

Declaratory Policy: Advancing Sole Purpose

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Nuclear declaratory policy encompasses public statements by leaders and governments articulating the circumstances under which nuclear weapons might be used. Declaratory policy communicates to other governments and the public both at home and abroad the role of nuclear weapons in a nation's security policy, and it is tied to the acquisition and posture of a nation's nuclear forces.

United States

Since the first and only use of nuclear weapons in wartime by the United States, U.S. leaders have maintained a policy of strategic ambiguity with respect to the future use of nuclear weapons, refusing to rule out nuclear first use.

Obama-Era Policy

In its 2010 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR),¹ the Obama administration stated that “the fundamental role of U.S. nuclear weapons, which will continue as long as nuclear weapons exist, is to deter nuclear attack on the United States, our allies, and partners.” The administration committed to “continue to strengthen conventional capabilities and reduce the role of nuclear weapons in deterring non-nuclear attacks, with the objective of making deterrence of a nuclear attack on the United States or our allies and partners the sole purpose of U.S. nuclear weapons.” Although the Obama administration never formally adopted “sole purpose,” then-Vice President Biden in early 2017 stated that he and President Obama believed that it should be U.S. policy.²

Also in the 2010 NPR, the Obama administration stated, “the United States is now prepared to strengthen its long-standing ‘negative security assurance’ by declaring that the United States will not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapon states that are party to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and in compliance with their nuclear non-proliferation obligations.” In making this “strengthened” assurance, the administration also noted that, “Given the catastrophic potential of biological weapons and the rapid pace of bio-technology development, the United States reserves the right to make any adjustment in the assurance that may be warranted by the evolution and proliferation of the biological weapons threat and U.S. capacities to counter that threat.”

A strategy for moving toward sole purpose declaratory policy will have to clearly lay out the rationale and benefits, while reassuring U.S. allies about the enduring and reliable U.S. commitment to their security.

Trump-Era Policy

The 2018 NPR³ states that a policy of no first use “is not justified today” in light of the contemporary threat environment, underscoring that, “It remains the policy of the United States to retain some ambiguity regarding the precise circumstances that might lead to a U.S. nuclear response.” The Trump NPR is consistent with the administration’s 2017 National Security Strategy,⁴ which stated that America’s nuclear arsenal is now “essential” to preventing not just a nuclear attack but also “non-nuclear strategic attacks, and large-scale conventional aggression.” The 2018 NPR, by underscoring the role of nuclear weapons in deterring significant non-nuclear strategic attacks, explicitly rejects sole purpose. While it repeats the Obama-era negative security assurance (NSA), it broadens the exception to that policy, noting, “Given the potential of significant non-nuclear strategic attacks, the United States reserves the right to make any adjustment in the assurance that may be warranted by the evolution and proliferation of non-nuclear strategic attack technologies and U.S. capabilities to counter that threat.”

President Biden’s Views

In January 2017—one week before leaving office—then-Vice President Biden stated:

“Given our non-nuclear capabilities and the nature of today’s threats—it’s hard to envision a plausible scenario in which the first use of nuclear weapons by the United States would be necessary. Or make sense. President Obama and I are confident we can deter—and defend ourselves and our Allies against—non-nuclear threats through other means. The next administration will put forward its own policies. But, seven years after the Nuclear Posture Review charge—the President and I strongly believe we have made enough progress that deterring—and if necessary, retaliating against—a nuclear attack should be the sole purpose of the U.S. nuclear arsenal.”

More recently, in a March/April 2020 essay in *Foreign Affairs*,⁵ then-presidential candidate Biden underlined his commitment to sole purpose (reiterated in the 2020 Democratic Party Platform):

“As I said in 2017, I believe that the sole purpose of the U.S. nuclear arsenal should be deterring—and, if necessary, retaliating against—a nuclear attack. As president, I will work to put that belief into practice, in consultation with the U.S. military and U.S. allies.”

Russia

Russia’s 2014 military doctrine⁶ states that it would consider the use of nuclear weapons against any country in extreme self-defense situations:

“The Russian Federation shall reserve the right to use nuclear weapons in response to the use of nuclear and other types of weapons of mass destruction against it and/or its allies, as well as in the event of aggression against the Russian Federation with the use of conventional weapons when the very existence of the state is in jeopardy.”

Most recently, in early June 2020, President Putin signed an official Russian policy paper, titled “Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence,”⁷ spelling out the principles of

Moscow's nuclear deterrence strategy. The paper repeats the formula quoted above from the 2014 Russian military doctrine, making clear that Russia "considers nuclear weapons exclusively as a means of deterrence, their use being an extreme and compelled measure."

The paper also states that "in the event of a military conflict, this Policy provides for the prevention of an escalation of military actions and their termination on conditions that are acceptable for the Russian Federation and/or its allies." This may be a reference to general nuclear capabilities and readiness, rather than an explicit endorsement of early nuclear use or "escalate to de-escalate."

The paper also makes clear that deployment of nuclear weapons delivery systems, ballistic missile defenses, INF systems (nuclear or conventional), and other advanced weapons in the territory of non-nuclear weapon states that consider Russia as a potential adversary would make them targets of Russian nuclear deterrence.

