nuclear policy should be adopted because the US already maintains sufficient conventional deterrence.

Ankit Panda, adjunct senior fellow at the Federation of American Scientists, graduate of the Princeton School Public and International Affairs at Princeton University, ‘No First Use’ and Nuclear Weapons, Council on Foreign Relations, July 17, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/background/no-first-use-and-nuclear-weapons>

Proponents of a U.S. NFU declaration have argued that not only does the United States already maintain a de facto NFU policy but that U.S. superiority in conventional weapons is sufficient to deter significant nuclear, biological, chemical, and conventional threats. Additionally, as Kingston Reif of the Arms Control Association has argued, “a clear U.S. no-first-use policy would reduce the risk of Russian or Chinese nuclear miscalculation during a crisis by alleviating concerns about a devastating U.S. nuclear first-strike.” In nuclear strategy, a first strike refers to a nuclear attack that seeks to disarm a nuclear-armed enemy before it can employ its weapons.

A no first use nuclear policy is a first step to nuclear nonproliferation and disarmament.

Ankit Panda, adjunct senior fellow at the Federation of American Scientists, graduate of the Princeton School Public and International Affairs at Princeton University, ‘No First Use’ and Nuclear Weapons, Council on Foreign Relations, July 17, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/background/no-first-use-and-nuclear-weapons>

Other proponents pointed to an NFU policy declaration being a necessary step on the road to global nuclear disarmament, an aspirational goal of the Obama administration and a requirement for all recognized nuclear weapon states under Article VI of the NPT. Proponents also argue that U.S. resistance to an NFU declaration has harmed U.S. nonproliferation efforts.

Nuclear war is the greatest risk facing the US and its allies; a no first use nuclear policy would reduce that risk.

Jon B. Wolfsthal, nuclear security expert, former Senior Director at the National Security Council for Nonproliferation and Arms Control, and member of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists Science and Security Board, Nuclear First-Use Is Dangerous and Unnecessary, Policy Roundtable: Nuclear First-Use and Presidential Authority, July 2, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-nuclear-first-use-and-presidential-authority/#essay3>

The greatest military risk facing the United States and its allies is the use of nuclear weapons, whether via an accident, escalation, or deliberate use. As such, it is essential that the United States and its allies use all available tools to reduce and, if possible, eliminate this danger. American nuclear strategy continues to reserve the right to use nuclear weapons first to deter or defeat both nuclear and non-nuclear attacks. However, maintaining this posture today unnecessarily increases the risk of a nuclear strike against the United States and its friends without providing any demonstrable security benefits, despite conventional wisdom and commentary to the contrary.⁵⁷ America and its allies should adopt a nuclear no-first-use (NFU) posture that would enhance deterrence and reduce the risk of nuclear use.

Normal means of implementing a no first use nuclear policy would include consultation with allies.

Jon B. Wolfsthal, nuclear security expert, former Senior Director at the National Security Council for Nonproliferation and Arms Control, and member of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists Science and Security Board, Nuclear First-Use Is Dangerous and Unnecessary, Policy Roundtable: Nuclear First-Use and Presidential Authority, July 2, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-nuclear-first-use-and-presidential-authority/#essay3>

Of course, any significant change to American nuclear policy should not be imposed by fiat, but must come through sustained consultation with American allies. As the United States moves over the coming years to repair its damaged alliances and reinforce deterrence, NFU advocates must be aware that such a move could be seen by some allies — as well as adversaries — as a weakening of America's commitment to their security. An NFU decision, therefore, needs to be met with a concerted set of other adjustments to reaffirm U.S. defense commitments and deterrence threats.

The US can work with and reassure allies in adopting a no first use nuclear policy.

Jon B. Wolfsthal, nuclear security expert, former Senior Director at the National Security Council for Nonproliferation and Arms Control, and member of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists Science and Security Board, Nuclear First-Use Is Dangerous and Unnecessary, Policy Roundtable: Nuclear First-Use and Presidential Authority, July 2, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-nuclear-first-use-and-presidential-authority/#essay3>

Because there is a significant security benefit to be gained — in the form of reduced risk of a nuclear accident or exchange — and because the United States and its allies can take political and conventional military actions to counter any such perception, America ought to adopt a policy of no-first-use and work with its allies to make it a credible reality. Such a change can be effectively pursued if done right.

The US can adopt a no first use nuclear policy without compromising the safety of allies.

Jon B. Wolfsthal, nuclear security expert, former Senior Director at the National Security Council for Nonproliferation and Arms Control, and member of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists Science and Security Board, Nuclear First-Use Is Dangerous and Unnecessary, Policy Roundtable: Nuclear First-Use and Presidential Authority, July 2, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-nuclear-first-use-and-presidential-authority/#essay3>

The United States — as the world's foremost conventional military power — can safely adopt NFU without compromising its security or that of its allies. While it will be harder for conventionally inferior states — like Russia — to adopt NFU, the last thing Washington should do is make it easier for Moscow to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons first. A U.S. NFU stance would make it harder for others to maintain first-use doctrines and would enable the United States to take more effective collective action — militarily, politically, and economically — should a state ever cross the nuclear threshold. It would also put the United States and NATO, as well as America's East Asian allies, in a stronger position to politically challenge states that maintain first-use postures, and to seek engagement in order to reduce the risks of nuclear use.

If the US cannot maintain conventional superiority with its oversized military budget, then there are bigger security problems for the US than a no first use nuclear policy would create.

Jon B. Wolfsthal, nuclear security expert, former Senior Director at the National Security Council for Nonproliferation and Arms Control, and member of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists Science and Security Board, Nuclear First-Use Is Dangerous and Unnecessary, Policy Roundtable: Nuclear First-Use and Presidential Authority, July 2, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-nuclear-first-use-and-presidential-authority/#essay3>

There is, of course, much discussion about whether America's conventional advantage can be maintained.⁶⁷ However, if America, with a defense budget more than four times as large as that of China,⁶⁸ cannot maintain a conventional military advantage, then there is a larger problem with America's defense and security strategy that no amount of nuclear weapons or threats can overcome. The core of deterrence and reassurance among allies rests not in making threats to initiate nuclear disaster, but in harnessing a collective political will to ensure that America can collectively maintain the political, military, and economic capabilities needed to defend its interests and security.

A US first-use nuclear policy is not a credible threat against Russia or China.

Jon B. Wolfsthal, nuclear security expert, former Senior Director at the National Security Council for Nonproliferation and Arms Control, and member of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists Science and Security Board, Nuclear First-Use Is Dangerous and Unnecessary, Policy Roundtable: Nuclear First-Use and Presidential Authority, July 2, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-nuclear-first-use-and-presidential-authority/#essay3>

If a first-use posture were safe and made America more secure, it might be worth keeping. However, it is neither of these things. Nor is there much to suggest that U.S. threats to use nuclear weapons first against other nuclear-weapon states — a threat that would be certain to bring about nuclear retaliation — are seen as credible by America's main nuclear adversaries, including Russia and China.

US allies know the US will never use nuclear weapons first.

Jon B. Wolfsthal, nuclear security expert, former Senior Director at the National Security Council for Nonproliferation and Arms Control, and member of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists Science and Security Board, Nuclear First-Use Is Dangerous and Unnecessary, Policy Roundtable: Nuclear First-Use and Presidential Authority, July 2, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-nuclear-first-use-and-presidential-authority/#essay3>

Just as America is right to assume that its large, diverse, and highly-capable nuclear forces are able to deter nuclear attacks against itself and its allies, so too is Russia right to assume that its forces are able to deter a nuclear attack by the United States in the absence of a nuclear provocation. It is not clear why the United States believes now, let alone in the past, that it can credibly threaten a nuclear first-strike on Russia or its forces and then control or prevent a response or escalation. Russia plainly is aware that its conventional capabilities are no match for those of the United States and NATO, which is why it relies on a first-strike posture and has invested in and is expanding its hybrid and disinformation capabilities. The United States has no such need, and yet it maintains a first-use posture for anachronistic political reasons, which carry with them real and observable political and financial costs, as well as costs to stability. In other words, the United States believes that it is the one who will and can control nuclear escalation, but that Russia will not and cannot. A dangerous bet, with no real facts on which to base it.

The US's first use policy increases the risk of nuclear war with North Korea.

Jon B. Wolfsthal, nuclear security expert, former Senior Director at the National Security Council for Nonproliferation and Arms Control, and member of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists Science and Security Board, Nuclear First-Use Is Dangerous and Unnecessary, Policy Roundtable: Nuclear First-Use and Presidential Authority, July 2, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-nuclear-first-use-and-presidential-authority/#essay3>

In the case of smaller nuclear states like North Korea, U.S. threats to “go nuclear” first might be seen as credible because North Korea lacks the ability to destroy all of the United States in retaliation. But threats to “go nuclear” first may make Kim Jong Un more, not less, likely to rely on rapid nuclear launch decisions because of the possible vulnerability of his country’s nuclear forces and leadership to nuclear strike. First-use threats in the Korean context, in which America continues to have massive conventional advantages, actually increase the likelihood of North Korea launching a nuclear weapon first. Most informed analysts believe Kim sees nuclear weapons as an insurance policy, to be used only to prevent his destruction. If his destruction seems increasingly imminent, so too would his own willingness to “go nuclear.” As the United States adjusts to the reality of a nuclear standoff with North Korea, this reality has to be taken more seriously, and the risks of nuclear-crisis instability on the Korean peninsula more carefully considered.

US allies don't really rely on the US's first strike nuclear policy.

Jon B. Wolfsthal, nuclear security expert, former Senior Director at the National Security Council for Nonproliferation and Arms Control, and member of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists Science and Security Board, Nuclear First-Use Is Dangerous and Unnecessary, Policy Roundtable: Nuclear First-Use and Presidential Authority, July 2, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-nuclear-first-use-and-presidential-authority/#essay3>

U.S. allies and adversaries know that, in the absence of a threat to America's national existence or that of an ally, an American decision to initiate nuclear war against a nuclear adversary is highly doubtful. It is far more credible, and thus effective, to promise to respond to conventional aggression with America's and its allies' combined conventional capabilities, and to reserve the role of nuclear weapons to deter, and if necessary retaliate against, a nuclear attack against an American ally. This as much as anything else argues in favor of adopting a no-first-use policy — to make a nuclear retaliatory threat all the more credible.

The risk that a no first use nuclear policy would cause ally proliferation is merely theoretical.

Jon B. Wolfsthal, nuclear security expert, former Senior Director at the National Security Council for Nonproliferation and Arms Control, and member of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists Science and Security Board, Nuclear First-Use Is Dangerous and Unnecessary, Policy Roundtable: Nuclear First-Use and Presidential Authority, July 2, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-nuclear-first-use-and-presidential-authority/#essay3>

Advocates for maintaining a first-use posture also claim, with little evidence, that adopting an NFU posture would lead allies to reconsider their own non-nuclear status.⁶⁹ In theory, this is a risk. Decades ago, the extension of the U.S. nuclear umbrella influenced the decision of states to forgo independent nuclear options during the Cold War and commit instead to an international nonproliferation norm. Any proliferation now, even by a close U.S. ally, would be met with global concern and a collective response.

In reality, there is zero chance US allies would create nuclear weapons of the US adopted a no first use nuclear policy.

Jon B. Wolfsthal, nuclear security expert, former Senior Director at the National Security Council for Nonproliferation and Arms Control, and member of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists Science and Security Board, Nuclear First-Use Is Dangerous and Unnecessary, Policy Roundtable: Nuclear First-Use and Presidential Authority, July 2, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-nuclear-first-use-and-presidential-authority/#essay3>

In reality, it is hard to see which U.S. ally would respond to a coordinated move by the United States to adopt NFU by breaking with the U.S. alliance structure, withdrawing from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, and building nuclear weapons. To be sure, countries in Europe and Asia are facing complex security and political challenges. Yet, it remains unlikely that Germany, South Korea, Poland, or other “front line” states are likely to be driven to proliferate by a U.S. decision to maintain a strong alliance and a credible retaliatory nuclear posture while adopting an NFU pledge. Indeed, the United States adopting NFU would likely lead to steps to increase the credibility of U.S. conventional and political commitments to allied security.

Allies value support more than nuclear first use guarantees, and Trump has destroyed allies’ faith in the US’s protection guarantee.

Jon B. Wolfsthal, nuclear security expert, former Senior Director at the National Security Council for Nonproliferation and Arms Control, and member of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists Science and Security Board, Nuclear First-Use Is Dangerous and Unnecessary, Policy Roundtable: Nuclear First-Use and Presidential Authority, July 2, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-nuclear-first-use-and-presidential-authority/#essay3>

Proponents of maintaining first-use options also need to consider the possibility that the very steps needed to enhance conventional deterrence of Russia and China and to reassure U.S. allies are not being pursued out of a false belief that America’s nuclear first-use policy — and investment in nuclear capabilities to back it up — will achieve the same goal. Reassuring allies, as with deterring adversaries, requires a balanced combination of capability and intent. Above all, to feel secure, America’s allies need strong political commitments from the United States that it will ensure their security, and they need to feel confident that America can and will act upon those commitments. If the will of America to act in support of its defense and alliance commitments are questioned — as they are now in a way not seen in a generation — then no amount of nuclear posturing will make up for it. Sadly, the Trump administration has done a poor job of reassuring U.S. allies, despite making massive increases in defense spending and pursuing new nuclear weapon systems.

Allies don't rely on the US's first strike nuclear policy because Trump's unpredictability has undermined the credibility of the US's nuclear policy.

Jon B. Wolfsthal, nuclear security expert, former Senior Director at the National Security Council for Nonproliferation and Arms Control, and member of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists Science and Security Board, Nuclear First-Use Is Dangerous and Unnecessary, Policy Roundtable: Nuclear First-Use and Presidential Authority, July 2, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-nuclear-first-use-and-presidential-authority/#essay3>

Likewise, the Trump administration has done a poor job of maintaining strong and clear deterrent statements and postures toward Russia, China, and North Korea. Trump believes that unpredictability is a virtue, but in deterrence and alliance management it is the opposite. While America's formidable nuclear and conventional capabilities remain fully able to deter nuclear attacks on the United States and its allies, the current state of America's political leadership undermines the credible use of those capabilities. Washington needs to pursue improved political engagement and ensure its efforts to deter aggression are clear and credible. As these steps are taken, there is an opportunity to put America's nuclear strategy on a more credible footing without damaging its defense capabilities or its alliance commitments.

