

No First Use, Sole Purpose and Arms Control

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The United States is captured by the debate over the upcoming Nuclear Posture Review, expected early next year, and especially over whether the Biden administration will adopt a no-first-use (NFU) or sole-purpose (SP) policy. The former refers to a declaration that in, case of a conflict, nuclear weapons would only be used in response to nuclear use by the opponent. The latter means that nuclear weapons' only mission is deterrence of the opponent's nuclear weapons but not of other elements of its military power (especially



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conventional capability). This conflict is not new but appears stronger than ever before. At the moment, opponents of these policies in the United States – the military first and foremost – [are on the offensive and seem poised to win this conflict](#) (once again). Moreover, US allies are [reportedly firmly against the adoption of either principle](#).

The conflict is primarily political – a decision in favor or against either or both policies cannot be made based on arguments about stability of deterrence or reducing/enhancing the likelihood of war. In essence, deterrence is about influencing the cost-benefit calculations of the opponent and it is difficult to argue conclusively whether one or another policy can achieve the desired effect. It is even more difficult in today's world when there are two opponents, China and Russia. Ultimately, the outcome of the debate will be determined not so much by rational arguments, but rather by the relative political weight of the proponents and the opponents, by the degree of concentration of their interest, and by the impact that winning or losing the debate may have on other policies. For example, President Biden could make a decision in favor of NFU, SP or both against all odds, but that could deplete his political capital to the detriment of other goals he may have.

At the moment, it seems increasingly unlikely that the Nuclear Posture Review will feature both NFU and SP. Moreover, it might feature neither. Yet, it is always worth keeping in mind that NFU and SP [are not the same policy](#). They differ, first and foremost by political and, to an extent, strategic implications. They are also inextricably linked to the prospects of arms control and the relationship of either policy is non-linear, perhaps even paradoxical. They each have a different balance of positive and negative consequences and, while we compare these, it is also useful to keep in mind that simple continuation of the present policy is not free of its own negative consequences. A close look suggests that SP has a better balance of positives and negatives than either NFU or the present policy, and as such it appears advisable to give it serious consideration.

No First Use versus Sole Purpose

A US first-use policy emerged in full force during the Cold War as a response to the perceived Soviet massive superiority in conventional forces (a perception that was, indeed, correct, but the extent of Soviet conventional superiority changed over time and is still subject to debate). Since the probability of NATO successfully defeating a potential Soviet large-scale conventional attack was assessed as low, it was decided that the only reasonable means of deterring it would be a promise to use nuclear weapons, whether on a limited scale (on the theater) or strategically.

The scale of the nuclear response was always a major source of contention within NATO. Some European allies some of the time questioned whether the United States would put its own territory on the line to defend Europe. This question could mean two opposite things with different implications. In one scenario, the United States would cede Europe to the Soviet Union to avoid damage to its own territory while in the other it would try to limit nuclear conflict to Europe. As so many other questions related to deterrence (including but not limited to nuclear) were never resolved, today all sides of the debate can claim their view was correct.

The United States never abandoned its first-use policy, even though the end of the Cold War and the radical decline of Russian conventional capability offered an opportunity in the 1990s. The decision to keep the first-use policy was not rational but primarily political – it was simply too controversial and probably judged not worth the political costs. The possibility of adopting an NFU pledge has not been seriously raised since until the present time.

To a much greater extent than during the Cold War and the first post-Cold War decade, the prospects of adopting NFU are affected by the growing Chinese conventional capability. The nature of the Asia-Pacific theater is fundamentally different from that of Europe, but the same logic is applied to it. One major challenge for deterrence of China is apparent insufficiency of conventional capability deployed sufficiently close to the likely theater, including the absence of nuclear weapons, even in symbolic numbers. Same as in Europe, NFU may result in an increase in permanent deployment of conventional capability (naval first of all but not limited to it) in Japan and South Korea. Whether they will accept such deployment is less certain than with respect to Central European members of NATO.

The Soviet Union adopted NFU in 1982, but after the Cold War Russia dropped it in 1993 for the same reasons the United States did not adopt NFU during the Cold War – US and NATO conventional capability was so overwhelmingly greater, the Russian military argued, that it could be deterred only by the threat of early use of nuclear weapons in response to a conventional attack.

