

**Nuclear risks reduction and disarmament: is it time for no-first-use policies in the US and globally?  
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Today's conference to discuss, and hopefully to promote, commitments by nuclear weapons possessor states to no-first-use (NFU) policies is both timely and welcome. I make no apologies for beginning my remarks with a geopolitical overview. Nuclear doctrines like NFU can not hope to spread and prosper without considering the global strategic security framework in which they would be situated.

That geopolitical overview in the spring of 2021 has both positive and negative features. On the positive side is the decision by the incoming Biden administration and Russia to extend the New START Treaty capping their strategic weapons for the full five years available under the treaty. That extension provides an opportunity not only to maintain that cap further into the future but to reduce it, recognising that the arsenals of these two powers are far greater than is needed to assure credible deterrence. Another potentially positive feature is the holding, later this year, of last year's postponed Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference. I say potentially because it is no sure thing that the conference outcome will in fact be positive. Its predecessor in 2015 certainly was not. The proposed summit meeting between Presidents Biden and Putin is another potential plus - or a minus. At least it is being recognised that nuclear arms control will need to be on its agenda.

There is, however, no lack of negative features. The rise in tension between the US and China, and between the US and its NATO allies and Russia are certainly not going to facilitate discussion of nuclear doctrines even if they do make such a discussion more necessary, as they do. The absence so far of China from all such discussions is another lacuna which really needs to be filled. And hanging over the scene like a dark cloud are the nuclear programmes of North Korea and Iran which have the capacity to damage the whole NPT regime, perhaps irretrievably. And the modernisation programmes of the P5 nuclear powers often look more like expansion than simple modernisation. So, plenty to worry about.

In February 2020 the P5 met in London at Deputy Minister level - itself an unusual event - and announced publicly their intention to start a dialogue on strategic stability at the time of the NPT Review Conference, then scheduled for May 2020. That conference was postponed and the dialogue has not yet started. It is urgent that it do so. Why? Because such a dialogue between the P5, if it were to be established on a continuing basis, provides the best way of drawing China into global nuclear discussions. And because it would also provide a forum in which crucial elements of nuclear doctrine, such as NFU and "sole purpose" could be considered discreetly. I mention "sole purpose" because that aspect of nuclear doctrine was a crucial component of the Negative Security Assurances given by the P5 and by the UN Security Council in 1995 when it was decided to extend the Nuclear NPT sine die. Since then the waters have been considerably muddied in that respect, including by the recent Integrated Review of security policy by my own country, the UK.

As for the NFU itself, I would have no hesitation in saying that it would strengthen global strategic security massively if all nuclear weapon possessor states were to adopt it, thus reducing the prominence of nuclear weapons in their security planning. But it is not helped by menacing statements and deployments of non-nuclear forces such as have recently occurred with respect to Taiwan and on Russia's border with Ukraine. NFU too requires a degree of trust between the nuclear possessor states that they would certainly stand by any commitment they entered into, when push

came to shove. That trust does not currently exist. So we should not be too depressed if progress towards NFU commitments is slow. Nor should we abandon the overall objective.

I mentioned earlier the passages on the UK's nuclear policies in our recent Integrated Review of Security, Foreign Policy and Development policies. Those passages, in particular the raising of the cap on nuclear warheads and the defence of a policy of "deliberate ambiguity" about nuclear holdings and doctrines, have been widely criticised right across the political spectrum, and not just by the opposition parties and by those who call for unilateral nuclear disarmament by the UK. When the House of Lords held a five-hour debate last week on the review, only one out of more than fifty speakers defended the government's stance. I posed the question whether, if all nuclear possessor states practiced policies of "deliberate ambiguity" the world would be a safer place and the risk of nuclear war would be reduced; and I answered in the negative. That debate will continue. The pity is that the Review will inhibit the positive role which many of us had hoped the UK would take at the Nuclear NPT Review Conference, as they have often done in the past. There is plenty of lost ground here to be made up.

In finishing my remarks, I would just plead for avoiding clear-cut and apocalyptic conclusions as the discussion of all these issues continues. It will be slow and difficult and strewn with obstacles, not all of which will have much objective credibility. But there are, I believe, opportunities now to set off on a new footing and to reverse the recent erosion of nuclear arms control; and we need to make the most of them.