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The debate about US nuclear declaratory policy is as old as US nuclear weapons themselves. Presidential promises about when nuclear weapons would be used (positive security assurances) and when they would not (negative security assurances) are widely seen as a critical factor in shaping the political and military environments, as they can directly affect perceptions of deterrence, assurance and strategic stability by both friends and adversaries. Over the years, many have advocated that the United States adopt a policy of no-first-use (NFU) of nuclear weapons. But no US president has so far heeded this advice. The NFU debate has resurfaced in the new 116th Congress. House Armed Services Committee Chairman Adam Smith joined with Senator Elizabeth Warren to offer NFU legislation, with the statement that ‘our current nuclear strategy is not just outdated – it is dangerous’. They went on to argue that NFU would ‘help us maintain our moral and diplomatic leadership in the world’.¹

With the political debate about US nuclear policy again heating up, it is a good time to recall prior debates. Understanding how they took shape and why they concluded the way they did can help inform current policy development. With this policy baseline in mind, it is easier to assess whether and how changed circumstances might dictate changed policies.

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The 2009 Strategic Posture Commission and NFU

The last significant congressional discussion of US nuclear declaratory policy occurred late in the George W. Bush administration. It arose in the context of a highly charged debate over nuclear policy driven by an unpopular administration seeking new nuclear warheads. Stoking the controversy was the call to substantially revise deterrence practices made by former secretaries of state Henry Kissinger and George Shultz, former secretary of defense William Perry, and former senator Sam Nunn in their now famous series of *Wall Street Journal* op-eds.²

Faced with division and confusion on nuclear policy generally, congressional leaders established a bipartisan Strategic Posture Commission. Its 2009 report, in turn, underscored the necessity of a bipartisan nuclear strategy given the enduring nature of the nuclear problem. The crux of the matter was that the lifespan of nuclear-modernisation programmes and of arms control (from negotiation through ratification to full implementation) is measured in decades – far longer than a two-year Congress. As the congressional balance of power can be expected to shift periodically, continuity of policy purpose requires some basic bipartisan agreement about the means and ends of policy, and some restraint on the exercise of bold departures that are unlikely to enjoy broad support. Toward this end, the commission recommended a nuclear strategy combining political means to reduce and eliminate nuclear weapons with military means of maintaining deterrence so long as they remain deployed. Despite its bipartisan cast, the commission was unequivocal and unanimous in rejecting NFU. It did so with the argument that NFU would be harmful to extended deterrence: ‘potential aggressors should have to worry about the possibility that the United States might respond by overwhelming means at a time and in a manner of its choosing’.³

This unanimous position materialised despite the presence on the commission of long-time NFU advocate Morton Halperin. Having joined the consensus in 2009, Halperin subsequently set out his own personal views on the subject, arguing that NFU was ‘a good idea whose time has not come’ and ‘can and should be put off for another day’.⁴ In making this case, he noted that a declaratory policy of NFU would generate political discord that

would impede efforts to accomplish other steps that would go further in reducing nuclear dangers.

The 2010 Nuclear Posture Review and NFU

The Barack Obama administration ended up taking the commission's advice on both bipartisanship and declaratory policy, but not without significant deliberation. Advocates within and outside the administration made the case for adopting NFU. The insiders saw NFU as beneficial for signalling a move away from Cold War thinking, which the president had promised in his April 2009 speech in Prague. Those outside government generally reinforced this view, while also deriving new arguments from a changing security environment. Scott Sagan, for example, argued that the threat of nuclear first use was no longer necessary to deter non-nuclear attack by other weapons of mass destruction (WMD) or by large-scale conventional military forces, and that the benefits of adopting NFU for US non-proliferation objectives had been seriously underestimated.⁵

While considering its options but before deciding what formulation of declaratory policy to adopt, the Obama administration sought out the views of the broader community of interest. It encountered many different opinions about the wisdom of NFU from a wide range of stakeholders. Among non-governmental organisations (NGOs), it found both supporters and opponents. Among allies, there were also varied attitudes, sometimes even within the same government. Some allies felt more secure than ever before in 2009 and thus were inclined to support a US NFU policy; others were under new pressure from hostile neighbouring powers, small and large, and felt rising anxiety about both nuclear and non-nuclear threats to their integrity and sovereignty. They also conveyed rising anxiety about the credibility of US security guarantees in light of new nuclear threats to the US homeland from 'rogue states' and given new questions about the end of unipolarity and possible US retreat.