A US President will likely never use nuclear weapons first.

Jon B. Wolfsthal, nuclear security expert, former Senior Director at the National Security Council for Nonproliferation and Arms Control, and member of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists Science and Security Board, Nuclear First-Use Is Dangerous and Unnecessary, Policy Roundtable: Nuclear First-Use and Presidential Authority, July 2, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-nuclear-first-use-and-presidential-authority/#essay3>

Does the United States need to rely on nuclear first-use to respond to non-nuclear threats from a nuclear state? If not, then the United States can adopt a policy where the role of nuclear weapons is limited solely to nuclear deterrence. It is far from certain that America must rely on nuclear weapons in such situations. Indeed, the scenarios identified by first-use advocates, while plausible, do not make a compelling case for a nuclear first-use policy and generally ignore its risks.⁷² Among these scenarios, the most prominent are the risks of a conventional attack by a state like Russia or a chemical or biological weapons attack by a nuclear state such as North Korea. A careful step-by-step review of these scenarios suggests that it is very hard, if not impossible, to imagine that the conditions would come about that would lead an American president to initiate a nuclear conflict, while it is easy to see how threatening first-use does more to increase the danger to America and its allies than to decrease it.

The US's first use policy against nuclear states contradicts its no first use policy against non-nuclear states.

Jon B. Wolfsthal, nuclear security expert, former Senior Director at the National Security Council for Nonproliferation and Arms Control, and member of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists Science and Security Board, Nuclear First-Use Is Dangerous and Unnecessary, Policy Roundtable: Nuclear First-Use and Presidential Authority, July 2, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-nuclear-first-use-and-presidential-authority/#essay3>

Before looking at these specific scenarios, it is useful to note that the United States — under both Presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump — has clearly stated that it will not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapon states. That means that there are a range of conventional, cyber, and chemical and biological threats that the U.S. military and political leadership agree do not require a nuclear response. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that the same goes for nuclear-armed adversaries that possess those same capabilities.

The US's first strike nuclear policy increases the risks of nuclear war with North Korea.

Jon B. Wolfsthal, nuclear security expert, former Senior Director at the National Security Council for Nonproliferation and Arms Control, and member of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists Science and Security Board, Nuclear First-Use Is Dangerous and Unnecessary, Policy Roundtable: Nuclear First-Use and Presidential Authority, July 2, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-nuclear-first-use-and-presidential-authority/#essay3>

Yet, to be effective, an American nuclear strike would need to be able to stop the use of chemical and biological weapons or be credible enough to convince North Korea's leaders not to cross that line. However, the United States does not have anything close to perfect intelligence about North Korea's capabilities or the location of its chemical and biological weapons production, storage, and employment sites. Even if it did, the use of multiple nuclear weapons to neutralize North Korea's use of chemical or biological weapons remains a scenario that is hard to envision. Moreover, North Korea knows the United States has and continues to threaten nuclear use to deter or retaliate for the use of chemical and biological weapons. Should Pyongyang be in a situation where it would consider using such weapons, then it would automatically also have to consider its own preemptive use of nuclear weapons, ratcheting up the nuclear cycle of escalation and making it more, not less, likely that a smaller conflict would escalate into a broader nuclear exchange. In these two different scenarios, it remains hard to identify the benefits of nuclear first-use, while it is clear that the posture carries with it significant risks. Thus, when it comes to the question of whether America needs to threaten first-use, it seems that not only are its conventional capabilities sufficient, but that threatening first-use lacks military or political utility or credibility, and actually risks significant escalation in most scenarios that do not benefit American or allied interests.

A no first use nuclear policy is not a radical or new idea.

Jon B. Wolfsthal, nuclear security expert, former Senior Director at the National Security Council for Nonproliferation and Arms Control, and member of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists Science and Security Board, Nuclear First-Use Is Dangerous and Unnecessary, Policy Roundtable: Nuclear First-Use and Presidential Authority, July 2, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-nuclear-first-use-and-presidential-authority/#essay3>

No-first-use is not a new idea.⁷⁵ In the past, it has been considered as a way to reduce nuclear instability, protect American conventional superiority, pursue nuclear reductions and disarmament, and enhance non-proliferation goals. More recently, however, it has come back to the forefront because of concerns about the ability of any one leader, including in the United States, to be trusted with the awesome responsibility of whether and when to initiate a nuclear war.

The risk of nuclear war is increasing; we need to adopt a no first use nuclear policy to help prevent a global nuclear war.

Jon B. Wolfsthal, nuclear security expert, former Senior Director at the National Security Council for Nonproliferation and Arms Control, and member of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists Science and Security Board, Nuclear First-Use Is Dangerous and Unnecessary, Policy Roundtable: Nuclear First-Use and Presidential Authority, July 2, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-nuclear-first-use-and-presidential-authority/#essay3>

The risk of nuclear conflict is a growing part of the global security landscape. The slow growth in nuclear states, the deterioration of traditional alliances and deterrent relationships, and broader instability on the global stage has forced both nuclear strategists and the public to wrestle anew with the appropriate role of nuclear weapons and how best the United States can achieve one of its top security objectives: how to avoid the use of nuclear weapons against itself or its allies. For some, the answer is to double down on longstanding nuclear threats and to enhance the range of options for America to initiate the use of nuclear weapons. However, there is now growing political support for reversing course and adopting a more restrained view of nuclear weapons in order to diminish the chance of them being used, while retaining the ability to use them to deter and respond to nuclear weapons use. This renewed debate requires objective thinking grounded in realistic scenarios and backed up by evidence. The adoption of a clear no-first-use posture by the United States, combined with strong efforts to repair America's alliances, reinforce the credibility of deterrence, and reduce the risks of nuclear accident or escalation would make America and its allies more secure.

Adopting a no first use nuclear policy would devalue nuclear weapons and have numerous other nuclear benefits.

Dr. John P. Holdren, S.B. and S.M. degrees from M.I.T. and a Ph.D. (1970) from Stanford in aerospace engineering and theoretical plasma physics, The overwhelming case for no first use, Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, Volume 76, Jan. 13, 2020, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00963402.2019.1701277>

Declaring a policy and posture of no first use of nuclear weapons offers the most conspicuous opportunity not yet taken for the United States to devalue the currency of nuclear weapons in world affairs. Importantly, this step could be accomplished by a US president on his or her own authority, without need for authorization or agreement by the Congress. Doing so would bring multiple benefits.

Adopting a no first use nuclear policy would boost US credibility in nonproliferation norms.

Dr. John P. Holdren, S.B. and S.M. degrees from M.I.T. and a Ph.D. (1970) from Stanford in aerospace engineering and theoretical plasma physics, The overwhelming case for no first use, Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, Volume 76, Jan. 13, 2020, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00963402.2019.1701277>

Notably, it would immediately raise the global credibility of the US stance against nuclear proliferation. It would reduce the incentives of potential adversaries that don't have nuclear weapons to acquire them. And it would reduce the risks of nuclear use through accident or miscalculation. It would also render unnecessary the continuous striving to develop and deploy nuclear capabilities that would make US nuclear first use against a nuclear-armed adversary advantageous and therefore credible. No longer striving for such advantage – which is very probably unattainable in any case – would reduce incentives for nuclear armed adversaries to seek to improve their own nuclear forces as a hedge against US gaining a first-use advantage.

Adopting a no first use nuclear policy would not undermine nuclear deterrence.

Dr. John P. Holdren, S.B. and S.M. degrees from M.I.T. and a Ph.D. (1970) from Stanford in aerospace engineering and theoretical plasma physics, The overwhelming case for no first use, Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, Volume 76, Jan. 13, 2020, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00963402.2019.1701277>

As recently argued in a powerful analysis by Steve Fetter and Jon Wolfsthal (2018), moreover, A no first use policy would in no way reduce deterrence of nuclear attack against the United States or its allies. [And] nuclear weapons are not an effective deterrent against non-nuclear attack because there are few if any scenarios in which a US threat to use nuclear weapons first in response to non-nuclear aggression against the United States or its allies would be credible. For all these reasons, embracing no first use would be advantageous to the United States whether or not any other nuclear-armed nations (besides China and India, both of which announced no-first-use stances shortly after their first nuclear tests) decide to do the same. There would be no logic in holding out for a no-first-use treaty. We should get on with it – unilaterally.

A no first use nuclear policy would establish the US's moral authority to prevent nuclear proliferation.

Dr. John P. Holdren, S.B. and S.M. degrees from M.I.T. and a Ph.D. (1970) from Stanford in aerospace engineering and theoretical plasma physics, The overwhelming case for no first use, Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, Volume 76, Jan. 13, 2020, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00963402.2019.1701277>

When the country with the most capable conventional forces the world has ever seen insists that it nonetheless needs nuclear weapons to deter and respond to non-nuclear attacks, it is logically conceding, to any country that fears or professes to fear attack by another, the right to acquire its own nuclear weapons to deter or respond to such attacks. The US stance of “first use if we think we need to” undermines, in the eyes of most of the world, any moral authority the United States might wish to assert against the acquisition of nuclear weapons by others. And if potential adversaries that don't possess nuclear weapons think the United States would use nuclear weapons against their conventional forces or in retaliation for an actual (or suspected!) chemical or biological attack, that can only increase their incentive to acquire nuclear weapons of their own.

Allies won't acquire nuclear weapons if the US adopted a no first use nuclear policy because they are still covered by the US's nuclear umbrella.

Dr. John P. Holdren, S.B. and S.M. degrees from M.I.T. and a Ph.D. (1970) from Stanford in aerospace engineering and theoretical plasma physics, The overwhelming case for no first use, Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, Volume 76, Jan. 13, 2020, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00963402.2019.1701277>

First of all, nobody is proposing that the US nuclear umbrella deterring nuclear threats or attacks against US allies would be withdrawn under no first use. To misunderstand this reality is to conflate the two forms of extension in the term “extended deterrence”: extension of the nuclear umbrella to protect allies, as opposed to extension to cover nonnuclear threats. It's the latter form of extended deterrence, extension to non-nuclear threats, that would be renounced under no first use. The United States should be crystal clear in reassuring its allies – and reminding potential adversaries – on this point.

Our allies won't acquire nuclear weapons if the US adopted a no first use nuclear policy because there are too many factors preventing them from developing nuclear weapons.

Dr. John P. Holdren, S.B. and S.M. degrees from M.I.T. and a Ph.D. (1970) from Stanford in aerospace engineering and theoretical plasma physics, The overwhelming case for no first use, Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, Volume 76, Jan. 13, 2020, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00963402.2019.1701277>

Second, public and leadership opinion on the proper role of US nuclear weapons is undoubtedly not uniform in any of these countries. Whether people think they want non-nuclear threats against them to be deterred or responded to with US nuclear weapons varies with many factors, including whether they think deterrence will assuredly work and whether they think, if it doesn't, nuclear weapons will end up exploding on or near their own territory. (The Cold War saying that “the towns in Germany are two kilotons apart” is relevant here.) And Japan's leaders would do well to consider the direction the fallout would travel if the United States attacked North Korea with nuclear weapons.

Our allies won't acquire nuclear weapons if the US adopted a no first use nuclear policy because they will see such a policy as expressing confidence in conventional forces.

Dr. John P. Holdren, S.B. and S.M. degrees from M.I.T. and a Ph.D. (1970) from Stanford in aerospace engineering and theoretical plasma physics, The overwhelming case for no first use, Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, Volume 76, Jan. 13, 2020, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00963402.2019.1701277>

Third, US allies should see a declaration of no first use as an expression of this country's confidence in the capabilities of its conventional forces to deter or defeat any non-nuclear threat from a state adversary. (Non-state adversaries, of course, may not be deterrable.) And, if US allies are thinking clearly, they will conclude that the US pledge to come to their defense if they are attacked is actually more believable by all concerned if it based on defending them with conventional rather than nuclear forces.

Even if the US's conventional capabilities are not always superior, the risks of a first strike nuclear policy outweigh the minimal benefits of such a policy.

Dr. John P. Holdren, S.B. and S.M. degrees from M.I.T. and a Ph.D. (1970) from Stanford in aerospace engineering and theoretical plasma physics, The overwhelming case for no first use, Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, Volume 76, Jan. 13, 2020, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00963402.2019.1701277>

Of course, it will likely always be true that the United States (or NATO) cannot be immediately superior on the ground, in the air, or at sea at every location where need for conventional force projection might arise. The real question is whether the explicit threat to use nuclear weapons first in such a circumstance is a sensible way to deal with that reality. I believe that making this threat brings a very small benefit at a very large cost to our nonproliferation goals, as well as to arms-race stability and crisis stability in cases where the prospective adversary is a nuclear-weapon state. The benefit is small because – whatever an adversary's estimate of the probability that the United States, under our current declaratory policy and posture, would actually use nuclear weapons against a conventional attack – the propensity to worst-case assessment means that the adversary's estimate of that probability won't be a whole lot smaller under a US no-first-use stance. That is, the mere existence of US nuclear weapons induces a non-negligible degree of caution on the part of adversaries contemplating aggression, irrespective of US declaratory policy and the details of posture. Besides, there are better remedies for the problem: Some are already in hand (such as conventional precision strike), and some are attainable at a more favorable ratio of benefit to cost and risk than that of our first-use stance (such as increasing our capacity to deploy troops, weapons, and supply chains rapidly to wherever they are needed).

A first strike nuclear policy has little relevance to a nuclear calculus, especially with nonstate actors.

Dr. John P. Holdren, S.B. and S.M. degrees from M.I.T. and a Ph.D. (1970) from Stanford in aerospace engineering and theoretical plasma physics, The overwhelming case for no first use, Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, Volume 76, Jan. 13, 2020, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00963402.2019.1701277>

The deterrence component has the same weaknesses as for deterring conventional attacks with nuclear weapons – most notably, the low salience of declaratory policy in the worse-case calculus of potential state adversaries – on top of a low likelihood that potential state adversaries of the United States would see benefit in attacking this country or its allies with chemical or biological weapons unless they saw a way to do so without the United States being able to determine the source. In the case of non-state adversaries that may not even be under the control of the state(s) where they're based, deterrence by threat of nuclear response is even less germane.

A first strike nuclear policy promotes a disproportionate response that could escalate conflicts.

