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The Role of Nuclear Weapons: Arguments for a U.S. Declared No First Use Policy

The United States built the world's first nuclear arsenal via the Manhattan Project during World War II as a result of fears that Nazi Germany, with its world class nuclear physics capability would get them first and win the war.

After the war, the U.S. built only a few weapons until the first Soviet test in 1949, supported by Soviet espionage in the United States. Instead of seeking some limiting arrangement with the Soviets—which likely would have failed—the U.S. went in the other direction. The U.S. began to build nuclear weapons at an "industrial rhythm" as the French commented. America also developed what was then called "Super," the hydrogen bomb. By the early 1960s the U.S. had constructed some 72,000 nuclear weapons, the later Soviet high point was 55,000.

The two countries claimed they would use these devices as weapons only in a second strike, launch under attack, mode. But this was not true. Both sides had launch on warning policies, which meant that a country initiates general nuclear war if its early warning technology indicates that strategic nuclear missiles launched by the other superpower are on the way. Pursuant to U.S. early warning procedure, it would expect to detect Soviet strategic nuclear missiles coming over the Pole about 20

minutes before they arrive and struck the United States. There would be an emergency call among the senior national security advisors to the President who would discuss this situation for ten minutes and if, during this discussion the threat was verified and confirmed, then the President would be contacted wherever he was, fishing in Idaho or sound asleep in his bed. He would be briefed on the situation and told he had seven minutes to decide whether to launch the U.S. strategic nuclear forces and initiate general nuclear war in response to this attack. The last three minutes of the 20 minutes were to be utilized to get the order to our missile sites should the President decided to launch our strategic nuclear forces. In theory this would have our missiles launched before the Soviet missiles arrived and possibly destroyed them. Every time the U.S. practiced this procedure during the 45 years of the Cold War, the President always said "launch" at the end. President Ronald Reagan strongly denounced this reckless practice in his diary and presumably elsewhere.

This, of course, created a serious risk of a nuclear war taking place by miscalculation or accident. Indeed, during the Cold War there were at least four well documented such incidents, two on each side. Indeed in one, because of certain U.S. actions and policies, in 1983 the Soviet Union became convinced that the U.S. planned a first strike with nuclear weapons to eliminate the Soviet Union if the

disparity in the strength of the two forces—the strategic balance—represented an increase in the American margin of superiority to a certain level. The KGB was directed to set up a computer program to inform the Politburo should that point—as they estimated it—be neared. The computer system would then warn the Soviet leadership. To be more precise, in the program American and NATO forces were valued at 100 and the Soviet forces at 60. Although the Soviets would have been more comfortable if their side could have been estimated at 70 they thought 60 to be more objective.

It was Politburo policy if the KGB computer estimate ever fell below 40 for the Soviet side to then immediate launch their entire nuclear arsenal at the United States in a preemptive first strike which would initiate general nuclear war. They had concluded it was their only chance to survive. At one point in this 1983 timeframe the estimate reached 45. At the time the United States and NATO were conducting a huge war game simulation of an all-out nuclear weapon attack on the Soviet Union. There was a large carrier task force participating, launching its bombers directly toward the Soviet coastline and veering off at the last moment. U.S. strategic bombers were flying over the North Pole and turning on their target acquisition radar. And just before the height of this crisis in 1983 a Soviet early warning station one night received reports from a newly installed Soviet satellite-based missile launch detection

system. It reported the launch of first one, then five more, U.S. strategic nuclear missiles headed toward the Soviet Union. The senior officer at the station saw the first report flash on the screen. He looked at reports from his other instruments; there was nothing. He didn't trust the satellites because they were new and as a result he didn't believe the satellite report. Directly contrary to his orders—he was supposed to simply report everything and send no comments—he reported it to the headquarters of the General Staff as a "false alarm." The duty officer replied "got it". If he had not violated his orders, given the anxieties of the times, general nuclear war would almost certainly have followed. He was the right man in the right place at the right time. He was the subject of a movie, "The Man Who Saved the World," and he did.

Nuclear weapons are going to be with us for a long time. Heightened nuclear weapon fears generated by the Iran question, the North Korea issue, and the nearness of chaos caused by rapidly advancing global warming from climate change as well as other issues have made the possibility of nuclear war greater than it was 10-15 years ago. And one of the four nuclear weapon near misses that I mentioned took place after the Cold War in 1996. President Yeltsin for the only time in the Nuclear Age activated the nuclear keys and came within 2-3 minutes of launching Russian nuclear forces at the U.S. as a result of a faulty radar report. Nuclear crises are not just a Cold War problem.

We simply must find a way to make the world a safer place. And one of the most important goals must be to establish more arrangements that will have the effect of reducing the risk of nuclear war resulting from accidents, miscalculations, or misunderstandings. Crises lie ahead for sure. We can't always be sure that the right man or woman will be in the right place at the right time. Nor can we be sure that no government will ever repeat the Soviet error of 1983 and be seized by fears of nuclear attack from some quarter or create some bizarre use of a computer or other technology for strategic guidance. The situation is becoming too dangerous.