Although attracted to bold policy initiatives, the Obama administration was also focused on practical steps toward the long-term disarmament goal. The White House characterised these as steps that would increase the safety and security of the United States and its allies, and also of other

nuclear-armed states, thereby presumably increasing their willingness to take additional steps to reduce the numbers and roles of nuclear weapons. While the president wanted to take significant steps toward the long-term disarmament goal, he did not want to undermine strategic stability, weaken extended deterrence and assurance of allies, or erode the non-proliferation regime. Quite a few bold ideas that were judged to fall short of these criteria were left on the cutting-room floor. NFU ended up there for several reasons.⁶

Firstly, the administration rejected the claim that there are no plausible circumstances in which the US might be the first to employ nuclear weapons. It saw such circumstances as extremely remote but did not regard them as completely implausible. It conceived a narrow range of contingencies, much narrower than in the Cold War, in which the vital interests of the United States or its allies might be put at risk by non-nuclear WMD or overwhelming conventional forces.

*Calculated
ambiguity served
deterrence well*

Secondly, the administration did not share the confidence of many NFU advocates that US conventional forces, though pre-eminent, would be sufficient to deter such threats to the vital interests of US allies. Considerable damage could be done to allies in the time it would take the US to project conventional forces in sufficient scale to prevent a catastrophe for those allies.

Thirdly, the administration concluded that the United States and its allies could reduce their reliance on nuclear weapons but not eliminate their role entirely. While building up missile defences and non-nuclear counterforce capabilities would facilitate a reduced role, these measures could not obviate the need for nuclear weapons. This was because the supplemental, non-nuclear tools of deterrence were unlikely to have the same influence as US nuclear threats on the calculus of cost and risk that would crucially inform an enemy's decision to go to war against a US ally.

Fourthly, administration leaders assessed that the tradition of calculated ambiguity had served deterrence well and should not be set aside at a time of continued concern about the effectiveness of deterrence for new challenges. Fraught experience with US red lines in Libya, Syria and Ukraine did nothing to increase their willingness to experiment with red lines in the nuclear realm.

Fifthly, some in the administration judged that the views of worried allies needed to be prioritised over those of more secure allies. This was a moral choice. But it also reflected a desire to ensure that decisions about NATO's nuclear policy and posture be made by the allies collectively rather than individually and separately. Had such unilateral decisions become the norm, it is likely that NATO's collective nuclear deterrent would have collapsed, stranding those more worried allies without a nuclear umbrella and generating among them resentment about the disengagement of NATO's long-standing members from their defence.

Sixthly, there was a desire to align US nuclear declaratory policy with the policies of its two nuclear allies, the United Kingdom and France, which were not prepared to adopt or support NFU.

Finally, the administration was broadly inclined to take the advice of the Strategic Posture Commission on tailoring nuclear strategy to promote bipartisanship. This approach was considered valuable in gaining congressional support for its nuclear-policy agenda, covering both arms control and force modernisation.⁷

After considerable deliberation, and after hearing the views of many experts inside and outside government, Obama rejected NFU. The administration's 2010 Nuclear Posture Review report thus stated that the employment of US nuclear weapons would be considered only in extreme circumstances, when the vital interests of the United States or an ally were at risk. But the Obama administration did significantly restrict the place of first use in US nuclear strategy by amending the negative security assurance. Under the so-called 'clean NSA', the US limited the threat of first use to only nuclear-armed states and other states not in compliance with their nuclear non-proliferation obligations.

In rejecting NFU, the Obama administration was not instead embracing first use as its preferred strategy. This is a continuing point of confusion and concern about the implications of rejecting NFU. In US strategy, the fundamental role of nuclear weapons has always been to deter nuclear attack by threatening nuclear retaliation. The fundamental role is not for pre-emptive or preventive nuclear war. Reserving the right to 'go first' in a certain narrow range of circumstances does not alter that fact.

The president also rejected the 'sole purpose' formulation. That is, having agreed that the fundamental purpose of US nuclear weapons is to deter and retaliate against nuclear attack, he was not willing to state that this was their sole purpose. This stance followed from the assessment that there remains a narrow range of contingencies in which an enemy's use of chemical, biological or conventional capabilities could jeopardise the vital interests of the United States or its allies and thus create the extreme circumstances in which the US might employ nuclear weapons. At the same time, however, the 2010 Nuclear Posture Review expressed a commitment to work to create the conditions that might make it possible to safely adopt such a formulation in the future.