Dr. John P. Holdren, S.B. and S.M. degrees from M.I.T. and a Ph.D. (1970) from Stanford in aerospace engineering and theoretical plasma physics, The overwhelming case for no first use, Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, Volume 76, Jan. 13, 2020, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00963402.2019.1701277>

As for defeating such attacks, it's hard to envision circumstances where nuclear weapons would be of any use, except for pre-emptive strikes against deeply buried chemical and biological weapons storage or manufacturing sites. In the case of deeply buried sites, the world would almost surely see using nuclear weapons to attack them pre-emptively as disproportionate, leading to universal condemnation. Retaliating with nuclear weapons against chemical or biological weapons use (in the subset of cases where the source was clear) would likewise almost certainly be seen as disproportionate. Indeed, the disproportionality aspect makes it so unlikely that any US president would order either a pre-emptive or retaliatory nuclear attack in the chemical and biological weapons context that including the option in declaratory policy seems perverse, given the downsides of doing so.

Just because we haven't had a nuclear war in the past with a first strike nuclear policy doesn't mean we should continue with a first strike nuclear policy.

Dr. John P. Holdren, S.B. and S.M. degrees from M.I.T. and a Ph.D. (1970) from Stanford in aerospace engineering and theoretical plasma physics, The overwhelming case for no first use, Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, Volume 76, Jan. 13, 2020, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00963402.2019.1701277>

The argument that NATO's posture of "first use if necessary" contributed importantly to keeping the peace in the Cold War, so why should we change a winning game, is logically suspect and empirically untestable (NAS 1997). Were the Soviets deterred from a conventional invasion of Western Europe by the threat of NATO nuclear-weapon use? Or did their attempts to neutralize that nuclear threat and our attempts to shore it up – both sides seeking "escalation dominance" – contribute to a destabilizing competition in nuclear armaments and postures that made war more rather than less likely? Did we escape World War III because we were smart, or because we were lucky? We will never know. And we should not wish to rerun the experiment to get more data.

A no first use nuclear policy would improve credibility in the US's nuclear posture.

Dr. John P. Holdren, S.B. and S.M. degrees from M.I.T. and a Ph.D. (1970) from Stanford in aerospace engineering and theoretical plasma physics, The overwhelming case for no first use, Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, Volume 76, Jan. 13, 2020, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00963402.2019.1701277>

Against the argument that, outside the peace movement and countries that don't matter, no one would give the United States any credit for a no-first-use declaration. This argument ignores the transformation a US no first-use declaration, backed up by changes in posture, would bring to the moral standing of the United States in the global discussion about both nonproliferation and reducing the role of nuclear weapons in the policies of countries that have them. It also ignores the statements in favor of the United States taking a no-first-use position that have been made by many experienced statesmen, nuclear-weapon experts, and retired military leaders from countries that do matter. Some of the arguments against a US declaration of no first use have some plausibility, but they pale in comparison to the arguments in favor. The United States should have taken the no-first-use step long ago, and the next administration, after due consultation with US allies, should take it as a high priority after the start of the new term in 2021.

Con Case #1

We negate the resolution, Resolved: The United States should adopt a declaratory nuclear policy of no first use. Our sole contention is that adopting a no first use nuclear policy would increase the risk of nuclear war because US allies would acquire their own nuclear weapons.

First: A no first use nuclear policy would destroy US's relations with its allies, and promote nuclear proliferation by allies. Ankit Panda, adjunct senior fellow at the Federation of American Scientists, graduate of the Princeton School Public and International Affairs at Princeton University, writes in 2018:⁸

During the Cold War and even today, the credible threat of the United States using its nuclear weapons first against an adversary has been an important component of reassuring allies. At the height of the Cold War, the threat of U.S. tactical nuclear use was conceived of as a critical bulwark against a conventional Soviet offensive through the Fulda Gap, a strategically significant lowland corridor in Germany that would allow Warsaw Pact forces to enter Western Europe. A nuclear first-use policy was thought to be a cornerstone of the defensive posture of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), given the large number of bases of Warsaw Pact conventional military forces. Accordingly, NATO has always opposed a U.S. NFU declaration and has never ruled out U.S. first use under its “flexible response” posture since 1967. Today, U.S. allies in East Asia and Europe alike rely on credible commitments from the United States to use nuclear weapons first to deter major nonnuclear threats against them.

Second: Our allies see a first strike nuclear policy as a commitment to protecting them. Dr. John R. Harvey, nuclear physicist, former principal deputy assistant secretary of defense for nuclear, chemical, and biological defense programs, writes in 2019:⁹

Many countries, including those that share a border with an adversary that presents a threat to their very existence, see no-first-use as a weakening, symbolic or otherwise, of U.S. extended deterrence. In response to Chinese provocations in the western Pacific and North Korea's nuclear tests and missile launches, Japan regularly seeks, both in official consultations and ongoing military cooperation, assurances that America will continue to fulfill its security commitments to protect the island nation. Some in South Korea have already pressed to explore an increased U.S. nuclear presence in their country to further deter regional threats.⁸¹ Loss of confidence in U.S. security commitments could cause some allies to seek accommodation with regional adversaries in ways that run counter to U.S. interests.

⁸ ‘No First Use’ and Nuclear Weapons, Council on Foreign Relations, July 17, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/background/no-first-use-and-nuclear-weapons>

⁹ A Considered “No” on “No First Use,” Texas National Security Review, July 2, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-nuclear-first-use-and-presidential-authority/#essay4>

Third: US allies could rapidly develop nuclear weapons if the US adopted a no first use nuclear policy. Michaela Dodge, Senior Policy Analyst for Defense and Strategic Policy at The Heritage Foundation, & Adam Lowther, Ph.D., is a Director of the School for Advanced Nuclear Deterrence Studies., writes in 2016:¹⁰

South Korea and Japan are technologically advanced and could rapidly join the club of nuclear weapons states should they lose confidence in the credibility of American deterrence. Increasing these nations' uncertainty about U.S. security commitments undermines American nonproliferation policy. A no-first-use policy only adds to the already existing view that an American President is not likely to trade San Francisco or New York for Seoul or Riga.

For the foregoing reasons, we urge a Con Ballot.

¹⁰ A No-First-Use Policy Would Make the United States Less Secure , E-International Relations Articles, Oct. 4, 2016, <https://www.e-ir.info/2016/10/04/a-no-first-use-policy-would-make-the-united-states-less-secure/>

Pre-flow – Con Case #1

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Con Case #2

We negate the resolution, Resolved: The United States should adopt a declaratory nuclear policy of no first use. Our sole contention is that adopting a no first use nuclear policy would increase the risk of nuclear war.

First: A no first use nuclear policy is misleading because nuclear weapons are used for deterrence every day. Michaela Dodge, Senior Policy Analyst for Defense and Strategic Policy at The Heritage Foundation, & Adam Lowther, Ph.D., is a Director of the School for Advanced Nuclear Deterrence Studies., writes in 2016:¹¹

The very term “no-first-use” is misleading. While a nuclear weapon has not been used in anger for over 70 years, nuclear weapons are used every single day to deter large-scale conventional and nuclear attacks. Former Air Force Chief of Staff General Larry Welch points out that “we have used the nuclear forces every second of every day for 50 years.” Moreover, during those 50 years, humankind has experienced the most peaceful period in its history as measured by the number of conflict-related casualties as a proportion of the world’s population. This is due in large part to the devastating risks that nuclear weapons pose to any society that is attacked with them. For the United States and the Soviet Union, a large-scale nuclear exchange meant the end of society as Americans and Russians had known it. That risk led American and Soviet leaders to exercise a level of caution and restraint that was not exercised by German, Japanese, and other world leaders in the years leading up to World War II.

Second: A no first use nuclear policy would make the US and its allies less safe. Dodge 2016 continues:

A no-first-use nuclear weapons policy means that a country vows not to use nuclear weapons unless it is first attacked with nuclear weapons. Such a declaration would be a departure from the current U.S. policy of “calculated ambiguity.” Since the dawn of the atomic age, the United States has refused to specify exactly which scenarios would lead to the use of its nuclear weapons. The ambiguity created by having an undefined “red line” contributed greatly to deterrence during the Cold War—including deterrence of large-scale attacks conducted with non-nuclear weapons—and continues to do so today. The effect of changing this policy would be to make the United States and its allies less secure while failing to provide tangible nonproliferation benefits.

¹¹ A No-First-Use Policy Would Make the United States Less Secure , E-International Relations Articles, Oct. 4, 2016, <https://www.e-ir.info/2016/10/04/a-no-first-use-policy-would-make-the-united-states-less-secure/>

Third: A no first use nuclear policy would open the door to large scale military conflicts involving large military states. Dodge 2016 continues:

If the United States were to adopt a no-first-use policy, the perceived threat of nuclear conflict admittedly would decline. While a decline in the perceived threat of nuclear weapons use may seem like a good thing, however, it is actually dangerous because it is that very perceived threat that gives leaders who may be contemplating the use of force the chance for second thoughts that can prevent great-power war. This is an important point. Opening the door to great-power conflict, even if ever so slightly, is obviously a step in the wrong direction.

For the foregoing reasons, we urge a Con Ballot.

Pre-flow – Con Case #2

-Our sole contention is that adopting a no first use nuclear policy would increase the risk of nuclear war.

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Second: A no first use nuclear policy would make the US and its allies less safe. Dodge 2016 continues:

Third: A no first use nuclear policy would open the door to large scale military conflicts involving large military states. Dodge 2016 continues

Con Case #3

We negate the resolution, Resolved: The United States should adopt a declaratory nuclear policy of no first use. Our sole contention is that adopting a no first use nuclear policy would increase the risk of the use of other weapons of mass destruction.

First: A first strike nuclear policy prevents conventional war from escalating to using nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons. Nina Tannenwald, director of the International Relations at Brown University, M.A., Columbia School of International & Public Affairs, PhD, International Relations, Cornell University, writes in 2019:¹²

A first-use policy is based primarily on the belief that the threat of nuclear escalation continues to serve as a deterrent to large-scale conventional war or the use of chemical and biological weapons.¹² Critics of NFU argue that the United States should not make any promise that might make it easier for an opponent to plan an effective military action, a strategy known as “calculated ambiguity.” As the Defense Department recently explained, Retaining a degree of ambiguity and refraining from a no first use policy creates uncertainty in the mind of potential adversaries and reinforces deterrence of aggression by ensuring adversaries cannot predict what specific actions will lead to a U.S. nuclear response. Implementing a no first use policy could undermine the U.S. ability to deter Russian, Chinese, and North Korean aggression, especially with respect to their growing capability to carry out nonnuclear strategic attacks.¹³ In addition, skeptics believe that an NFU promise would be especially costly for the United States, given its wide-ranging extended deterrence commitments.

Second: The threat of first use promotes nuclear deterrence against non-nuclear weapons of mass destruction. Ankit Panda, adjunct senior fellow at the Federation of American Scientists, graduate of the Princeton School Public and International Affairs at Princeton University, writes in 2018:¹³

Strategic planners for nuclear weapons powers see the credible threat of the first use of nuclear weapons as a powerful deterrent against a range of significant nonnuclear threats, including major conventional, chemical, and biological attacks, as well as cyberattacks. Even states with significant conventional military forces, such as the United States, consider it necessary to retain nuclear first use as an option. The 2018 Nuclear Posture Review, under the administration of President Donald J. Trump, retains the option of nuclear first use.

¹² It's Time for a U.S. No-First-Use Nuclear Policy, Texas National Security Review, Vol. 2, Issue 3, Aug. 1, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/its-time-for-a-u-s-no-first-use-nuclear-policy/>

¹³ ‘No First Use’ and Nuclear Weapons, Council on Foreign Relations, July 17, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/no-first-use-and-nuclear-weapons>

Third: A no first use nuclear policy would increase the risk of cyber attacks and use of chemical and biological weapons. Michaela Dodge, Senior Policy Analyst for Defense and Strategic Policy at The Heritage Foundation, & Adam Lowther, Ph.D., is a Director of the School for Advanced Nuclear Deterrence Studies., writes in 2016:¹⁴

Nor are great-power conflicts the only dangerous challenge that nuclear weapons deter. Biological, chemical, and even well-organized and targeted cyber-attacks can be as devastating as nuclear attacks. Some proponents may claim that the combination of a no-first-use policy and American conventional superiority plays to America's strength, but recent history suggests that simply using our conventional forces rarely achieves our political objectives. It is also worth noting that the U.S. military is overstretched and on the verge of a readiness crisis. In the European theater, for example, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces are judged by many to be insufficient to counter a Russian military advance into the Baltics. Most important, the point of deterrence is to prevent a war from happening, which is frequently preferable to becoming engaged in a war even if one wins at the end of the day.

For the foregoing reasons, we urge a Con Ballot.

¹⁴ A No-First-Use Policy Would Make the United States Less Secure , E-International Relations Articles, Oct. 4, 2016, <https://www.e-ir.info/2016/10/04/a-no-first-use-policy-would-make-the-united-states-less-secure/>

Pre-flow – Con Case #3

- Our sole contention is that adopting a no first use nuclear policy would increase the risk of the use of other weapons of mass destruction.

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Con Case #4

We negate the resolution, Resolved: The United States should adopt a declaratory nuclear policy of no first use. Our sole contention is that adopting a no first use nuclear policy would abandon a decades-long, historically proven nuclear policy and only increase the risk of nuclear war.

First: The US’s first strike nuclear policy has been effective for decades, we shouldn’t change it. Michaela Dodge, Senior Policy Analyst for Defense and Strategic Policy at The Heritage Foundation, & Adam Lowther, Ph.D., is a Director of the School for Advanced Nuclear Deterrence Studies., writes in 2016:¹⁵

In the context of the no-first-use policy, we must keep in mind that President Harry Truman made the decision to use nuclear weapons against Japan to prevent an estimated 500,000 or more American casualties in a planned invasion of Japan. We cannot know that future Presidents will not find the nation in a similar situation in which using nuclear weapons could end a war and save thousands or even millions of American lives. Such a decision ought never to be taken lightly, but considering how many times we have been wrong about the future, changing a policy that has served the United States and its allies so well since the end of the Cold War would be at best naïve and at worst dangerous, particularly since security trends for the United States point in a negative direction.

