



Dangers of a Nuclear No First Use Policy

Longstanding U.S. Declaratory Policy

In the many decades that U.S. nuclear forces have deterred adversaries and assured allies and partners, the U.S. has never adopted a policy declaring it would not use nuclear weapons first in a conflict. Today, the U.S. continues its longstanding policy of retaining some degree of ambiguity regarding the precise circumstances that might lead to a U.S. nuclear response.

Within the Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) process, every recent U.S. administration has examined

whether and how U.S. nuclear declaratory policy should change. The 2018 NPR is consistent with NPRs conducted by previous administrations in rejecting a no first use policy and notes that “the United States would only consider the employment of nuclear weapons in extreme circumstances to defend the vital interests of the United States, its allies, and partners.” Given the significant deterioration in the international security and nuclear threat environment since the previous 2010 NPR, a no first use policy remains unjustified.

No First Use Could Invite Attack or Coercion

Advocates argue that a U.S. no first use policy would reduce the risk of nuclear war. However, adoption of such a policy could increase the likelihood of devastating conflict, including one that escalates to nuclear war, by incentivizing non-nuclear strategic attack on, and coercion of, the U.S. or our allies and partners. Such a policy may change how adversaries and allies view the credibility of the U.S. nuclear deterrent and our resolve to use it when our vital interests are threatened. Operational scenarios exist in which the U.S. would consider first use.

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 non-nuclear strategic attacks.

Concerns of Allies and Partners

From their inception, U.S. alliances with NATO, Japan, and South Korea have depended upon U.S. extended nuclear deterrence. A U.S. no first use policy would be deeply concerning to many of our allies and partners. Such a policy could undermine these relationships by suggesting the U.S. would not use the full means at its disposal to deter and respond to devastating, non-nuclear strategic attacks on our allies and partners—and could even incentivize U.S. allies and partners to pursue their own nuclear forces.

“The U.S. should retain calculated ambiguity as an element of its nuclear declaratory policy...calculated ambiguity creates uncertainty in the mind of a potential aggressor about just how the U.S. might respond to an act of aggression, and this ought to reinforce restraint and caution on the part of that potential aggressor... [The U.S.] should not abandon calculated ambiguity by adopting a policy of no first use.”

– *Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States, 2009*