Subsequent Obama reviews

With these decisions, the administration's policy review concluded. But its internal debate did not end. The Obama team reviewed, re-assessed and re-deliberated its nuclear policy throughout its eight-year term. It periodically asked itself what more should and could be done to fulfil the Prague vision. The White House first revisited these questions in 2011 and 2012, in its preparation of new presidential guidance on planning for the employment of nuclear weapons. Toward that end, it undertook a comprehensive review of nuclear deterrence strategy. The review was strategy-driven in that it began with first-order policy objectives and determined how they should be reflected in operational plans and capabilities. Those objectives were drawn directly from the 2010 Nuclear Posture Review, but explicitly included the requirement of achieving presidential objectives in case deterrence were to fail, and revalidated the administration's positive and negative security assurances.

In its final year, the administration undertook another sweeping review of nuclear policy, which again resurrected the NFU issue. Outside advocates again made the case for NFU, this time with the implied message of 'better late than never'. Bruce Blair, for example, called for NFU adoption as part of 'a bold move to fix an outdated strategy' that would, in his view, make the world dramatically safer by reducing the concerns of US adversaries that the United States might use nuclear weapons first.⁸ And Sagan's 2009 arguments

were revisited – especially the contention that the non-proliferation benefits of NFU had been undervalued.

This so-called ‘internal review’, however, came to the same conclusion on NFU as all of its predecessors. Administration leaders were not persuaded that a change in policy had been undervalued. Instead, there was a rising frustration with the constant demands of NGOs on the United States and the disappointing impact of prior decisions and actions in generating support for more robust non-proliferation actions. Nor was the administration persuaded that US adoption of NFU would significantly reduce the likelihood of nuclear threats or attack by Russia or China, whose declaratory policies and nuclear doctrines seemed to have little to do with US declaratory policy.

A coda to this review arose during the administration’s last few days. In a review of the administration’s legacy in implementing the agenda set out in Prague eight years earlier, then-vice president Joseph Biden asserted that both he and the president wanted to endorse the ‘sole purpose’ formulation because of the administration’s progress in reducing nuclear dangers.⁹ Oddly, he did not go on to explain why the president had chosen not to change declaratory policy. Nor did he make any case that the ‘narrow range of contingencies’ that drove the policy in the first place had been meaningfully narrowed.

In fact, this would have been, and would still be, a difficult case to make. The non-nuclear threats to the sovereignty and integrity of US allies cannot be said to have eased during that period. Significant chemical, biological and conventional threats remain in all three regions where the United States extends security guarantees.¹⁰ And the crisis of confidence in the multilateral disarmament regime has only intensified.

Subsequent commentary on the results of the 2016 internal review raised an additional issue of continuing importance: the proper impact of allies on US declaratory policy. In the internal review as in the Nuclear Posture Review, stakeholders were consulted. Given that US allies had almost unanimously welcomed the findings of the 2010 Nuclear Posture Review, it is hardly surprising that they again opposed NFU. The executive departments again found their thinking about the requirements of extended deterrence compelling, and the secretaries of defense, state and energy (Ash Carter, John Kerry and Ernest Moniz) again lined up against NFU.¹¹

NFU advocates criticised both the grumbling of US allies and the Obama administration's deference to their complaints.¹² Such critics were far off the president's policy course. Obama had arrived in office in 2009 committed to renewing US alliances and more effectively engaging US allies in meeting contemporary international challenges of many kinds. His dedication to assuring them deepened as his personal relationships with allied leaders developed. In close parallel, his commitment to extended deterrence intensified, as allied leaders communicated their concerns about emerging threats, and about the ability and will of the United States to deter those threats. Thus, Obama was particularly unprepared to reject their counsel on the requirements of their assurance. The advice of NFU advocates to override allied concerns might have been better received by the administrations that preceded and succeeded Obama.

The 2018 Nuclear Posture Review and NFU

The Trump administration also took up declaratory policy as part of its own Nuclear Posture Review. Its internal deliberations are not yet a matter of public record, but the result on NFU is clear enough. Although motivated by some very different principles and foreign- and defence-policy objectives, the administration settled for direct repetition of the nuclear declaratory policy of the Obama administration. NFU was rejected again, as was 'sole purpose'. The review concluded that 'significant non-nuclear strategic attacks' could create the 'extreme circumstances' in which the US president might employ nuclear weapons. The Trump administration also maintained the 'clean NSA', word for word.¹³

Debate renewed

Now, in 2019, the advocates of 'bold action' via NFU are back. As of spring 2019, it remained unclear whether Representative Smith and Senator Warren actually expected to succeed in imposing a new declaratory policy on the executive branch. Their effort may instead reflect their intent to line up Democrats so that NFU is a pre-agreed input and not merely an option for the next Democratic administration's Nuclear Posture Review.