Second: The US repeatedly weighs the pros and cons of a no first use nuclear policy, but always decides the cons outweigh the pros. Dr. John R. Harvey, nuclear physicist, former principal deputy assistant secretary of defense for nuclear, chemical, and biological defense programs, writes in 2019:¹⁶

Over the past few decades, the United States has weighed the risks and benefits to both its nuclear deterrence posture and its non-proliferation policy goals of renouncing first-use of nuclear weapons in a conflict. In President Barack Obama’s 2010 Nuclear Posture Review and, later, near the end of Obama’s second term as part of a mini-nuclear review, the adoption of a so-called “no-first-use” pledge was considered.⁷⁶ Both times, Obama rejected adopting such a policy. The 2018 Nuclear Posture Review carried out by the Trump administration reviewed the policy and reaffirmed Obama’s decision.

¹⁵ A No-First-Use Policy Would Make the United States Less Secure , E-International Relations Articles, Oct. 4, 2016, <https://www.e-ir.info/2016/10/04/a-no-first-use-policy-would-make-the-united-states-less-secure/>

¹⁶ A Considered “No” on “No First Use,” Texas National Security Review, July 2, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-nuclear-first-use-and-presidential-authority/#essay4>

Third: Because US Presidents have historically viewed nuclear weapons as unique and only to be used as a last resort, a no first use nuclear policy is not necessary.
Harvey 2019 continues:

Every president since Dwight Eisenhower has viewed nuclear weapons not just as another weapon of war augmenting conventional arms, but as a special kind of weapon to be used only in the direst circumstances when vital U.S. security interests are at stake. The main concern in adopting a policy of no-first-use is that it could lead an enemy to believe that it could launch a catastrophic, non-nuclear strike against the United States, its allies, or U.S. overseas forces without fear of nuclear reprisal. Consider, for example, a North Korean biological attack on an American city that kills hundreds of thousands, or an artillery bombardment of Seoul with chemical weapons, resulting in the deaths of tens of thousands of Korean and U.S. forces and citizens. Would North Korea be more willing to contemplate such attacks if it thought it was immune to a U.S. nuclear response? Recent presidents have been unwilling to accept the risk to deterrence that would accompany a pledge of no-first-use.

For the foregoing reasons, we urge a Con Ballot.

Pre-flow – Con Case #4

- Our sole contention is that adopting a no first use nuclear policy would abandon a decades-long, historically proven nuclear policy and only increase the risk of nuclear war.

First: The US's first strike nuclear policy has been effective for decades, we shouldn't change it. Michaela Dodge, Senior Policy Analyst for Defense and Strategic Policy at The Heritage Foundation, & Adam Lowther, Ph.D., is a Director of the School for Advanced Nuclear Deterrence Studies., writes in 2016:

Second: The US repeatedly weighs the pros and cons of a no first use nuclear policy, but always decides the cons outweigh the pros. Dr. John R. Harvey, nuclear physicist, former principal deputy assistant secretary of defense for nuclear, chemical, and biological defense programs, writes in 2019

Third: Because US Presidents have historically viewed nuclear weapons as unique and only to be used as a last resort, a no first use nuclear policy is not necessary. Harvey 2019 continues:

Con Responses to Pro Contentions

Responses To: First strike nuclear policy is outdated

They argue that “A first strike nuclear policy is outdated.” My responses are:

1. The world had gotten more dangerous; we cannot afford bad ideas like a no first use nuclear policy.

Michaela Dodge, Ph.D., Some Bad Ideas, Like Zombies, Never Die. A ‘No First Use’ Nuclear Policy Is One of Them, Heritage Foundation, Aug 16, 2017, <https://www.heritage.org/defense/commentary/some-bad-ideas-zombies-never-die-no-first-use-nuclear-policy-one-them>

A development of nuclear weapon capabilities could be one such option with negative consequences for U.S. nonproliferation goals. Under successive Democratic and Republican administrations, the U.S. has continued to reject a no first use nuclear weapons policy based on sound reasoning. Those reasons remain sound today. Considering negative security developments—which include increased ballistic missile and nuclear threats from North Korea, increased assertiveness of the Iranian regime flush with the Obama administration’s cash, as well China and Russia’s massive nuclear weapons modernization programs—the United States cannot afford bad ideas like a no first use policy.

2. The US needs to adopt realism in international policy, which justifies a first strike nuclear policy.

Nina Tannenwald, director of the International Relations at Brown University, M.A., Columbia School of International & Public Affairs, PhD, International Relations, Cornell University, It’s Time for a U.S. No-First-Use Nuclear Policy, Texas National Security Review, Vol. 2, Issue 3, Aug. 1, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/its-time-for-a-u-s-no-first-use-nuclear-policy/>

Several theoretical approaches in international relations help to illuminate why states choose to adopt a first-use versus a no-first-use (NFU) policy. A realist approach, which emphasizes the central role of material capabilities, would generally be skeptical of no-first-use pledges, which it would view as “cheap talk” and unenforceable. States that have made such pledges could still launch a nuclear weapon first in a conflict. Thus, NATO leaders and other observers expressed considerable skepticism during the final years of the Cold War that Russia’s declaration of an NFU policy in 1982 had any real substance behind it.¹ Today, while India has made an NFU pledge, analysts debate how constraining it really is. In turn, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi is sometimes dismissive of China’s NFU policy.

Con Responses to Pro Contentions

Responses To: Must avoid nuclear war at all costs.

They argue that “We must avoid nuclear war at all costs.” My responses are:

1. Adopting a no first use nuclear policy will increase the risk of war. Also, No action will entirely eliminate the threat of nuclear war.

Jon B. Wolfsthal, nuclear security expert, former Senior Director at the National Security Council for Nonproliferation and Arms Control, and member of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists Science and Security Board, Nuclear First-Use Is Dangerous and Unnecessary, Policy Roundtable: Nuclear First-Use and Presidential Authority, July 2, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-nuclear-first-use-and-presidential-authority/#essay3>

No one should believe that America can deter all conflict — with or without nuclear first-use threats — or that it can prevail quickly or cleanly in any conventional war. No amount of defense or nuclear spending can achieve such a goal. To be sure, conventional war scenarios in Korea or the Baltics take months to play out and result in disastrous consequences for the country in which the fighting occurs, for global stability, and for the global economy.⁷³ But in all of these scenarios, America and its allies would likely prevail if the full force of its allied conventional capabilities were brought to bear.

2. A no first use nuclear policy will not minimize the risk of nuclear miscalculation or accidents, and other solutions can solve.

Dr. John R. Harvey, nuclear physicist, former principal deputy assistant secretary of defense for nuclear, chemical, and biological defense programs, A Considered “No” on “No First Use,” Texas National Security Review, July 2, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-nuclear-first-use-and-presidential-authority/#essay4>

In light of these risks, what are the benefits of a U.S. no-first-use pledge that could offset them? Would it, as Sen. Warren claims, “[reduce] the risk of a nuclear miscalculation by an adversary in a crisis ...”?⁸⁴ If an adversary launches a nuclear weapon because it has misinterpreted America’s actions or intentions, or even if it launches a nuclear weapon by accident, the consequences would, of course, be tragic. Such actions must be assiduously avoided with clear crisis communications, transparency, and strong negative control of nuclear weapons. But, a U.S. no-first-use pledge, by itself, is unlikely to have any effect at all in preventing such a situation from arising in the first place.

3. Adopting a no first use nuclear policy will not delegitimize nuclear weapons or result in disarmament.

Dr. John R. Harvey, nuclear physicist, former principal deputy assistant secretary of defense for nuclear, chemical, and biological defense programs, A Considered “No” on “No First Use,” Texas National Security Review, July 2, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-nuclear-first-use-and-presidential-authority/#essay4>

Along these lines, some view no-first-use as a means to delegitimize nuclear weapons in general, and, more specifically, as a first step to removing from alert and eventually getting rid of the inter-continental ballistic missile (ICBM) leg of the Triad.⁸⁵ After all, if ICBMs are not survivable unless used first, and if America’s policy becomes one of no-first-use, then why does the United States need them at all, much less on alert? This claim misrepresents both the role of America’s ICBMs and the obligations that America would be under as part of a no-first-use pledge. Thus, such arguments are unlikely to sway any president who views a nuclear Triad as an essential element of U.S. security for managing risk in a dangerous world.

Con Responses to Pro Contentions

Responses To: International Relations

They argue that “A no first use nuclear policy would improve international relations.” My responses are:

1. Adopting a no first use nuclear policy will not improve the US’s international relations.

Dr. John R. Harvey, nuclear physicist, former principal deputy assistant secretary of defense for nuclear, chemical, and biological defense programs, A Considered “No” on “No First Use,” Texas National Security Review, July 2, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-nuclear-first-use-and-presidential-authority/#essay4>

Another purported benefit of adopting a no-first-use policy is that it might silence criticism from Non-Aligned Movement countries that periodically denounce the United States for, among other things, not having disarmed unilaterally. This is unlikely. Indeed, the enormous progress made in the decades leading up to the end of the Cold War and beyond in ending the nuclear arms race, reducing nuclear stockpiles, and eliminating other global nuclear threats has done little to moderate such rhetoric.

2. Other nuclear states will not model a US no first use nuclear policy; so no nuclear states will really care if the US adopts a no first use nuclear policy. It only has the risk of scaring allies into proliferating.

Dr. John R. Harvey, nuclear physicist, former principal deputy assistant secretary of defense for nuclear, chemical, and biological defense programs, A Considered “No” on “No First Use,” Texas National Security Review, July 2, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-nuclear-first-use-and-presidential-authority/#essay4>

Some argue that adopting such a policy would set an example and cause nuclear adversaries to follow America’s lead. If promises were kept, this would allow the U.S. conventional juggernaut to win wars absent the threat of nuclear use. But this outcome is unlikely. Indeed, several nuclear adversaries have acquired, or are currently seeking, nuclear weapons precisely to offset superior U.S. conventional capabilities. Again, quoting Tierney: If [a President] made a dramatic announcement of no-first-use, it would probably have less impact than people think because other countries wouldn’t follow suit, especially if they’re weak. Would U.S. adoption of no-first-use cause other countries to be more inclined to cooperate with the United States to work toward a strengthened nonproliferation regime and less likely to acquire nuclear weapons of their own? No evidence exists to support such a contention and, as noted above, allied perceptions of weakened extended deterrence could actually spur proliferation.

Con Responses to Pro Contentions

Responses To: Allies Won't Acquire Nuclear Weapons

They argue that “US Allies Won't Acquire Nuclear Weapons.” My responses are:

1. Our allies are on the brink of considering developing nuclear weapons from nuclear energy programs.

Dr. John R. Harvey, nuclear physicist, former principal deputy assistant secretary of defense for nuclear, chemical, and biological defense programs, A Considered “No” on “No First Use,” Texas National Security Review, July 2, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-nuclear-first-use-and-presidential-authority/#essay4>

Moreover, both South Korea and Japan, similar to many NATO allies, have latent nuclear weapons capabilities characteristic of advanced industrial economies with commercial nuclear power. Any perceived wavering of U.S. security commitments could cause allies to develop and field their own nuclear weapons.

2. US allies have been vocal about opposing a no first use nuclear policy.

Dr. John R. Harvey, nuclear physicist, former principal deputy assistant secretary of defense for nuclear, chemical, and biological defense programs, A Considered “No” on “No First Use,” Texas National Security Review, July 2, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-nuclear-first-use-and-presidential-authority/#essay4>

Further, America's allies have made their feelings about America adopting a no-first-use policy known. U.S. officials consulted America's allies extensively in the lead up to the 2010 and 2018 nuclear posture reviews. This dialogue has been rich and productive and, in some ways, surprising in its candor. For example, in 2009, Japanese officials briefed the Perry-Schlesinger Commission, established by Congress to seek a bipartisan approach to the U.S. nuclear posture, on specific features and capabilities of the U.S. nuclear deterrent that Japan viewed as critical to its security.⁸² In related dialogue, many foreign counterparts to U.S. officials, including those of Japan, have urged the United States not to adopt a no-first-use policy.

Con Responses to Pro Contentions

Responses To: First strike nuclear policy is not credible

They argue that “Our First strike nuclear policy is not credible.” My responses are:

1. Most nuclear states have first strike nuclear policies, and don’t consider no first use nuclear policies credible. Ankit Panda, adjunct senior fellow at the Federation of American Scientists, graduate of the Princeton School Public and International Affairs at Princeton University, ‘No First Use’ and Nuclear Weapons, Council on Foreign Relations, July 17, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/backgroundunder/no-first-use-and-nuclear-weapons>

Most states with nuclear weapons maintain policies that would permit their first use in a conflict. Pledges to only use these weapons in retaliation for a nuclear attack—or a no-first-use (NFU) policy—are rare. Where these pledges have been made by nuclear states, their adversaries generally consider them not credible.

2. After Trump, the US has no credibility on nuclear policy, so a no first use nuclear policy would not be credible either.

Jon B. Wolfsthal, nuclear security expert, former Senior Director at the National Security Council for Nonproliferation and Arms Control, and member of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists Science and Security Board, Nuclear First-Use Is Dangerous and Unnecessary, Policy Roundtable: Nuclear First-Use and Presidential Authority, July 2, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-nuclear-first-use-and-presidential-authority/#essay3>

Convinced America can safely manage these risks, the Trump administration has sought to develop new, more diverse nuclear delivery options and weapons, and has expanded the conditions under which it would consider using nuclear weapons first, to include massive conventional attacks and other “non-nuclear strategic attacks.”⁶² The Defense Department has recently gone out of its way to refute arguments in favor of no-first-use,⁶³ likely in response to multiple bills in Congress calling for America to adopt an NFU policy.