Finally, in addition to responding to reliable data on a launch of ballistic missiles or the use of nuclear weapons against Russia and/or its allies, the document provides for the possible use of nuclear weapons in response to an attack against the critical national infrastructure that is responsible for controlling and employing nuclear weapons (which many experts have suggested could include cyberattacks that can disable nuclear command-and-control systems).

China

Alone among the P5, China states that it maintains a "no first use" policy of nuclear weapons with no exceptions. Originally declared in 1964, this pledge has been reaffirmed by Chinese officials on numerous occasions. China has also shown interest in a universal, legally binding P5 negative security assurance toward non-nuclear weapon states.

France and the United Kingdom

Neither France nor the United Kingdom has adopted "sole purpose" or "no first use" policies.

In its 2017 Defense and National Security Strategic Review,⁸ France stated that the "use of nuclear weapons would be conceivable only in extreme circumstances of legitimate self-defense." In February 2020, French President Macron, noting that the fundamental purpose of France's nuclear strategy is to prevent war and that French nuclear forces "strengthen the security of Europe through their very existence," reaffirmed that "France will never engage into a nuclear battle or any forms of graduated response," but "should there be any misunderstanding about France's determination to protect its vital interests, a unique and one-time-only nuclear warning could be issued to the aggressor State to clearly demonstrate that the nature of the conflict has changed to re-establish deterrence."⁹

In 2015, the United Kingdom stated that "We would use our nuclear weapons only in extreme circumstances of self-defence, including the defence of our NATO Allies. While our resolve and capability to do so if necessary is beyond doubt, we will remain ambiguous about precisely when, how and at what scale we would contemplate their use, in order not to simplify the calculations of any potential aggressor."¹⁰ In 2021, the United Kingdom repeated almost verbatim this language in the "Integrated Review of Security, Defence,

Development and Foreign Policy,” stating that “We would consider using our nuclear weapons only in extreme circumstances of self defence, including defence of our NATO Allies . . . we will remain deliberately ambiguous about precisely when, how and at what scale we would contemplate use of nuclear weapons.”¹¹

Both France and the United Kingdom also have adopted NSAs with respect to non-nuclear countries—the French with no caveats and the United Kingdom (in 2021) with caveats relating to chemical or biological capabilities, or emerging technologies with comparable impact (i.e., the United Kingdom leaves open the option to use nuclear weapons in response to chemical or biological attacks or emerging technologies with comparable impact).¹²

Political and Security Context

As the Biden administration reviews its nuclear policy and posture, the likely point of departure will be a review of Trump and Obama administration policies and President Biden’s previously stated views on sole purpose, both as vice president and as a candidate for president.

Although President Biden has clearly and publicly stated his position, moving U.S. nuclear allies Britain and France to follow and other U.S. allies in NATO and the Asia-Pacific to support a change in U.S. declaratory policy will be challenging. Although U.S. and NATO defense budgets are unlikely to escape the COVID-19 pandemic without significant programmatic adjustments—including in missile defense and nuclear capabilities—the issue of declaratory policy may be insulated from a NATO defense review. The absence of substantial progress on Ukraine and other political and security issues relating to Russia may create resistance to changing declaratory policy, despite the slightly improved atmosphere for progress on nuclear threat reduction following the extension of New START. Such resistance to a fundamental change of NATO nuclear policy likely will come from many NATO member states.¹³ Given the worsening political and security dynamic with China, there may be similar reservations among Asian allies to changes in U.S. declaratory policy. According to news accounts, both Japan and South Korea expressed concern about reports that the Obama administration was considering adopting a “no first use” policy in 2016, and the Biden administration is likely to encounter similar resistance to the somewhat different idea of a sole purpose declaration.

Advancing Sole Purpose

Given the potential for resistance, a strategy for moving toward sole purpose declaratory policy will have to clearly lay out the rationale and benefits, while reassuring U.S. allies about the enduring and reliable U.S. commitment to their security.

A new policy narrative—A change in declaratory policy, alone or along with other steps, would need to make clear that reducing the role of nuclear weapons in national security strategy is an urgent priority for the United States and would set a solid foundation for a new direction in U.S. nuclear policy. Importantly, it also would provide a basis for a new process of engagement with Russia and China, with the goal of encouraging and adopting safer policies on nuclear use. Announcing that the sole purpose of U.S. nuclear weapons is to deter nuclear attacks on the United States and its allies and partners—combined with restoring the Obama-era negative security assurance (i.e., the United States “will not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons

against non-nuclear weapon states that are party to the NPT and in compliance with their nuclear non-proliferation obligations”)—would clearly signal a policy course change and renewed U.S. global leadership toward reduced reliance on nuclear weapons.

