

# US Military Options Should *Not* Include Starting a Nuclear War

## *The Security Benefits of a No-First-Use Policy*

### HIGHLIGHTS

*The United States maintains nuclear weapons to deter other countries from using nuclear weapons. However, it also reserves the right to use its nuclear weapons first in response to a Russian, Chinese, or North Korean attack using conventional, chemical, biological, or other nonnuclear weapons. This means the United States might deliberately cross the threshold to a new level of conflict by using nuclear weapons. But these countries also have nuclear weapons and could respond in kind. The United States will have started a nuclear war—with potentially devastating consequences.*

*A no-first-use policy would take this option off the table—making us all safer.*

The United States maintains nuclear weapons to deter and, if necessary, respond to the use of nuclear weapons by other countries against the United States, its troops, or its allies. However, it has always reserved the right to use nuclear weapons in response to non-nuclear attacks on its territory, its troops, or its allies.

During the Cold War, the United States deployed as many as 7,000 “tactical” (low-yield and short-range) nuclear weapons in Europe to be able to counter an invasion of Western Europe using conventional forces. It also considered the first use of nuclear weapons against countries that did not have nuclear weapons during the Korean and Vietnam Wars and, in 1955 and 1958, during two crises in the Taiwan Strait. (China tested its first nuclear weapon in 1964.)

### Constraining First-Use Options

During negotiation of the 1970 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which aims to prevent more countries from acquiring nuclear weapons, it became clear that non-nuclear countries might be reluctant to join the treaty if they were faced with the prospect of being attacked with nuclear weapons. Instead, they might want to retain the option of acquiring their own nuclear weapons to deter such attacks. In response, the five nuclear-armed countries indicated their general opposition to the use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear countries.

Beginning with President Jimmy Carter in 1978, the United States has provided a “negative security assurance”—a declaration that it would consider using nuclear weapons first only under certain, specified circumstances. This assurance has been strengthened over time.



Capt. Christopher J. Mesnard/US Air Force

*A B-2 bomber drops a mock B61 nuclear bomb during an August 2015 exercise. If the United States decided to respond to a non-nuclear attack with a nuclear weapon, it might choose to use a B61 bomb because it can be set to produce a relatively small explosion.*

## US Policy Today

As stated in the Trump administration's 2018 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), "the United States will not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapons states" that are members in good standing of the NPT (OSD 2018).

This unequivocal security guarantee, first articulated in the 2010 Obama administration NPR, covers the 185 non-nuclear members of the NPT (OSD 2010). There are nine nuclear-armed countries, which include the United States and five US allies (Britain, France, India, Israel, and Pakistan). Thus, the United States reserves the right to use nuclear weapons first against three nations—Russia, China, and North Korea.

Both the 2010 and 2018 NPRs also state that the United States would consider using nuclear weapons only in "extreme circumstances to defend the vital interests of the United States, its allies, and partners."

## Using Nuclear Weapons First in a Crisis Would Risk a Nuclear War

What might those extreme circumstances be? The United States has long stated it would consider using nuclear weapons in response to a conventional, chemical, or biological attack. The 2018 NPR broadens these circumstances to encompass any "significant non-nuclear strategic attacks"—which could presumably include cyberattacks.

In these circumstances, the United States might deliberately cross the threshold to a new level of conflict by using nuclear weapons. But Russia, China, and North Korea have nuclear weapons of their own and could respond in kind. The United States will have started a nuclear war—with potentially devastating consequences.

## The Security Benefits of a No-First-Use Policy

By declaring a no-first-use policy, the United States would pledge that it will not be the first to use a nuclear weapon in a future crisis, regardless of the circumstances. Adopting this policy simply requires an official statement by the president. It would not require any changes to US nuclear forces.

Explicitly declaring a no-first-use policy would increase US security in several ways:

- It would reduce the risk of miscalculation during a crisis with Russia, China, or North Korea. These countries could otherwise believe that the United States was preparing to use nuclear weapons first and take preemptive action in response.
- It would strengthen the NPT. The non-nuclear states are increasingly frustrated with the failure of the United States and four other nuclear states to fulfill their treaty obligations to reduce and eliminate their nuclear forces. A no-first-use pledge would demonstrate that the United States was reducing the role of nuclear weapons in its security policy, providing some evidence that it is taking its obligations seriously.
- It would reduce the risks associated with the president's sole authority to order the use of nuclear weapons. Only the president can order the use of nuclear weapons and can do so without any consultation and for any reason. A no-first-use policy would remove the president's option of ordering the first use of nuclear weapons.

### REFERENCES

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- Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD). 2010. Nuclear Posture Review Report, Washington, DC, p. ix. Online at [https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/features/defenseReviews/NPR/2010\\_Nuclear\\_Posture\\_Review\\_Report.pdf](https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/features/defenseReviews/NPR/2010_Nuclear_Posture_Review_Report.pdf), accessed November 29, 2018

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