3. A no first use nuclear policy would not be credible.

Dr. John R. Harvey, nuclear physicist, former principal deputy assistant secretary of defense for nuclear, chemical, and biological defense programs, A Considered “No” on “No First Use,” Texas National Security Review, July 2, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-nuclear-first-use-and-presidential-authority/#essay4>

First, a no-first-use pledge is unlikely to appear credible to an adversary contemplating major aggression. For example, North Korea is unlikely to base any military planning to reunify the Korean Peninsula by force, or plans for its regime survival after an unsuccessful effort to achieve that objective, on a U.S. promise of no-first-use. Consider China’s existing no-first-use pledge, which has not caused the United States to moderate its own nuclear posture one iota. Few states will risk their national security based on a declaratory policy that can be reversed overnight. Dominic Tierney, an academic who supports a no-first-use policy, eloquently addresses this point: Viewed through a strategic — and perhaps more cynical — lens, the no-first-use doctrine also has a huge credibility problem. For the U.S. pledge to truly matter, a president who otherwise favors a nuclear first strike would have to decide not to press the button because of this policy. But in an extreme national crisis — one involving, say, North Korean nuclear missiles — a president is unlikely to feel bound by America’s former assurance. After all, if a country is willing to use nuclear weapons, it’s also willing to break a promise.⁷⁹

Con Responses to Pro Contentions

Responses To: Other nuclear states have a no first use nuclear policy

They argue that “other nuclear states have a no first use nuclear policy.” My responses are:

1. Only China has an unconditional no first use nuclear policy; all other states don't have a true no first use nuclear policy.

Ankit Panda, adjunct senior fellow at the Federation of American Scientists, graduate of the Princeton School Public and International Affairs at Princeton University, ‘No First Use’ and Nuclear Weapons, Council on Foreign Relations, July 17, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/background/no-first-use-and-nuclear-weapons>

A so-called NFU pledge, first publicly made by China in 1964, refers to any authoritative statement by a nuclear weapon state to never be the first to use these weapons in a conflict, reserving them strictly to retaliate in the aftermath of a nuclear attack against its territory or military personnel. These pledges are a component of nuclear declaratory policies. As such, there can be no diplomatic arrangement to verify or enforce a declaratory NFU pledge, and such pledges alone do not affect capabilities. States with such pledges would be technically able to still use nuclear weapons first in a conflict, and their adversaries have generally not trusted NFU assurances. Today, China is the only nuclear weapon state to maintain an unconditional NFU pledge.

2. Not only do they not have no first use nuclear policies, they won't model us; Russia proves this.

Rebecca Heinrichs, senior fellow at Hudson Institute, Reject 'No First Use' Nuclear Policy, Aug. 24, 2020, <https://www.newsweek.com/reject-no-first-use-nuclear-policy-opinion-1527037>

Third, our adversaries would hardly restrict themselves if America were to adopt a true NFU policy. In fact, we have reason to believe that many are willing to use nuclear weapons first in a conflict. Start with Russia. Russian officials have implied their comfort with the use of nuclear weapons in a conventional conflict, have at times threatened nuclear use against purely defensive systems and, in at least one instance, an official stated that the conditions for a Russian nuclear use could as small as a regional, or even a local, conflict. In June 2015, the Obama administration's deputy secretary of defense, Robert Work, and then-Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral James Winnefeld informed Congress that "Russian military doctrine includes what some have called an 'escalate to de-escalate' strategy—a strategy that purportedly seeks to de-escalate a conventional conflict through coercive threats, including limited nuclear use." Then-Trump administration Secretary of Defense James Mattis testified to the same concern in 2018.

Con Responses to Pro Contentions

Responses To: China

They argue that “We should match China’s no first use nuclear policy.” My responses are:

1. China is considering abandoning its no first use nuclear policy.

Ankit Panda, adjunct senior fellow at the Federation of American Scientists, graduate of the Princeton School Public and International Affairs at Princeton University, ‘No First Use’ and Nuclear Weapons, Council on Foreign Relations, July 17, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/no-first-use-and-nuclear-weapons>

Under stated Chinese posture, the country would expect to first absorb a nuclear attack before using its own nuclear forces to retaliate. While this has held constant since China’s first nuclear test, there is a debate today in the country over the continuing advisability of an NFU posture. For decades, China sought to make its NFU pledge appear credible by separating its ballistic missile and warhead units; under these circumstances, China’s intention to use nuclear weapons before first suffering a nuclear attack would ostensibly be easily detectable. So far, there have been no public caveats to China’s NFU policy, but some U.S. and Indian strategists doubt the credibility of China’s pledge. China has been able to maintain its NFU pledge because it has invested so heavily in conventional military modernization, making it unlikely that it would consider nuclear escalation in a conventional war. China has publicly called on nuclear weapon states to create and join a multilateral NFU treaty—what it has called [PDF] a Treaty on Mutual No-First-Use of Nuclear Weapons.

2. China’s no first use nuclear policy is a lie, and part of disinformation campaign against the US.

Rebecca Heinrichs, senior fellow at Hudson Institute, Reject 'No First Use' Nuclear Policy, Aug. 24, 2020, <https://www.newsweek.com/reject-no-first-use-nuclear-policy-opinion-1527037>

As for China, the Chinese have purported to embrace NFU. Way back on October 16, 1964, China declared that it "will never, at any time or under any circumstances, be the first to use nuclear weapons." For decades, that was blindly accepted by those who wished to believe it—including NFU proponents in the U.S. But current Commander of U.S. Strategic Command Admiral Richard, when speaking about the Chinese NFU policy, told senators in February 2020, "I could drive a truck through that no first use policy." He went on to explain that the Chinese nuclear program lacks transparency and fosters distrust. Worse, the CCP's dubious claims to disputed Chinese territory raises concerns about how, and where, Beijing may employ nuclear weapons. Moreover, the CCP is engaged in a robust disinformation campaign across all areas of its government and society: America should not presume anything but deceit from our number one geopolitical threat.

Con Responses to Pro Contentions

Responses To: Conventional Superiority/Deterrence

They argue that “The US doesn’t need a first strike nuclear policy because it has conventional superiority and deterrence.” My responses are:

1. Considering asymmetry of conventional weaponry cannot be a basis for a no first use nuclear policy because of the existence of other weapons of mass destruction.

Nina Tannenwald, director of the International Relations at Brown University, M.A., Columbia School of International & Public Affairs, PhD, International Relations, Cornell University, It’s Time for a U.S. No-First-Use Nuclear Policy, Texas National Security Review, Vol. 2, Issue 3, Aug. 1, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/its-time-for-a-u-s-no-first-use-nuclear-policy/>

The theory that adopting an NFU policy is based on asymmetries in conventional forces is further complicated by the existence of other weapons of mass destruction. During the George W. Bush and Barack Obama years, the strongest argument for the United States to retain the first-use option was that nuclear weapons are necessary to help deter and possibly retaliate against attacks with chemical and especially biological weapons.⁶ The Trump administration’s 2018 Nuclear Posture Review has expanded the category of non-nuclear attacks that it will seek to deter with nuclear threats to include cyber attacks, a move that previous presidents had ruled out and that most observers view skeptically, given its dangerous escalatory potential.

2. A first strike nuclear policy is better at deterring conventional conflicts than conventional weapons

Michaela Dodge, Ph.D., Some Bad Ideas, Like Zombies, Never Die. A ‘No First Use’ Nuclear Policy Is One of Them, Heritage Foundation, Aug 16, 2017, <https://www.heritage.org/defense/commentary/some-bad-ideas-zombies-never-die-no-first-use-nuclear-policy-one-them>

To assume that the only utility of nuclear weapons is to retaliate after a nuclear attack is to ignore historical experience. The United States used nuclear weapons in 1945 to bring an end to the most devastating conflict in the modern history of mankind. That conflict, the Second World War, was fought predominantly with conventional weapons. Comfortably assuming that such devastation could never happen again is foolish and imprudent. Aside from the fact that other countries are unlikely to trust any potential U.S. no first use declarations, a world without nuclear weapons is not a better world than the one we currently have, which involves a large degree of nuclear ambiguity.

Con Extensions

The US needs to adopt realism in international policy, which justifies a first strike nuclear policy.

Nina Tannenwald, director of the International Relations at Brown University, M.A., Columbia School of International & Public Affairs, PhD, International Relations, Cornell University, It's Time for a U.S. No-First-Use Nuclear Policy, Texas National Security Review, Vol. 2, Issue 3, Aug. 1, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/its-time-for-a-u-s-no-first-use-nuclear-policy/>

Several theoretical approaches in international relations help to illuminate why states choose to adopt a first-use versus a no-first-use (NFU) policy. A realist approach, which emphasizes the central role of material capabilities, would generally be skeptical of no-first-use pledges, which it would view as “cheap talk” and unenforceable. States that have made such pledges could still launch a nuclear weapon first in a conflict. Thus, NATO leaders and other observers expressed considerable skepticism during the final years of the Cold War that Russia's declaration of an NFU policy in 1982 had any real substance behind it.¹ Today, while India has made an NFU pledge, analysts debate how constraining it really is. In turn, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi is sometimes dismissive of China's NFU policy.

Considering asymmetry of conventional weaponry cannot be a basis for a no first use nuclear policy because of the existence of other weapons of mass destruction.

Nina Tannenwald, director of the International Relations at Brown University, M.A., Columbia School of International & Public Affairs, PhD, International Relations, Cornell University, It's Time for a U.S. No-First-Use Nuclear Policy, Texas National Security Review, Vol. 2, Issue 3, Aug. 1, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/its-time-for-a-u-s-no-first-use-nuclear-policy/>

The theory that adopting an NFU policy is based on asymmetries in conventional forces is further complicated by the existence of other weapons of mass destruction. During the George W. Bush and Barack Obama years, the strongest argument for the United States to retain the first-use option was that nuclear weapons are necessary to help deter and possibly retaliate against attacks with chemical and especially biological weapons.⁶ The Trump administration's 2018 Nuclear Posture Review has expanded the category of non-nuclear attacks that it will seek to deter with nuclear threats to include cyber attacks, a move that previous presidents had ruled out and that most observers view skeptically, given its dangerous escalatory potential.

Most nuclear states have first strike nuclear policies, and don't consider no first use nuclear policies credible.

Ankit Panda, adjunct senior fellow at the Federation of American Scientists, graduate of the Princeton School Public and International Affairs at Princeton University, 'No First Use' and Nuclear Weapons, Council on Foreign Relations, July 17, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/backgroundunder/no-first-use-and-nuclear-weapons>

Most states with nuclear weapons maintain policies that would permit their first use in a conflict. Pledges to only use these weapons in retaliation for a nuclear attack—or a no-first-use (NFU) policy—are rare. Where these pledges have been made by nuclear states, their adversaries generally consider them not credible.

Only China has an unconditional no first use nuclear policy; all other states don't have a true no first use nuclear policy.

Ankit Panda, adjunct senior fellow at the Federation of American Scientists, graduate of the Princeton School Public and International Affairs at Princeton University, 'No First Use' and Nuclear Weapons, Council on Foreign Relations, July 17, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/backgroundunder/no-first-use-and-nuclear-weapons>

A so-called NFU pledge, first publicly made by China in 1964, refers to any authoritative statement by a nuclear weapon state to never be the first to use these weapons in a conflict, reserving them strictly to retaliate in the aftermath of a nuclear attack against its territory or military personnel. These pledges are a component of nuclear declaratory policies. As such, there can be no diplomatic arrangement to verify or enforce a declaratory NFU pledge, and such pledges alone do not affect capabilities. States with such pledges would be technically able to still use nuclear weapons first in a conflict, and their adversaries have generally not trusted NFU assurances. Today, China is the only nuclear weapon state to maintain an unconditional NFU pledge.

Even President Obama didn't change the US's no first use nuclear policy.

Ankit Panda, adjunct senior fellow at the Federation of American Scientists, graduate of the Princeton School Public and International Affairs at Princeton University, 'No First Use' and Nuclear Weapons, Council on Foreign Relations, July 17, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/backgroundunder/no-first-use-and-nuclear-weapons>

Though the 2010 Nuclear Posture Review did not include an NFU pledge, the Obama administration considered the idea during its second term. It ultimately left U.S. nuclear declaratory policy unchanged from its 2010 iteration, which stated that the United States reserved the right to use nuclear weapons to deter nonnuclear attacks while strengthening conventional capabilities to gradually reduce the role of nuclear weapons to that of solely deterring nuclear attacks. Nevertheless, the Obama administration's final year in office saw animated debate among proponents and opponents of an NFU declaration.

A no first use nuclear policy would cause US allies to develop their own nuclear weapons.

Ankit Panda, adjunct senior fellow at the Federation of American Scientists, graduate of the Princeton School Public and International Affairs at Princeton University, ‘No First Use’ and Nuclear Weapons, Council on Foreign Relations, July 17, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/no-first-use-and-nuclear-weapons>

Critics, meanwhile, have suggested that U.S. allies in East Asia and Europe alike would not accept a unilateral U.S. NFU declaration, because it could encourage adversaries to attack with conventional weapons or to use chemical, biological, or cyber weapons. Russian conventional military advantages over U.S. allies in Europe have amplified these concerns. Critics argue that such a declaration could undercut allied commitments and encourage U.S. allies to develop their own nuclear weapons.

A no first use nuclear policy would emboldened US enemies and promote threats against the US and allies.

Ankit Panda, adjunct senior fellow at the Federation of American Scientists, graduate of the Princeton School Public and International Affairs at Princeton University, ‘No First Use’ and Nuclear Weapons, Council on Foreign Relations, July 17, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/no-first-use-and-nuclear-weapons>

Within the Obama administration in 2016, Secretary of State John Kerry, Secretary of Defense Ash Carter, and Secretary of Energy Ernest Moniz opposed an NFU declaration, primarily along these lines. These officials shared the view of NFU skeptics that a U.S. declaration would embolden adversaries, weaken allied commitments, and invite brinkmanship.

The UK does not have a no first use nuclear policy.

Ankit Panda, adjunct senior fellow at the Federation of American Scientists, graduate of the Princeton School Public and International Affairs at Princeton University, ‘No First Use’ and Nuclear Weapons, Council on Foreign Relations, July 17, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/no-first-use-and-nuclear-weapons>

The country maintains an ambiguous nuclear posture that does “not rule in or out the first use of nuclear weapons,” according to the UK Ministry of Defense’s 2010–2015 policy paper on the country’s nuclear deterrent. In 1978 and 1995, the UK reiterated a commitment to not use nuclear weapons against nonnuclear states in the NPT.

Russia has abandoned its no first use nuclear policy.