That change of policy took some time – about a year and a half – and did not come without doubts. The initial push to drop NFU took place in the spring of 1992 when the author, who was on the interagency group working on the first National Security Concept of the Russian Federation, proposed dropping NFU but was overruled by the military, which felt uncomfortable to make such a declaration. Only by the fall of 1993 the military was ready to do it, indirectly demonstrating that even declaratory policies matter. Several years later, in 2000, the first-use policy was also augmented by the provision allowing the use of nuclear weapons in regional conventional conflicts, a policy that came to be known as “escalate to de-escalate.”

China has always had an NFU policy. That pledge has always been respected by others but given the small size and the vulnerability of its strategic nuclear forces, has also always been doubted.

In the end, NFU reflects the assessment of the likelihood of a conventional-only conflict and of the strength of non-nuclear deterrence vis-à-vis likely opponents. For US allies in Europe, first of all new members of NATO, that question is even more pertinent than for the United States. Their attitude is determined by the assessment of whether NATO will be able to repel conventional Russian aggression without resorting to nuclear weapons and whether the adoption of NFU might increase the likelihood of such aggression. Whether Russia truly harbors any aggressive plans vis-à-vis US allies in Europe is immaterial in this context. Deterrence is a matter of perception and politics, not of reality, and the assumption about Russian aggressive plans is rarely questioned. The same attitude, incidentally, determines Russian attitude toward NFU. Moscow does not believe NATO's assurances of peaceful intentions and prepares for NATO aggression. As such, given an imbalance in conventional forces, especially precision-guided long-range conventional strike assets, Moscow relies on first use of nuclear weapons for deterrence.

Were the United States adopt NFU, new members of NATO will demand a significant increase in US conventional capabilities deployed in Central Europe and/or committed to that theater (ergo, permanent deployment of long-range conventional assets within reach of Western Russia, whether on land, sea, or in the air). The fact that NATO as a whole (including the United States) is superior to Russia in conventional forces, does not matter much from the European perspective because they are more interested in the local balance, which favors NATO much less.

Declaration sole purpose effectively means that US nuclear weapons will have only one mission – balancing nuclear weapons of opponents, China and Russia. This policy draws a line between nuclear and conventional deterrence and presupposes that US nuclear posture will be determined by the size and the capabilities of nuclear postures of China and Russia. On the other hand, how an SP posture is different from a non-SP posture is anyone's guess.

SP has not been formally adopted by any nuclear state. All of them allowed for nuclear weapons to be employed for balancing against conventional forces and other weapons of mass destruction, chemical and biological. Obama administration came close to SP in the [2010 Nuclear Posture Review](#). It allowed for nuclear use in response to chemical and biological weapons as well as to reinforce conventional deterrence, but also declared that the role of nuclear weapons would continue to decline – a direct hint that it considered eventual transition to the sole purpose of nuclear weapons. That trend was reversed under the Trump administration in the [2018 Nuclear Posture Review](#).

While at first glance SP requires a change in the US nuclear posture because it removes a key mission – that of balancing conventional capabilities of the opponents – in reality changes in the posture are unlikely. It will always be possible to justify continuation of current posture by requirements of nuclear-only deterrence. For example, a declaration of SP does not necessarily entail any changes in the existing modernization plans.

Moreover, there is no reason to expect that it will reverse the deployment of [low-yield W76-2 warheads](#) on D5 submarine-launched ballistic missiles, which began in early 2020. The introduction of low-yield warheads was justified by the Russian strategy of limited nuclear use for de-escalation purposes, and that rationale still holds, at least in theory. Same as in other cases, it is immaterial whether Russia has such a

strategy of escalate-to-deescalate – it is sufficient that many in the United States believe it. In fact, SP in and of itself does not necessarily rule out limited nuclear use. It rules out only limited nuclear use against conventional attack but allows limited use against nuclear forces of the opponent, whether in response or pre-emptively. This point is worth keeping in mind as we observe the continuing debate in the United States on both NFU and SP, as well as modernization of strategic and non-strategic nuclear forces.

At the same time, if SP links US nuclear posture to those of the potential opponents (China and Russia), it could also motivate a greater effort and commitment of resources into upgrades in US conventional capabilities. It is easy to see an argument that, since nuclear weapons can no longer be used to balance conventional forces, prudence dictates greater attention to the conventional balance.