Advancing a new policy—An initiative to move toward a sole purpose policy will need to combine U.S. leadership with deft diplomacy involving U.S. allies in both Europe and Asia, as well as Russia and China. Such an initiative could include a “declaratory policy challenge” to other nuclear weapon states and involve the following three steps:

- 1. Consultations and Reassurance**—Consultations with NATO and Asia-Pacific allies could take place in the context of an internal U.S. defense and nuclear policy review and/or as part of a NATO defense and nuclear policy review. The consultations would focus on reassuring allies of the continuing U.S. commitment to their defense against the full range of security threats and the continuing role U.S. nuclear weapons will play alongside enhanced conventional capabilities in their defense. It could include agreed measures to enhance conventional deterrence.
- 2. Challenge**—After clearly articulating the U.S. intention to move toward a sole purpose policy, the United States could challenge other nuclear weapon states to make the same commitment. This would be a historic milestone in joint efforts to reduce the threat of nuclear use and advance nuclear disarmament obligations under the NPT. It will move the world one step closer to the day when the risk of nuclear use is eliminated.
- 3. Diplomacy**—Washington would seek to coordinate policy statements with the United Kingdom and France, and with Russia and China, supporting sole purpose. These could be in the form of coordinated unilateral statements or joint statements.

Flexible implementation—In implementing this approach, a sole purpose declaration could be adopted unilaterally by the United States after consultations with allies, including on reassurance measures. Or, it could be coordinated with other nuclear weapon states. Coordinated unilateral or joint sole purpose statements could be implemented in stages (such as, United States-United Kingdom, United States-China, etc.) as a means of demonstrating progress and incentivizing other countries to act.

P5 Negative Security Assurances (NSAs) at a Glance

Country	Most Recent Declared NSA as of March 2021
United States	Will not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear countries fulfilling NPT obligations, with caveat that “Given the potential of significant non-nuclear strategic attacks, the United States reserves the right to make any adjustment in the assurance that may be warranted by the evolution and proliferation of non-nuclear strategic attack technologies and U.S. capabilities to counter that threat.”
Russia	Will not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear countries party to the NPT, except in the case of an invasion or attack on Russia or allies by state acting in association with a nuclear weapon state, or “when the very existence of the state is in jeopardy.”
China	No first use of nuclear weapons without caveats.
France	Will not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear countries fulfilling NPT obligations, and would only use nuclear weapons in extreme situations of self-defense.
United Kingdom	Will not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear countries fulfilling NPT obligations, with the right to review policy if the future threat of weapons of mass destruction, such as chemical or biological capabilities or emerging technologies with comparable impact, make it necessary.

Note: NPT is the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Endnotes

- ¹ U.S. Department of Defense, “Nuclear Posture Review Report,” April 2010. Available at: https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/features/defenseReviews/NPR/2010_Nuclear_Posture_Review_Report.pdf.
- ² The White House, Office of the Vice President, “Remarks by the Vice President on Nuclear Security,” January 12, 2017. Available at: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2017/01/12/remarks-vice-president-nuclear-security>.
- ³ U.S. Department of Defense, “Nuclear Posture Review,” 2018. Available at: <https://media.defense.gov/2018/Feb/02/2001872886/-1/-1/1/2018-NUCLEAR-POSTURE-REVIEW-FINAL-REPORT.PDF>.
- ⁴ The White House, “National Security Strategy of the United States of America,” December 2017. Available at: <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.
- ⁵ Joseph R. Biden, “Why America Must Lead Again,” *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2020. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-01-23/why-america-must-lead-again>.
- ⁶ “Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation,” December 25, 2014. Available at: <https://rusemb.org.uk/press/2029>.
- ⁷ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, “Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence,” June 2, 2020. Available at: https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/international_safety/disarmament/-/asset_publisher/rp0fiUBmANaH/content/id/4152094.
- ⁸ Republic of France, “Defence and National Security Strategic Review,” 2017. Available at: <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/layout/set/popup/content/download/520198/8733095/version/2/file/DEFENCE+AND+NATIONAL+SECURITY+STRATEGIC+REVIEW+2017.pdf>.
- ⁹ President of France Emmanuel Macron, “Speech of the President of the Republic on the Defense and Deterrence Strategy,” February 7, 2020. Available at: <https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2020/02/07/speech-of-the-president-of-the-republic-on-the-defense-and-deterrence-strategy>.
- ¹⁰ HM Government, Office of the Prime Minister, “National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015,” November 2015. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/555607/2015_Strategic_Defence_and_Security_Review.pdf.
- ¹¹ “Global Britain in a Competitive Age, The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy,” March 2021. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/975077/Global_Britain_in_a_Competitive_Age_the_Integrated_Review_of_Security__Defence__Development_and_Foreign_Policy.pdf.
- ¹² A summary of NSAs by the nuclear weapon states is provided in the table above.
- ¹³ See the November 25, 2020, report by the NATO secretary general’s “Forward-Looking Reflection Process,” which concluded that “Given the deterioration of the Cold War-era arms control framework, it is critical to sustain nuclear deterrence . . . in the 21st century as the bedrock of NATO security” and that “NATO should adapt its defence and deterrence posture in the post-INF setting to take into account the threat posed by Russia’s existing and new military capabilities.” Available at: https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/12/pdf/201201-Reflection-Group-Final-Report-Uni.pdf.