Ankit Panda, adjunct senior fellow at the Federation of American Scientists, graduate of the Princeton School Public and International Affairs at Princeton University, ‘No First Use’ and Nuclear Weapons, Council on Foreign Relations, July 17, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/backgroundunder/no-first-use-and-nuclear-weapons>

In 1993, Russia released a military doctrine that formally abandoned a 1982 pledge by Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev not to use nuclear weapons first in a conflict. This pledge was never seen as credible by NATO leaders in the final years of the Cold War. A French diplomat, writing in 1999, observed [PDF] that even after Brezhnev’s declaration, “military records of the Warsaw Pact that fell into German hands demonstrated beyond doubt that Russian operational plans called for the use of nuclear and chemical weapons in Germany at the onset of hostilities, even if NATO forces were using only conventional weapons.” The 1993 military doctrine said that the country’s nuclear weapons would never be used against nonnuclear states that were members of the NPT, except those that were allied with a nuclear state. Today, Russian’s military doctrine says [PDF] the country will use nuclear weapons against attacks by conventional forces that represent an existential threat to the country or in retaliation for a nuclear or WMD attack.

China is considering abandoning its no first use nuclear policy.

Ankit Panda, adjunct senior fellow at the Federation of American Scientists, graduate of the Princeton School Public and International Affairs at Princeton University, ‘No First Use’ and Nuclear Weapons, Council on Foreign Relations, July 17, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/backgroundunder/no-first-use-and-nuclear-weapons>

Under stated Chinese posture, the country would expect to first absorb a nuclear attack before using its own nuclear forces to retaliate. While this has held constant since China’s first nuclear test, there is a debate today in the country over the continuing advisability of an NFU posture. For decades, China sought to make its NFU pledge appear credible by separating its ballistic missile and warhead units; under these circumstances, China’s intention to use nuclear weapons before first suffering a nuclear attack would ostensibly be easily detectable. So far, there have been no public caveats to China’s NFU policy, but some U.S. and Indian strategists doubt the credibility of China’s pledge. China has been able to maintain its NFU pledge because it has invested so heavily in conventional military modernization, making it unlikely that it would consider nuclear escalation in a conventional war. China has publicly called on nuclear weapon states to create and join a multilateral NFU treaty—what it has called [PDF] a Treaty on Mutual No-First-Use of Nuclear Weapons.

France has a first strike nuclear policy.

Ankit Panda, adjunct senior fellow at the Federation of American Scientists, graduate of the Princeton School Public and International Affairs at Princeton University, ‘No First Use’ and Nuclear Weapons, Council on Foreign Relations, July 17, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/backgroundunder/no-first-use-and-nuclear-weapons>

France has maintained a first-use nuclear posture since it first developed and tested nuclear weapons during the Cold War. France’s posture emerged from its Cold War-era fears of abandonment by the United States, which led to the country’s withdrawal from NATO in 1966 to pursue an independent nuclear capability, giving France the sovereign ability to determine how and when it would use its nuclear weapons. France pioneered the concept of a prestrategic strike for a conventional invasion, threatening limited nuclear first use as a way to signal that it was contemplating escalation to the strategic nuclear level. France rejoined NATO in 2009 but kept its nuclear forces outside of NATO’s defense coordination mechanisms. French forces today have inherited that legacy of independence and maintain a first-use posture to deter any type of attack on or invasion of France.

India’s no first use nuclear policy is not absolute.

Ankit Panda, adjunct senior fellow at the Federation of American Scientists, graduate of the Princeton School Public and International Affairs at Princeton University, ‘No First Use’ and Nuclear Weapons, Council on Foreign Relations, July 17, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/backgroundunder/no-first-use-and-nuclear-weapons>

India maintains a declared NFU posture, with exceptions for chemical and biological weapons attacks. In its 1999 draft nuclear doctrine, India announced that it “will not be the first to initiate a nuclear strike, but will respond with punitive retaliation should deterrence fail.” The public summary of India’s final nuclear doctrine, released in 2003, says that “in the event of a major attack against India, or Indian forces anywhere, by biological or chemical weapons, India will retain the option of retaliating with nuclear weapons.” Indian public statements on nuclear weapons continue to emphasize the NFU policy, without acknowledging the exceptions carved out explicitly in the official doctrine.

Pakistan has a first use nuclear policy.

Ankit Panda, adjunct senior fellow at the Federation of American Scientists, graduate of the Princeton School Public and International Affairs at Princeton University, 'No First Use' and Nuclear Weapons, Council on Foreign Relations, July 17, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/backgroundunder/no-first-use-and-nuclear-weapons>

Pakistan has not ruled out nuclear first use to deter what it sees as an overwhelming Indian quantitative advantage in conventional forces. Islamabad has left the exact threshold for its nuclear use ambiguous. Pakistani officials and strategists have been consistent in their support of a first-use posture, with the exception of former President Asif Ali Zardari, who voiced support for an NFU posture early in his term, in 2008. Today, there is no serious push in Pakistan to reconsider the country's first-use posture.

Israel doesn't have a no first use nuclear policy because it won't acknowledge it has nuclear weapons.

Ankit Panda, adjunct senior fellow at the Federation of American Scientists, graduate of the Princeton School Public and International Affairs at Princeton University, 'No First Use' and Nuclear Weapons, Council on Foreign Relations, July 17, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/backgroundunder/no-first-use-and-nuclear-weapons>

Israel has neither confirmed nor denied its possession of nuclear weapons but is thought to have developed a limited arsenal more than fifty years ago, effectively becoming the world's sixth nuclear weapon state. In line with this policy of nuclear opacity, Israel has made no authoritative declarations on how it would use nuclear weapons. In the late 1960s, Prime Minister Golda Meir and President Richard Nixon came to an understanding, with Meir offering assurances that Israel would "not be the first to introduce nuclear weapons to the Middle East" but that it would also "not be the second to introduce this weapon."

After Trump, the US has no credibility on nuclear policy, so a no first use nuclear policy would not be credible either.

Jon B. Wolfsthal, nuclear security expert, former Senior Director at the National Security Council for Nonproliferation and Arms Control, and member of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists Science and Security Board, Nuclear First-Use Is Dangerous and Unnecessary, Policy Roundtable: Nuclear First-Use and Presidential Authority, July 2, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-nuclear-first-use-and-presidential-authority/#essay3>

Convinced America can safely manage these risks, the Trump administration has sought to develop new, more diverse nuclear delivery options and weapons, and has expanded the conditions under which it would consider using nuclear weapons first, to include massive conventional attacks and other “non-nuclear strategic attacks.”⁶² The Defense Department has recently gone out of its way to refute arguments in favor of no-first-use,⁶³ likely in response to multiple bills in Congress calling for America to adopt an NFU policy.

No action will entirely eliminate the threat of nuclear war.

Jon B. Wolfsthal, nuclear security expert, former Senior Director at the National Security Council for Nonproliferation and Arms Control, and member of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists Science and Security Board, Nuclear First-Use Is Dangerous and Unnecessary, Policy Roundtable: Nuclear First-Use and Presidential Authority, July 2, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-nuclear-first-use-and-presidential-authority/#essay3>

No one should believe that America can deter all conflict — with or without nuclear first-use threats — or that it can prevail quickly or cleanly in any conventional war. No amount of defense or nuclear spending can achieve such a goal. To be sure, conventional war scenarios in Korea or the Baltics take months to play out and result in disastrous consequences for the country in which the fighting occurs, for global stability, and for the global economy.⁷³ But in all of these scenarios, America and its allies would likely prevail if the full force of its allied conventional capabilities were brought to bear.

Adopting a no first use nuclear policy is too risky for the US.

Dr. John R. Harvey, nuclear physicist, former principal deputy assistant secretary of defense for nuclear, chemical, and biological defense programs, A Considered “No” on “No First Use,” Texas National Security Review, July 2, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-nuclear-first-use-and-presidential-authority/#essay4>

There are three major risks in adopting a nuclear declaratory policy of no-first-use. The first risk is to deterrence: Adversaries, absent a fear of reprisal, could be emboldened to act against U.S. interests. The second risk is to U.S. assurances to its allies: If America adopts no-first-use, then allies could lose confidence in America’s extended deterrence commitments. The third risk is to the goal of non-proliferation: Such lost confidence among America’s allies could spur them to develop and field their own nuclear weapons. The purported benefits of adopting a no-first-use policy, which I discuss below, are insufficient to offset these inherent risks.

A no first use nuclear policy would not be credible.

Dr. John R. Harvey, nuclear physicist, former principal deputy assistant secretary of defense for nuclear, chemical, and biological defense programs, A Considered “No” on “No First Use,” Texas National Security Review, July 2, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-nuclear-first-use-and-presidential-authority/#essay4>

First, a no-first-use pledge is unlikely to appear credible to an adversary contemplating major aggression. For example, North Korea is unlikely to base any military planning to reunify the Korean Peninsula by force, or plans for its regime survival after an unsuccessful effort to achieve that objective, on a U.S. promise of no-first-use. Consider China’s existing no-first-use pledge, which has not caused the United States to moderate its own nuclear posture one iota. Few states will risk their national security based on a declaratory policy that can be reversed overnight. Dominic Tierney, an academic who supports a no-first-use policy, eloquently addresses this point: Viewed through a strategic — and perhaps more cynical — lens, the no-first-use doctrine also has a huge credibility problem. For the U.S. pledge to truly matter, a president who otherwise favors a nuclear first strike would have to decide not to press the button because of this policy. But in an extreme national crisis — one involving, say, North Korean nuclear missiles — a president is unlikely to feel bound by America’s former assurance. After all, if a country is willing to use nuclear weapons, it’s also willing to break a promise.⁷⁹

A no first use nuclear policy is not credible because the US President could always change the policy and strike first based on public outrage.

Dr. John R. Harvey, nuclear physicist, former principal deputy assistant secretary of defense for nuclear, chemical, and biological defense programs, A Considered “No” on “No First Use,” Texas National Security Review, July 2, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-nuclear-first-use-and-presidential-authority/#essay4>

Second, it’s not at all clear that an adversary could count on U.S. public opinion to act as a “brake” on an American president contemplating first use in response to a catastrophic non-nuclear attack. Several surveys conducted by Scott Sagan and Ben Valentino look at the American public’s willingness to support first-use under such circumstances. The results reveal a surprising level of support. Sagan and Valentino thus argue: Would we drop the bomb again? Our surveys can’t say how future presidents and their top advisers would weigh their options. But they do reveal something unsettling about the instincts of the U.S. public: When provoked, we don’t seem to consider the use of nuclear weapons a taboo, and our commitment to the immunity of civilians from deliberate attack in wartime, even with vast casualties, is shallow. Today, as in 1945, the U.S. public is unlikely to hold back a president who might consider using nuclear weapons in the crucible of war.⁸⁰ In other words, the American public might well demand, rather than oppose or simply tolerate, a nuclear response to a catastrophic non-nuclear attack — no-first-use pledge or not.

The lack of a credible no first use nuclear policy undermines the deterrence benefits of such a policy; we need to reassure our allies.

Dr. John R. Harvey, nuclear physicist, former principal deputy assistant secretary of defense for nuclear, chemical, and biological defense programs, A Considered “No” on “No First Use,” Texas National Security Review, July 2, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-nuclear-first-use-and-presidential-authority/#essay4>

Thus, an adversary’s doubts about a no-first-use pledge and its belief that the U.S. public may well support breaking such a pledge in response to a horrific attack could mitigate some of the deterrence risks of adopting a no-first-use policy. However, the degree to which those risks would be mitigated remains uncertain and, so far, no president has been willing to find out. Building and maintaining strong alliances has been a centerpiece of America’s effort to produce and sustain a more peaceful world. Critical to this is assuring U.S. allies of America’s commitment to their defense by extending to them the full range of U.S. military power.

Our allies are on the brink of considering developing nuclear weapons from nuclear programs.

Dr. John R. Harvey, nuclear physicist, former principal deputy assistant secretary of defense for nuclear, chemical, and biological defense programs, A Considered “No” on “No First Use,” Texas National Security Review, July 2, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-nuclear-first-use-and-presidential-authority/#essay4>

Moreover, both South Korea and Japan, similar to many NATO allies, have latent nuclear weapons capabilities characteristic of advanced industrial economies with commercial nuclear power. Any perceived wavering of U.S. security commitments could cause allies to develop and field their own nuclear weapons.

US allies have been vocal about opposing a no first use nuclear policy.

Dr. John R. Harvey, nuclear physicist, former principal deputy assistant secretary of defense for nuclear, chemical, and biological defense programs, A Considered “No” on “No First Use,” Texas National Security Review, July 2, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-nuclear-first-use-and-presidential-authority/#essay4>

Further, America’s allies have made their feelings about America adopting a no-first-use policy known. U.S. officials consulted America’s allies extensively in the lead up to the 2010 and 2018 nuclear posture reviews. This dialogue has been rich and productive and, in some ways, surprising in its candor. For example, in 2009, Japanese officials briefed the Perry-Schlesinger Commission, established by Congress to seek a bipartisan approach to the U.S. nuclear posture, on specific features and capabilities of the U.S. nuclear deterrent that Japan viewed as critical to its security.⁸² In related dialogue, many foreign counterparts to U.S. officials, including those of Japan, have urged the United States not to adopt a no-first-use policy.

Our allies see a first strike nuclear policy as a commitment to protecting them.

Dr. John R. Harvey, nuclear physicist, former principal deputy assistant secretary of defense for nuclear, chemical, and biological defense programs, A Considered “No” on “No First Use,” Texas National Security Review, July 2, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-nuclear-first-use-and-presidential-authority/#essay4>

Many countries, including those that share a border with an adversary that presents a threat to their very existence, see no-first-use as a weakening, symbolic or otherwise, of U.S. extended deterrence. In response to Chinese provocations in the western Pacific and North Korea’s nuclear tests and missile launches, Japan regularly seeks, both in official consultations and ongoing military cooperation, assurances that America will continue to fulfill its security commitments to protect the island nation. Some in South Korea have already pressed to explore an increased U.S. nuclear presence in their country to further deter regional threats.⁸¹ Loss of confidence in U.S. security commitments could cause some allies to seek accommodation with regional adversaries in ways that run counter to U.S. interests.

A no first use nuclear policy will not minimize the risk of nuclear miscalculation or accidents, and other solutions can solve.