In any case, the renewal of congressional debate has brought with it a resurgence of NGO advocacy and familiar arguments. The Arms Control Association's Daryl Kimball has staked out a leading role in this new debate with a forceful case for NFU that reflects current concerns and factors.¹⁴ He has reformulated one of the key arguments of NFU advocates, while adding a timely new argument. The point of departure for Kimball's analysis is the observation that nuclear risks are increasing. This assessment is incontestable, and all partisans in the debate about NFU should find it easy to concur in it. The renewal of major-power rivalry, North Korea's steady progress toward a viable nuclear force, the decay of the non-proliferation regime, the crisis of multilateral disarmament diplomacy, and rising doubts about the intention and ability of the United States to safeguard the global and regional order are all driving new sources of nuclear risk, danger and instability. Following three decades of concerted bipartisan US effort to mitigate these factors, this is a lamentable result.

Kimball goes on to reformulate the argument that existing policy is both outdated and dangerous. In Kimball's view, 'retaining the option to use nuclear weapons first is fraught with unnecessary peril'. He characterises contemporary US nuclear strategy as 'largely the same' as Cold War strategy, with what he believes to be a focus on large-scale nuclear attacks, dangerously high alert levels for such a contingency and a reliance on the threat of first use as a way to use US nuclear capabilities before losing them. In this framework, he judges that enemies have a high incentive to strike first against the United States with nuclear weapons in a time of crisis. To stabilise this tenuous situation, he concludes, NFU would make a dramatic difference by eliminating the use-or-lose incentive. In making this argument, he is echoing the arguments of Michael Gerson from nearly a decade earlier.¹⁵

The problem with this analysis is that its assumptions about current US nuclear policy are wrong. US nuclear strategy is not 'largely the same' as in the Cold War. The focus on large-scale nuclear attack disappeared along with the Single Integrated Operational Plan nearly two decades ago.¹⁶ The Obama administration's Deterrence Requirements Review further shifted the focus onto what it called twenty-first-century contingencies, which it

later defined as regional conflicts in which aggressors attempt to escalate their way out of failed aggression against a US ally.¹⁷ The alert practices of US nuclear forces were significantly altered by the presidential nuclear initiatives of the 1990s; only a portion of those forces remain capable of prompt action. The Obama administration also further downgraded planning for the Cold War-vintage, bolt-from-the-blue, all-out attack by a peer enemy and took steps to increase presidential decision time during a crisis. It did, however, opt to retain the technical capability for launch under attack. A key factor in its decision to do so was the desire to ensure that no enemy ever thinks that a disarming first nuclear strike on the United States can be attempted with acceptable risk. But so long as the US maintains nuclear forces capable of surviving a surprise pre-emptive attack, there seems no significant prospect of ever needing to employ forces in this manner.

Kimball's analysis focuses on the risks of all-out strategic warfare when the major risks today are at the regional level. Russia has established an approach to regional war that integrates a broad and diverse set of weapons (nuclear and non-nuclear, kinetic and non-kinetic) to conduct strategic operations aimed at destroying critically important targets. The potential value to Russia of escalatory action is not to use or lose its strategic arsenal. Rather, it is to sober the US and its allies by awakening them to the underlying reality that Russia has a higher stake and greater interest in prevailing in the conflict, and thus bring NATO to a Clausewitzian 'culminating point' at which it chooses not to bear the costs and risks of further war.¹⁸

The option for first use was retained to address this new problem. The scenarios that most concern deterrence planners today are those involving adversary nuclear blackmail and brinkmanship in regional contingencies and, potentially, limited nuclear attacks by challengers aimed at breaking the will of US allies, and perhaps separately the United States, to stay in the fight. The instabilities in such contingencies flow from the calculus that adversaries – principally Russia – may be able to escape significant escalatory risks by using conventional forces backed by nuclear threats to put in jeopardy allied and US interests.

