

A Deeply Flawed Policy Assessment: The “No First Use of Nuclear Weapons” for the United States

A Review of No-First Use of Nuclear Weapons: A Policy Assessment, Institute for Defense Analysis, January 2021

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This report, [No-First Use of Nuclear Weapons: A Policy Assessment](#) (by William A. Chambers; Caroline R. Milne; Rhiannon T. Hutton; and Heather W. Williams), mandated by Congress to assess No First Use (NFU), argues strongly and unambiguously against any change in declaratory policy, and concludes that “the weight of all the evidence indicates significant potential for NFU to impart more harm than good”.

It appears written as a justification for prior determined positions, and rehashes familiar arguments for the status quo.

It claims an extensive research base from interviews with unnamed individuals (presumably representative of defence establishments) in defending speculative conclusions expressed in robust and definitive terms with little to no evidence. This in spite of its initial acknowledgement that it is near impossible to verify any conclusions in this area.

The essence of the argument repeated many times in the report is outlined on page 30. A US NFU would reduce uncertainties in the minds of adversaries and potentially embolden them in crises. But for this to be significant there would need to be a strong presumption on the part of adversaries and allies that the US currently plans to and would intend to use nuclear weapons first in plausible scenarios. And if accepted it is an argument that would apply in all circumstances and in perpetuity, relevant against any proposal that limits the freedom of action of a US President to authorize nuclear use in any circumstance.

In other words, the arguments marshalled against NFU in this report are not specific to an NFU, but rather are arguments in favour of maximising the practice of strategic ambiguity. In arguing this point the report singularly fails to address the most important negative consequence of strategic ambiguity, namely its undermining international solidarity and trust, and its tendency to drive arms races amongst defence establishments predisposed to worst case scenario planning. It ignores the immeasurable damage to US credibility and interests within the international community arising from its attachment to strategic ambiguity and exceptionalism.

The reaction of allies

Chapter 5 on the reaction of allies is particularly depressing and is the focus of this response. It hinges essentially on the idea that an NFU declaration would be interpreted by allies as a signal that the United States is less committed to extending military capabilities to defending its allies, and so would demand compensation elsewhere (such as increased deployments of conventional capabilities in theatre). The logic is fallacious, and the idea that allies have the power to demand 'material compensation' from an NFU declaration is equally bizarre.

There is no direct connection between an NFU and actual reduced commitment, other than clarifying what must already be known by allies and adversaries... that there are no realistic scenarios in which the United States would benefit from using nuclear weapons first in any regional conflict. Yet the fallacy has swayed previous decisions in Washington over NFU, and this report argues should do so again. If this link is misperceived by allies and an NFU interpreted as a reduction in commitment, then US officials need to better explain the situation as they consult allies over the decision. An explicit NFU would simply clarify the situation and bring greater transparency and stability to nuclear diplomacy. The fact that the United States continues to offer an extended nuclear deterrent underlines its commitment to the defence of its allies in those remaining scenarios where an aggressor might contemplate nuclear first use.

The report even goes as far to suggest that an NFU would create a discomfort within the UK and France, and divergence within NATO that could then be exploited by adversaries.

This argument is bizarre and erroneous, and the fact that it is used damages the report's credibility. Both states have a nuclear posture already very divergent to that of the United States. They both, for example, have a completely different force posture, policies of minimum deterrence, a different targeting approach, and no formal arms control arrangements that involve inspections and verification.

Should the United States declare NFU some defence officials may experience some discomfort. There may be political pressure internally to follow the lead of the United States. But there would be no logical or strategic reason that would force such a change, particularly if the United States made it clear that they themselves would not expect them to follow suit. The report's conclusion that Russia and China "will seek to leverage [US NFU] to gain diplomatic capital and undermine alliances" [p.37] has no evidence or explanation, and is without merit. What possible diplomatic capital could accrue to these states from tighter US declaratory policy? The idea explicitly referenced in the report that any such difference would be interpreted as disarray and could embolden Russia in a crisis is preposterous, suggesting a fragility to the Alliance that borders on the paranoid.

So-called 'deterrence gaps'

The chapter makes reference to 'deterrence gaps', a controversial concept resuscitated by the Trump Nuclear Posture Review. It implies a wide acceptance of the concept and its applicability that is simply not there. The example given is in relation to the possibility that a country like Russia might consider limited use of nuclear weapons to force the United States and allies to back down in a regional conflict. There is no suggestion that the United States does not have global military superiority over its competitors - this would clearly be

preposterous. The issue is whether a competitor might believe it has a window of superiority in a particular region in a particular moment, such that they act fast and hard to deter any US response. It would be a fearsome and risky calculation for any adversary, given the global capabilities fielded by the United States. Yet these so-called deterrence gaps need to be filled with capabilities in that region, so the thinking goes.

The implied requirement for full spectrum dominance in every region rapidly deepens negative threat perceptions of the United States, forcing an extended arms race and driving counter moves that are destabilising (consider Putin's announcement of novel nuclear weapons in March 2018). It illustrates an insatiable desire for total security through military dominance if states have the capacity to pursue it, or making alliance with other states willing to provide cover.

If there is any use in this report it is in exposing the poverty of thinking that has obstructed moves towards an NFU in the past. We can only hope that clearer thinking within the new US Administration and within allied governments prevail and that an NFU gets a fair hearing.

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