Thus, both NFU and SP in the end may mean an intensified conventional arms race and concern about enhancing the credibility of conventional deterrence. How Russia and China will react to that is uncertain but there is no doubt they would react one way or the other – by enhancing their conventional capabilities, by increasing reliance on nuclear weapons, or both.

SP could have a major impact on other elements of policy, though, and that impact will likely be predominantly positive. A declaration of intention to isolate nuclear balance into its own “box” could be welcomed by the increasingly popular and influential nuclear disarmament movement, the proponents of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), and become a major contribution to the implementation of Article VI of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, which relates to nuclear disarmament. Indeed, it is impossible to even talk about nuclear disarmament as long as nuclear and conventional weapons are mixed. Putting nuclear weapons into a separate “box” makes nuclear disarmament possible, at least theoretically, and effectively represents the first step toward that goal. SP is especially important in this respect because NFU may not have the equally strong message in the context of the TPNW and NPT Article VI because NFU preserves a mixed nuclear-conventional model of deterrence in contrast to SP, which makes them separate.

Some are concerned that adoption of NFU, or SP, or both may increase support for TPNW among US allies. In fact, their impact is likely to be differential. Specifically, a declaration of SP could help reduce domestic pressures in European countries to politically support or even join the TPNW while NFU may have a smaller impact in this respect.

Linkages to Arms Control

Arms control is in crisis. Out of the entire range of US-Soviet/Russian agreements that emerged in the last years of the Cold War and after it, only New START, which reduces and limits strategic nuclear weapons, remains in force. All other categories of nuclear weapons are not subject to limitation. New START, moreover, was designed as a “bridge” from START I to a new, more comprehensive treaty with deeper reductions. Its main goal was to preserve predictability and transparency during the interim period.

Conventional forces are not limited by New START and the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty is no longer in force. Worse, the CFE Treaty does not address the most important conventional strike weapons that exist today – long-range precision-guided missiles. The key confidence building regime, the Vienna Document, has not been updated since 2011 and few consider it even moderately adequate.

The only negotiating forum that exists today is the US-Russian Strategic Stability Dialogue (SSD), which should eventually result in a new treaty. Consultations began in the summer of 2021 and only limited

progress has been achieved so far. It is far from obvious that a new treaty will be negotiated until New START, the last major arms control treaty, finally expires in February 2026.

Against this bleak picture the impact of the adoption of NFU and/or SP can have a noticeable, albeit not fully predictable impact. They could facilitate progress on arms control but in some cases reduce interest of states in achieving progress or even create new stumbling blocks.

NFU and SP (SP probably to a greater extent) can serve as a partial compensation for the absence of a US-Russian treaty to reduce nuclear weapons if the parties fail to achieve it, or for limited scale of reductions. The political costs of a failure to negotiate a new treaty could be significant but could be partially mitigated by declaration of NFU and/or SP. The United States will be able to demonstrate its commitment to prevention of nuclear war and nuclear disarmament. This applies both to the international and the domestic contexts. Moreover, the political costs of adopting one of these policies or both will be lower than those associated with a new treaty. After all, NFU and SP are declaratory policies whereas a new treaty would require tangible concessions.

Among these two scenarios – failure to negotiate a new treaty or only small-scale reductions – the latter appears quite likely. The anticipated growth of the Chinese nuclear arsenal will make both sides, the United States and Russia, reluctant to significantly reduce their nuclear arsenals. After all, it is not prudent to significantly reduce one's nuclear weapons under conditions of major uncertainty. On that, the interests of the United States and Russia will coincide, and Moscow is unlikely to seek deep reductions, given especially the role of nuclear weapons play in Russian security policy. Furthermore, if the United States were to adopt NFU and/or SP, its position vis-à-vis proponents of nuclear disarmament will be more advantageous than that of Russia because the latter is almost certain to refrain from adoption either.