Dr. John R. Harvey, nuclear physicist, former principal deputy assistant secretary of defense for nuclear, chemical, and biological defense programs, A Considered “No” on “No First Use,” Texas National Security Review, July 2, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-nuclear-first-use-and-presidential-authority/#essay4>

In light of these risks, what are the benefits of a U.S. no-first-use pledge that could offset them? Would it, as Sen. Warren claims, “[reduce] the risk of a nuclear miscalculation by an adversary in a crisis ...”?⁸⁴ If an adversary launches a nuclear weapon because it has misinterpreted America’s actions or intentions, or even if it launches a nuclear weapon by accident, the consequences would, of course, be tragic. Such actions must be assiduously avoided with clear crisis communications, transparency, and strong negative control of nuclear weapons. But, a U.S. no-first-use pledge, by itself, is unlikely to have any effect at all in preventing such a situation from arising in the first place.

Other nuclear states will not model a US no first use nuclear policy.

Dr. John R. Harvey, nuclear physicist, former principal deputy assistant secretary of defense for nuclear, chemical, and biological defense programs, A Considered “No” on “No First Use,” Texas National Security Review, July 2, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-nuclear-first-use-and-presidential-authority/#essay4>

Some argue that adopting such a policy would set an example and cause nuclear adversaries to follow America’s lead. If promises were kept, this would allow the U.S. conventional juggernaut to win wars absent the threat of nuclear use. But this outcome is unlikely. Indeed, several nuclear adversaries have acquired, or are currently seeking, nuclear weapons precisely to offset superior U.S. conventional capabilities. Again, quoting Tierney: If [a President] made a dramatic announcement of no-first-use, it would probably have less impact than people think because other countries wouldn’t follow suit, especially if they’re weak. Would U.S. adoption of no-first-use cause other countries to be more inclined to cooperate with the United States to work toward a strengthened nonproliferation regime and less likely to acquire nuclear weapons of their own? No evidence exists to support such a contention and, as noted above, allied perceptions of weakened extended deterrence could actually spur proliferation.

Adopting a no first use nuclear policy will not improve the US’s international relations.

Dr. John R. Harvey, nuclear physicist, former principal deputy assistant secretary of defense for nuclear, chemical, and biological defense programs, A Considered “No” on “No First Use,” Texas National Security Review, July 2, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-nuclear-first-use-and-presidential-authority/#essay4>

Another purported benefit of adopting a no-first-use policy is that it might silence criticism from Non-Aligned Movement countries that periodically denounce the United States for, among other things, not having disarmed unilaterally. This is unlikely. Indeed, the enormous progress made in the decades leading up to the end of the Cold War and beyond in ending the nuclear arms race, reducing nuclear stockpiles, and eliminating other global nuclear threats has done little to moderate such rhetoric.

Adopting a no first use nuclear policy will not delegitimize nuclear weapons or result in disarmament.

Dr. John R. Harvey, nuclear physicist, former principal deputy assistant secretary of defense for nuclear, chemical, and biological defense programs, A Considered “No” on “No First Use,” Texas National Security Review, July 2, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-nuclear-first-use-and-presidential-authority/#essay4>

Along these lines, some view no-first-use as a means to delegitimize nuclear weapons in general, and, more specifically, as a first step to removing from alert and eventually getting rid of the inter-continental ballistic missile (ICBM) leg of the Triad.⁸⁵ After all, if ICBMs are not survivable unless used first, and if America’s policy becomes one of no-first-use, then why does the United States need them at all, much less on alert? This claim misrepresents both the role of America’s ICBMs and the obligations that America would be under as part of a no-first-use pledge. Thus, such arguments are unlikely to sway any president who views a nuclear Triad as an essential element of U.S. security for managing risk in a dangerous world.

Adopting a no first use nuclear policy is a symbolic gesture that would have no tangible benefits.

Dr. John R. Harvey, nuclear physicist, former principal deputy assistant secretary of defense for nuclear, chemical, and biological defense programs, A Considered “No” on “No First Use,” Texas National Security Review, July 2, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-nuclear-first-use-and-presidential-authority/#essay4>

Many who favor a U.S. no-first-use pledge see it as a way to signal to the world a reduced role for nuclear weapons in U.S. national security.⁸⁶ Reducing that role, and hence the likelihood that the United States would ever have to resort to nuclear use, is a laudable goal advanced in the nuclear posture reviews of the three previous presidents. But, in regard to its foreign impact, the actual security benefits that could justify accepting the risks of this policy are not well understood, nor are they quantifiable, and so far they have not tipped the scales toward the adoption of no-first-use. Those who support no-first-use as a way to advance U.S. security must explain what has changed for the better in the international security environment since 2010 that would cause this president, or this Congress, to reverse earlier presidential decisions rejecting it.

The US should keep its first strike nuclear policy, weighing deterrence and nonproliferation goals.

Dr. John R. Harvey, nuclear physicist, former principal deputy assistant secretary of defense for nuclear, chemical, and biological defense programs, A Considered “No” on “No First Use,” Texas National Security Review, July 2, 2019, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-nuclear-first-use-and-presidential-authority/#essay4>

It has been a precept of U.S. policy for decades that deterrence is strengthened when an adversary is unsure of the precise conditions under which the United States would employ nuclear weapons — essentially, that uncertainty breeds caution. America has made exceptions, however, in certain cases to advance concrete security interests — for example, in regard to nuclear negative security assurances provided to non-nuclear weapons states that are parties in good standing with the Nonproliferation Treaty. If the United States were to adopt a policy of no-first-use, it would present clear risks for deterrence, for regional security more broadly, and to the non-proliferation regime, while the supposed benefits of such a policy that could offset such risks are largely illusory. It is thus no surprise that since the dawn of the nuclear age presidents across party lines have rejected no-first-use. The United States should continue to do so.

The US has spent decades establishing and boosting the credibility of its first strike nuclear policy.

Dr. John P. Holdren, S.B. and S.M. degrees from M.I.T. and a Ph.D. (1970) from Stanford in aerospace engineering and theoretical plasma physics, The overwhelming case for no first use, Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, Volume 76, Jan. 13, 2020, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00963402.2019.1701277>

In reaction to the 1948 Berlin Crisis, the United States adopted a “first use if necessary” stance as a counterweight to the perceived conventional-weapon superiority of the Soviet Union in the European theater (Legge 1983; Bundy 1988; Fetter and Wolfsthal 2018). This stance became the official policy of the NATO alliance and remained so through and beyond the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. In the attempt to make the first-use stance credible, the United States developed and deployed a wide range of “battlefield” nuclear weapons (including artillery shells, land mines, short-range rockets, and, eventually, the “neutron bomb”). This country also invested heavily in developing – and then more or less continuously modernizing – a “triad” of land-based, submarine-launched, and bomber-delivered nuclear weapons that could reach the Soviet Union. The primary aim of this effort was to deter the Soviet Union from responding to battlefield nuclear use with a nuclear attack on the United States. But the Soviet Union determinedly matched (and in some cases exceeded) the growing US nuclear capabilities, placing the credibility of the US first-use stance in continuing doubt (Holdren 1986; NAS 1997).

The US nuclear posture reviews have always credibly established a first strike nuclear policy.

Dr. John P. Holdren, S.B. and S.M. degrees from M.I.T. and a Ph.D. (1970) from Stanford in aerospace engineering and theoretical plasma physics, The overwhelming case for no first use, Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, Volume 76, Jan. 13, 2020, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00963402.2019.1701277>

US Nuclear Posture Reviews issued in 2002 and 2010 again declined to embrace no first use. Late in the Obama administration, however, journalists reported that President Obama was giving serious consideration to no first use as one of a number of possibilities for advancing, at the end of his tenure, the vision, which he had enunciated in Prague in April 2009, for reducing the salience of nuclear weapons in international affairs (Rogin 2016). This possibility elicited a flood of articles by senior arms control advocates and military officials encouraging Obama to embrace no first use (Cartwright and Blair 2016; Perry 2016; Reif and Kimball 2016; Thakur 2016), as well as counterattacks proposing rejection of the idea (Payne 2016; Sestanovich 2016). In the end, Obama did not announce a change in US first-use policy, reportedly because of concerns expressed by allies (Sanger and Broad 2016; Fetter and Wolfsthal 2018). Even so, Vice President Biden said in his final national-security speech that it “is hard to envision a plausible scenario in which the first use of nuclear weapons by the United States would be necessary or make sense” (Biden 2017). To no one’s great surprise, the Nuclear Posture Review issued under President Trump in 2018 once again reaffirmed the policy of first use if necessary, explicitly citing its purported usefulness against both nonnuclear and nuclear threats (DoD 2018).

Only a few countries have nuclear weapons, making the no first use nuclear policy relatively irrelevant given the types of threats from various countries and non-governmental terrorist actors.

Ankit Panda, adjunct senior fellow at the Federation of American Scientists, graduate of the Princeton School Public and International Affairs at Princeton University, ‘No First Use’ and Nuclear Weapons, Council on Foreign Relations, July 17, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/no-first-use-and-nuclear-weapons>

Today, eight states acknowledge that nuclear weapons play a role in their national defense policies. Each of these states—China, France, India, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States—has conveyed through official statements and documents a certain declaratory nuclear policy, detailing the conditions under which they might use these weapons. Another state, Israel, has not publicly acknowledged that it possesses nuclear weapons but is widely considered a nuclear state.

Both Democrat and Republican presidents have kept and expanded the US's first strike nuclear policy.

Ankit Panda, adjunct senior fellow at the Federation of American Scientists, graduate of the Princeton School Public and International Affairs at Princeton University, 'No First Use' and Nuclear Weapons, Council on Foreign Relations, July 17, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/background/no-first-use-and-nuclear-weapons>

The United States has considered but has never declared an NFU policy and remains the only country to have ever used nuclear weapons in war—twice against Japan, in 1945. The Trump administration's 2018 Nuclear Posture Review expands the range of significant nonnuclear strategic scenarios in which the United States may contemplate nuclear weapons use. Notably, it does not rule out the first use of nuclear weapons in response to cyberattacks. The 2010 Nuclear Posture Review, under the administration of President Barack Obama, reiterated an assurance in place since 1978 that the United States would not use nuclear weapons against compliant members of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). The Obama administration still maintained the option to use nuclear weapons first while stating that the role of these weapons to deter and respond to nonnuclear attacks had declined and that it would continue to reduce that role. It additionally emphasized that the “fundamental” role of U.S. nuclear weapons was to deter nuclear use against the United States and its allies. In 2002, during the administration of President George W. Bush, the classified Nuclear Posture Review emphasized the role of U.S. nuclear weapons in deterring nonnuclear threats, including weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and large conventional military forces, ostensibly through nuclear first use.

A no first use nuclear policy would increase, not decrease, nuclear proliferation.

Michaela Dodge, Senior Policy Analyst for Defense and Strategic Policy at The Heritage Foundation, & Adam Lowther, Ph.D., is a Director of the School for Advanced Nuclear Deterrence Studies., A No-First-Use Policy Would Make the United States Less Secure , E-International Relations Articles, Oct. 4, 2016, <https://www.e-ir.info/2016/10/04/a-no-first-use-policy-would-make-the-united-states-less-secure/>

Finally, a no-first-use nuclear weapons policy could result in more, not less, proliferation. America's allies depend on U.S. nuclear guarantees. They do not develop their own nuclear weapons because they rely on the United States to defend them, a necessity that is all too real for countries like South Korea, Japan, Poland, and the Baltic States. We must remember that North Korea has threatened “a sea of fire” upon South Korea. Russia has threatened to use nuclear weapons against NATO allies in order to force the United States to deescalate a conflict. In the context of today's threats and to strengthen deterrence, the United States does not specify the exact location of its red lines that would trigger an American nuclear response.

US allies could rapidly develop nuclear weapons if the US adopted a no first use nuclear policy.

Michaela Dodge, Senior Policy Analyst for Defense and Strategic Policy at The Heritage Foundation, & Adam Lowther, Ph.D., is a Director of the School for Advanced Nuclear Deterrence Studies., A No-First-Use Policy Would Make the United States Less Secure , E-International Relations Articles, Oct. 4, 2016, <https://www.e-ir.info/2016/10/04/a-no-first-use-policy-would-make-the-united-states-less-secure/>

South Korea and Japan are technologically advanced and could rapidly join the club of nuclear weapons states should they lose confidence in the credibility of American deterrence. Increasing these nations' uncertainty about U.S. security commitments undermines American nonproliferation policy. A no-first-use policy only adds to the already existing view that an American President is not likely to trade San Francisco or New York for Seoul or Riga.

A no first use nuclear policy is antithetical to “peace through strength.”

Michaela Dodge, Senior Policy Analyst for Defense and Strategic Policy at The Heritage Foundation, & Adam Lowther, Ph.D., is a Director of the School for Advanced Nuclear Deterrence Studies., A No-First-Use Policy Would Make the United States Less Secure , E-International Relations Articles, Oct. 4, 2016, <https://www.e-ir.info/2016/10/04/a-no-first-use-policy-would-make-the-united-states-less-secure/>

The benefits of a no-first-use policy are unlikely to materialize as advocates suggest. Rather, the United States is much more likely to see a number of negative consequences. The old adage “peace through strength” is certainly applicable to nuclear weapons policy. No-first-use is antithetical to such a view and only works to undermine the credibility of American deterrence.

All American presidents over the past several decades have realized a no first use nuclear policy is simply a bad policy with no benefits.

Rebecca Heinrichs, senior fellow at Hudson Institute, Reject 'No First Use' Nuclear Policy, Aug. 24, 2020, <https://www.newsweek.com/reject-no-first-use-nuclear-policy-opinion-1527037>

There is an activist effort among nuclear idealists to mobilize public opinion and urge elected officials to pledge to support a policy of "no first use" (NFU). Put simply, an American president who would adopt a policy of NFU would be declaring that the United States will never be the first country to use a nuclear weapon in a war. No doubt these activists were thrilled to see Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden offer an enthusiastic recent embrace of NFU. But his position is not new; at a campaign event last year, Biden confirmed that he has supported NFU for more than 20 years. Reasonable observers may therefore ask: Why hasn't his desire been realized? The reality is that every single American president, Democrat and Republican alike, has rejected an NFU declaration because to do so would invite unacceptable risk that could yield catastrophic war—and for no tangible benefit at all.

Adopting a no first use nuclear policy would invite non-nuclear attacks against the US.