One way we can improve the situation—one very significant way we can do this would be to have the United States formally declare in a major public statement that it will not ever use nuclear weapons first in a conflict or at any other time. The other nuclear weapon states could be asked to join the United States in a joint pledge to follow this policy.

This issue has a long history. NATO reserved the right to use nuclear weapons first rather than spend the money to build conventional forces to match those of the Warsaw Pact backed by the Soviet Union in Europe. U.S. officials expanded the reservation of first use or "calculated ambiguity" as it was called to buttress the nuclear umbrella for our allies in Europe and Asia. But whatever its effect in the early years, Germany and Japan now deny the necessity of this doctrine and support the

U.S. adoption of a no first use policy along with retaining full confidence in their alliance with the United States. This is despite recent policies to weaken our alliances which now have been fully reversed by President Biden. And they will stay reversed now that the American people have seen the deleterious effects of attempts to weaken our alliances carried out by the previous administration. Our allies fully understand that using nuclear weapons to deter biological, chemical or cyber attacks is unnecessary, unwise, misguided and dangerous as the ultimate outcome of such policies could be stumbling into nuclear war. No country expects the United States to ever use nuclear weapons except in response to an actual nuclear attack. In today's world what is needed is clarity, not ambiguity. The U.S. adoption of a no first use policy would bring an element of order and clarity to the control of nuclear weapons and strengthen peace and non-proliferation.

Some officials in Pakistan and North Korea think that having nuclear weapons and an ambiguity policy makes them safer, but their views don't matter. What matters are the views of the United States, its principal allies and adversaries. No first use as a declared policy will add to confidence and strengthen peace. Beginning with the United States, a formal pledge perhaps deposited with the United Nations Secretary General would reduce the chances of nuclear weapon miscalculation by assuring allies and potential adversaries that the chances of a U.S. preemptive first strike with

nuclear weapons is so extremely low as to be virtually non-existent—which in fact it is. And as part of all this, a no first use policy if worldwide would reduce the political value of a first use reservation and an international norm of behavior against first use could be established. Possessing nuclear weapons would be seen to a large degree as only valuable in deterring other nuclear weapons, nothing more, not for prestige, or deterring other types of weapons: chemical, biological, cyber, conventional and future weapons in the pipeline and this is doable, China has had such a policy since the days of Mao. President Biden supported such a concept during the campaign. He has to make a decision on this soon in the formulation of his Nuclear Posture Review to be submitted to Congress as required by law. Nothing is sure in life, but this outcome would be a long step toward peace and stability.

No first use is an emotional subject in the United States in part because of its long association with the nuclear umbrella. It will be difficult but it can be done. Just a couple of personal examples from my recollection for illustration.

In 1994 I was in Beijing with John Holcim, the Arms Control Agency Director consulting with Chinese officials on non-proliferation and the forthcoming NPT extension conference. We met with the Vice Minister for these issues, and Ambassador Sha Zu Kang, the senior Chinese Arms Control Officer, among others. Ambassador Stapleton Roy, the U.S. Ambassador to China joined our group. We were

also lobbying the Chinese to sign on to a missile detargeting agreement advocated by President Clinton to be signed on the margins of the ASEAN meeting to be held in the near future.

Sha Zu Kang in an aside outside the meeting said that China had just signed a no first use agreement with Russia that provided according to Sha that neither country will use nuclear weapons first against the other unless it changed its mind. If the U.S. would sign such an agreement like this with China, China will agree to a detargeting arrangement, he suggested.

Holum, Roy and I discussed it and it seemed innocuous enough so we agreed to send a joint cable to Washington recommending it be considered. This perhaps would lead to the detargeting agreement that President Clinton wanted. It was sent that night.

Well, the next day one would have thought we had launched a tactical nuclear weapon rather than a cable into Washington. The Pentagon was furious, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff personally called a senior official in the Office of the Assistant to the President for National Security demanding that our cable be withdrawn. Our small initiative came to an end.

After I left government in 1997 I teamed with former Defense Secretary Robert McNamara. We traveled around NATO attempting to persuade members of the

alliance to agree to a no first use policy for NATO to be unveiled at the 50th anniversary meeting of the Alliance in 1999. We had sort of an under the table green light from the administration to do this. If we succeeded it would be formally announced, if we failed, then they would disavow knowledge.

We went to 12 of the then 16 NATO countries, usually speaking with the Foreign Minister, the Deputy Foreign Minister or a senior Defense official. Three times we went to Canada, working with Foreign Minister Axworthy, a great enthusiast and Canada agreed to support no first use. Foreign Minister Fischer in Germany was a supporter and Germany came on board. The other 10 said they supported the policy but the U.S. had to act first. This was not what Washington wanted to hear; they wanted, for domestic political reasons, to be forced into no first use by the NATO membership. The initiative was not mentioned in 1999. So nothing came of this either.

Nuclear disarmament remains a long way off, even small reductions are unlikely in the current international political climate. But no first use which is important to peace, nuclear weapon disarmament and nuclear non-proliferation can be done now. This year. The stars are properly aligned for it. Its time has come! Let’s do it!