An SP declaration could help the United States to concentrate negotiations on reduction of nuclear weapons in contrast to the Russian insistence on including other elements of military balance, in particular long-range conventional strike assets. Discussions about the Russian proposal on a “strategic equation” (a broad approach to military balance that includes strategic conventional weapons, missile defense, and space weapons, whatever the latter means) continue within the confidential Strategic Stability Dialogue. The present-day US stance is not fully clear, but it does seem that Washington is leaning toward Obama's “nuclear weapons only” approach. If nuclear weapons are separated from conventional in US policy, then it is only logical to pursue a separate treaty on reduction of nuclear weapons. At least in the short term, this could make a strong argument as the parties discuss the framework of the future agreement.

Whether Russia would agree to that logic is a different matter, of course. Its insistence of the “strategic equation” appears firm but, on the other hand, it nonetheless agreed to make New START a “nuclear weapons only” treaty. Whether it makes the same concession at the ongoing SSD is far from obvious, though. It refused to pursue a “nuclear only” track at post-New START consultations and the disagreement over the framework for new negotiations resulted in the failure of SSD until the rest of Obama's term.

Moreover, as it was noted above, both NFU and SP policies (especially the latter) could intensify the conventional arms race. Since the collapse of previous SSD five years ago, Russia has made major advances in both long-range conventional weapons and in missile defense – these new capabilities are rapidly becoming very tangible vis-à-vis NATO. In short, Russia already can – or will be able in the near future – to wage a conventional conflict in Europe. This is, of course, if one remains within the realm of the possible

and likely instead of talking about tanks rolling across the borders of Baltic states. It is sad that arms control is still motivated by arms races .

The need to balance the growing Chinese conventional capability in the same domain will also have a less direct, but noticeable impact on the US-Russian negotiations because Russia will count relevant US capability in the Pacific in the bilateral balance.

Thus, sooner or later, the United States and NATO will need to look for ways to apply arms control tools in that domain because unrestricted and open-ended arms race is not the optimal solution for the security of NATO. It would have been much more advantageous for the United States to accept the Russian proposal to discuss long-range conventional weapons two decades ago (given the US' near-monopoly on these weapons in the past, such a deal would have been more advantageous for the United States) but unfortunately relationship between arms control and arms racing has remained unchanged since the days of the Cold War.

One way to mitigate the potential negative implications of SP is for the United States to offer Russia a separate negotiating track on long-range conventional weapons. Although Moscow insists on a direct linkage between nuclear and conventional weapons, it is likely to agree to two different tracks nonetheless. After all, it foresees separate agreements with different status for different elements of military balance anyway. The arrangement is similar to the one reached in Reykjavik in 1986. Although the Soviet Union had insisted on pursuing negotiations on intermediate-range and strategic nuclear weapons as part of one package, it agreed to separate them and negotiations along two separate tracks resulted in major successes – the INF Treaty in 1987 and START I in 1991.

In contrast to nuclear arms control, which requires strict accounting and verification because even one nuclear weapon is highly consequential, to say the least, conventional arms control may emphasize transparency and confidence building measures. After all, even a few dozen conventional cruise missiles or similar weapons have limited military impact. As long as both sides avoid high concentration of conventional strike assets and the other side is given an opportunity to ascertain that, the security situation will remain reasonably stable.

Whether the prospect of an intensified conventional arms race influences China is difficult to predict. There are simply too many variables that may affect its decision-making process – the nature of the theater, the probability of US allies accepting enhanced US deployments, the availability of resources, and many others. Similarly, it is difficult to predict how adoption of NFU and/or SP by the United States may influence China's propensity to engage in arms control dialogue.

Conclusion

In the end, adoption of NFU and/or SP by the United States could have both positive and negative consequences. On balance, however, positive implications seem to outweigh the negative ones. The advantages will be primarily political, of course: the standing vis-à-vis Article VI of the NPT and TPNW, somewhat better chances for nuclear arms control with Russia, and so on. Neither NFU, nor SP will significantly affect the nature and the future of US-Russian and US-China mutual deterrence, however. In fact, these policies may result in a conventional arms race and, instead, enhance the role of nuclear weapons in the policies of these countries and it will be necessary to take measures to mitigate these

consequences through arms control endeavors. As long as post-NFU and/or post-SP policy is carefully planned and implemented, adoption of at least SP and perhaps also NFU would be advisable.

All these calculations, of course, do not mean that the outcome of the ongoing debate in the United States will lean in that direction. Political considerations routinely trump reason (pun intended), and this case may not be different from the tradition.