Rebecca Heinrichs, senior fellow at Hudson Institute, Reject 'No First Use' Nuclear Policy, Aug. 24, 2020, <https://www.newsweek.com/reject-no-first-use-nuclear-policy-opinion-1527037>

First, adopting an NFU policy invites a strategic non-nuclear attack against the American people, our allies and our interests. An NFU declaration broadcasts to America's enemies that they can proceed with a chemical weapons attack on U.S. forces and their families, can proceed with a biological attack on an American city and can proceed with an overwhelming conventional attack against critical U.S. assets, all without fear of nuclear retaliation. Any would-be enemy could carry out an infinite number of attacks short of a nuclear attack, while the NFU-endorsing U.S. president assures their safety from our nuclear weapon arsenal.

Adopting a no first use nuclear policy would make the US weaker to China, which is the single greatest risk to the US's national security.

Rebecca Heinrichs, senior fellow at Hudson Institute, Reject 'No First Use' Nuclear Policy, Aug. 24, 2020, <https://www.newsweek.com/reject-no-first-use-nuclear-policy-opinion-1527037>

An NFU policy is especially unwise now, while the United States contends with not one, but two major power threats. Both Russia and China are expanding their military capabilities and have acted in ways that demonstrate their willingness to attack sovereign nations and redraw borders. Of the two, China poses the single greatest threat to America's national security and way of life. General Secretary Xi Jinping and his Chinese Communist Party (CCP) are now in the midst of a rapid modernization of their military. China has the most diverse missile force on the planet, and has launched more ballistic missiles for testing and training than the rest of the world combined. Nor has Beijing neglected its nuclear capabilities—although their efforts are furtive, we know the CCP is investing in a large force, with delivery systems capable of launching nuclear weapons. Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency Lt. General Robert P. Ashley, Jr. said in 2019 that the intelligence community believes China is likely to "at least double the size of its nuclear stockpile in the course of implementing the most rapid expansion and diversification of its nuclear arsenal in China's history." The number commonly cited for China's stockpile is around 300. But it is plausible that there are actually many more than 300, as one highly credible former government official confided to me.

China is a big risk to the US because of its chemical warfare program.

Rebecca Heinrichs, senior fellow at Hudson Institute, Reject 'No First Use' Nuclear Policy, Aug. 24, 2020, <https://www.newsweek.com/reject-no-first-use-nuclear-policy-opinion-1527037>

What's more, China likely has an advanced chemical warfare program. Like its nuclear program, China does not reveal to the United States what, exactly, it does have. But the more we learn about the CCP's gross abuse of religious minorities, including of the Uyghurs imprisoned in Xinjiang concentration camps, the more our hackles should be raised. Western democracies view any use of chemical weapons as unconscionable, but the evidence shows our enemies do not share this view. Although the scope of Russia's economy and the ambitiousness of its national objectives pale in comparison to China's, Russia still seeks to undermine the United States and our allies wherever it can. Like China, it is investing heavily in its nuclear forces and has repeatedly violated U.S. arms control agreements. To take one particularly abhorrent and brazen example, on August 6, 2018, the Russian government used chemical weapons on British soil in an attempt to assassinate a former Russian spy, eliciting sanctions by the United States.

A no first use nuclear policy would make China's and Russia's strategic calculations against the US easier, when nuclear deterrence requires making those calculations harder.

Rebecca Heinrichs, senior fellow at Hudson Institute, Reject 'No First Use' Nuclear Policy, Aug. 24, 2020, <https://www.newsweek.com/reject-no-first-use-nuclear-policy-opinion-1527037>

That brings us to the second reason NFU is a terrible idea. The United States should be working to create more complex calculations for China and Russia—not making their calculations simpler. Every policy decision related to arms control, the make-up and quality of America's own weapons and our public declarations should be made with one goal in mind: to deter acts of aggression against the United States. The United States must keep our options open, maintain some ambiguity about what we may do and force our enemies to make complex calculations and always doubt whether an act of aggression against the United States would be worth the punitive cost.

Russia won't model a US no first use nuclear policy.

Rebecca Heinrichs, senior fellow at Hudson Institute, Reject 'No First Use' Nuclear Policy, Aug. 24, 2020, <https://www.newsweek.com/reject-no-first-use-nuclear-policy-opinion-1527037>

Third, our adversaries would hardly restrict themselves if America were to adopt a true NFU policy. In fact, we have reason to believe that many are willing to use nuclear weapons first in a conflict. Start with Russia. Russian officials have implied their comfort with the use of nuclear weapons in a conventional conflict, have at times threatened nuclear use against purely defensive systems and, in at least one instance, an official stated that the conditions for a Russian nuclear use could as small as a regional, or even a local, conflict. In June 2015, the Obama administration's deputy secretary of defense, Robert Work, and then-Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral James Winnefeld informed Congress that "Russian military doctrine includes what some have called an 'escalate to de-escalate' strategy—a strategy that purportedly seeks to de-escalate a conventional conflict through coercive threats, including limited nuclear use." Then-Trump administration Secretary of Defense James Mattis testified to the same concern in 2018.

China's no first use nuclear policy is a lie, and part of a disinformation campaign against the US.

Rebecca Heinrichs, senior fellow at Hudson Institute, Reject 'No First Use' Nuclear Policy, Aug. 24, 2020, <https://www.newsweek.com/reject-no-first-use-nuclear-policy-opinion-1527037>

As for China, the Chinese have purported to embrace NFU. Way back on October 16, 1964, China declared that it "will never, at any time or under any circumstances, be the first to use nuclear weapons." For decades, that was blindly accepted by those who wished to believe it—including NFU proponents in the U.S. But current Commander of U.S. Strategic Command Admiral Richard, when speaking about the Chinese NFU policy, told senators in February 2020, "I could drive a truck through that no first use policy." He went on to explain that the Chinese nuclear program lacks transparency and fosters distrust. Worse, the CCP's dubious claims to disputed Chinese territory raises concerns about how, and where, Beijing may employ nuclear weapons. Moreover, the CCP is engaged in a robust disinformation campaign across all areas of its government and society: America should not presume anything but deceit from our number one geopolitical threat.

A no first use nuclear policy would undermine allies' confidence in the US.

Rebecca Heinrichs, senior fellow at Hudson Institute, Reject 'No First Use' Nuclear Policy, Aug. 24, 2020, <https://www.newsweek.com/reject-no-first-use-nuclear-policy-opinion-1527037>

Finally, adopting an NFU policy would cause allied nations, who have rightly forsworn nuclear weapons and who rely on the American nuclear umbrella, to doubt our assurances. And if allies and partners can no longer rely on our nuclear umbrella, they will develop their own. The result of the nuclear idealists' efforts, zealous as their mission is to take the world down to zero nuclear weapons, could ironically result in precipitous nuclear proliferation.

Even proponents of nuclear disarmament, like President Obama, oppose a no first use nuclear policy.

Rebecca Heinrichs, senior fellow at Hudson Institute, Reject 'No First Use' Nuclear Policy, Aug. 24, 2020, <https://www.newsweek.com/reject-no-first-use-nuclear-policy-opinion-1527037>

President Obama, recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize for, in part, his denuclearization aspirations, eschewed an NFU declaration. Though he was ideologically motivated to pursue the idealist nuclear disarmament agenda, reality and the weight of responsibility to protect the American people won the day. It is inexplicable that his vice president, who has decades of experience grappling with the global threats and has had a front-row seat to these executive decisions, would still hold to the notion that NFU is good policy.

We must reject a no first use nuclear policy because other nations will not care with the US does.

Rebecca Heinrichs, senior fellow at Hudson Institute, Reject 'No First Use' Nuclear Policy, Aug. 24, 2020, <https://www.newsweek.com/reject-no-first-use-nuclear-policy-opinion-1527037>

We must see the world as it is. We might wish that other nations will follow our lead and do as we do, but other nations do not hold to our same moral judgments. We should not assume that our adversaries will make the same strategic and operational decisions that we make. The historical evidence shows that they are not inspired by our efforts to de-emphasize nuclear weapons, either by unilaterally moving toward lower numbers or by placing restrictions on testing. Every American president should keep our options open, maintain strategic ambiguity and reject NFU.

A no first use nuclear policy will not promote disarmament.

Michaela Dodge, Ph.D., Some Bad Ideas, Like Zombies, Never Die. A 'No First Use' Nuclear Policy Is One of Them, Heritage Foundation, Aug 16, 2017, <https://www.heritage.org/defense/commentary/some-bad-ideas-zombies-never-die-no-first-use-nuclear-policy-one-them>

Some argue that the United States should declare a “no first use” nuclear weapons policy. This would mean that the United States would only use a nuclear weapon in response to another country’s nuclear attack. Proponents of this idea generally argue that an adoption of this policy would get the world closer to a world without nuclear weapons. Such optimism couldn’t be further away from the truth. A no first use nuclear weapons policy would make the United States and allies less safe from devastating attacks.

We shouldn’t try for nuclear disarmament because nuclear weapons deter large-scale conventional conflicts.

Michaela Dodge, Ph.D., Some Bad Ideas, Like Zombies, Never Die. A 'No First Use' Nuclear Policy Is One of Them, Heritage Foundation, Aug 16, 2017, <https://www.heritage.org/defense/commentary/some-bad-ideas-zombies-never-die-no-first-use-nuclear-policy-one-them>

To assume that the only utility of nuclear weapons is to retaliate after a nuclear attack is to ignore historical experience. The United States used nuclear weapons in 1945 to bring an end to the most devastating conflict in the modern history of mankind. That conflict, the Second World War, was fought predominantly with conventional weapons. Comfortably assuming that such devastation could never happen again is foolish and imprudent. Aside from the fact that other countries are unlikely to trust any potential U.S. no first use declarations, a world without nuclear weapons is not a better world than the one we currently have, which involves a large degree of nuclear ambiguity.

A first strike nuclear policy is necessary to assure allies that the US will act to deter large scale conventional conflict.

Michaela Dodge, Ph.D., Some Bad Ideas, Like Zombies, Never Die. A ‘No First Use’ Nuclear Policy Is One of Them, Heritage Foundation, Aug 16, 2017,
<https://www.heritage.org/defense/commentary/some-bad-ideas-zombies-never-die-no-first-use-nuclear-policy-one-them>

A no first use nuclear weapons policy would undermine America’s allies, particularly those that live in volatile regions. South Korea, Japan, and NATO member states in Europe rely on U.S. extended deterrence. They wish to not be obliterated by conventional weapons as much as they wish to not be obliterated by nuclear ones. If we accept that nuclear weapons help to deter large-scale conventional attacks—as experience since the dawn of the nuclear age indicates so far—undermining that notion does not serve any useful purpose and could incentivize allies to find other options to provide for their own security.

The world had gotten more dangerous; we cannot afford bad ideas like a no first use nuclear policy.

Michaela Dodge, Ph.D., Some Bad Ideas, Like Zombies, Never Die. A ‘No First Use’ Nuclear Policy Is One of Them, Heritage Foundation, Aug 16, 2017,
<https://www.heritage.org/defense/commentary/some-bad-ideas-zombies-never-die-no-first-use-nuclear-policy-one-them>

A development of nuclear weapon capabilities could be one such option with negative consequences for U.S. nonproliferation goals. Under successive Democratic and Republican administrations, the U.S. has continued to reject a no first use nuclear weapons policy based on sound reasoning. Those reasons remain sound today. Considering negative security developments—which include increased ballistic missile and nuclear threats from North Korea, increased assertiveness of the Iranian regime flush with the Obama administration’s cash, as well China and Russia’s massive nuclear weapons modernization programs—the United States cannot afford bad ideas like a no first use policy.

US allies have relied upon a no first use nuclear policy in structuring their own security policies.

Richard C. Bush and Jonathan D. Pollack, Before moving to “no first use,” think about Northeast Asia, Brookings Institute, July 20, 2016,
<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2016/07/20/before-moving-to-no-first-use-think-about-northeast-asia/>

According to recent press reports, the policy options under consideration include U.S. enunciation of a nuclear “no first use” doctrine. Such a step would represent a profound shift in U.S. policy. Non-nuclear states living in the shadow of nuclear-armed adversaries have long relied on U.S. security guarantees, specifically the declared commitment to employ nuclear weapons should our allies be subject to aggression with conventional forces. They have based their own national security strategies on that pledge, including their willingness to forego indigenous development of nuclear weapons.

US allies need the US to maintain its first strike nuclear policy.

Richard C. Bush and Jonathan D. Pollack, Before moving to “no first use,” think about Northeast Asia, Brookings Institute, July 20, 2016,
<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2016/07/20/before-moving-to-no-first-use-think-about-northeast-asia/>

Whether it is “no first use” or “sole purpose use,” Northeast Asia presents a clear contradiction between President Obama’s non-nuclear aspirations and existing circumstances. The Republic of Korea and Japan (the only state ever subject to nuclear attack) confront the reality of a nuclear-armed North Korea. Pyongyang continues to enhance its weapons inventory and the means to deliver them. It also regularly threatens Seoul and Tokyo with missile attack, potentially armed with nuclear weapons. [A]ny indications that the United States might be wavering from its nuclear guarantees would trigger worst-case fears that the United States, above all, would not want to stimulate. Both U.S. allies are therefore strongly opposed to a U.S. “no first use” pledge, and would likely have deep concerns about a sole purpose commitment. Though the United States possesses a wide array of non-nuclear strike options in the event of a North Korean attack directed against South Korea or Japan, any indications that the United States might be wavering from its nuclear guarantees would trigger worst-case fears that the United States, above all, would not want to stimulate. At the same time, choosing not to issue a “no first use” pledge should not in any way suggest that the United States favors nuclear use, which would play directly into North Korean propaganda strategy. Rather, the United States should not preemptively remove the nuclear option, especially when North Korea is in overt defiance of its non-proliferation obligations and is single-mindedly intent on a building a nuclear weapons capability.

North Korea has a first use nuclear policy.

Ankit Panda, adjunct senior fellow at the Federation of American Scientists, graduate of the Princeton School Public and International Affairs at Princeton University, 'No First Use' and Nuclear Weapons, Council on Foreign Relations, July 17, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounders/no-first-use-and-nuclear-weapons>

North Korea has not ruled out nuclear first use to deter a preemptive strike or invasion by the United States and its allies. If the country were to detect an imminent U.S. or allied attack, it would use nuclear weapons on military installations in East Asia and in Guam. North Korea's intercontinental-range ballistic missiles would not be used first but would deter retaliatory nuclear use or an invasion by the United States against its territory. The exception to this might be a scenario in which North Korea fears a first strike by the United States to eliminate the country's leadership.