The United States and its NATO allies have focused on this problem as a result of Russia's military annexation of Crimea and revelations about

the advanced state of Russian preparations for a war in Europe. Against this backdrop, NFU would be a step in the wrong direction. It would not decrease the risk of Russian nuclear use in a regional war in Europe. On the contrary, it would increase that risk by nourishing Russia's expectations that its actions putting the vital interests of NATO members at risk would not be met with a military reply that would be too costly for Russia to bear. The United States' adoption of NFU would also put the US at odds with its two nuclear-armed allies – the UK and France – and with the NATO tradition of calculated ambiguity. This would reinforce Russia's expectation of Western disagreement and disarray in a time of burgeoning crisis, which could encourage risk-taking by Russian leaders.

The timely new argument advanced by Kimball concerns the proper role of Congress in authorising nuclear employment – a question brought to the fore by President Donald Trump's 'cavalier and reckless statements' (Kimball's words) about nuclear weapons. Kimball argues that 'continuing to vest such destructive power in the hands of one person is undemocratic, irresponsible, unnecessary, and increasingly untenable'. Thus, he concludes, a congressionally imposed NFU policy could help reduce a significant new peril.¹⁹

*The president's talk
of nuclear war has
been alarming*

Indeed, the president's talk of nuclear war and the nuclear arms race has at times been alarming. Naturally and appropriately this has produced consideration of how to limit his authority to initiate nuclear war. Whether Congress has the authority to legislate constraints on the power of the commander-in-chief in a major international crisis is uncertain. Whether a president would in fact feel constrained by such a legislative requirement in time of war is also an open question. Moreover, a legal limitation on the president's authority to employ nuclear weapons could be seen by potential adversaries as further increasing the likelihood that the US would be fearful, divided and paralysed in a strategic crisis (as autocrats generally want to believe democracies to be). This consideration could embolden them to attempt to impose a military *fait accompli*. Thus, even successful legislation might simply trade one set of risks for another.

NFU: a 2019 net assessment

The arguments for NFU have not proven persuasive for policymakers for decades. Are they now, given the lessons of recent experience and the heightened dangers of the new period? An answer to this question requires subsidiary assessments of what impacts NFU adoption by the United States would have on deterrence, on assurance of allies, on non-proliferation and disarmament, and on the broader future of US nuclear policy.

Regarding the impact of the United States' NFU adoption on deterrence, the positive case is built on two main arguments. One, already discussed, is that it would actually strengthen deterrence by decreasing the adversary's incentive to strike first in a crisis. The second is that NFU would not harm deterrence because US conventional forces are credible deterrents for all non-nuclear contingencies, given the United States' presumed overwhelming conventional military edge. In fact, the ability of the US to fight and win 'major theater wars' slipped away while Washington was harvesting the peace dividend, fighting the 'war on terrorism' and engaging in prolonged counter-insurgency campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. Moreover, when the United States awakened to the problem of major-power rivalry in 2014–16, it discovered how much progress Russia and China had made in adapting their military strategies and capabilities to achieving a conventional *fait accompli* in a regional war and to protecting that gain with escalatory threats and actions in the all-domain context.

The situation has grown genuinely perilous. Reporting in late 2018, the bipartisan National Defense Strategy Commission offered this stark assessment:

Previous congressionally mandated reports ... warned that this crisis was coming. The crisis has now arrived ... a crisis of American power. Should war occur, America will face harder fights and greater losses than at any time in decades ... Put bluntly, the US military could lose the next state-vs.-state war it fights ... Russia and China are leveraging existing and emerging technologies to present US forces with new military problems ... Detailed, rigorous operational concepts for solving these problems and defending US interests are badly needed, but do not appear to exist.²⁰

This implies that the presumptively 'narrow' range of contingencies facing the US military has not in fact narrowed. The circumstances in which the United States can now credibly threaten decisive non-nuclear military action against an aggressor have diminished relative to a decade ago, and significantly so. Amplifying the problem is the continued non-compliance of numerous states with their chemical and biological arms-control obligations. The upshot is that NFU adoption would not have a positive or benign impact on deterrence. Rather, it would generate new dangers and new risks.

On the impact of NFU adoption on the assurance of allies, the positive case is that NFU assures allies that the United States remains committed to reducing nuclear dangers and to restraining its own nuclear policies and posture. But for many allies, this argument misses the point. Yes, they seek assurance that a cavalier and sometimes reckless president will not generate new nuclear dangers for them. But for a significant number of allies, the deeper assurance they seek is that the United States will be prepared to use all means available when their vital interests are at risk. They want to be convinced that a neighbour who might contemplate putting those interests at risk understands that there would be a terrible price to be paid. They also want to rest easy that the United States understands this requirement and is proceeding, in partnership with them, to strengthen the means of their common defence.²¹

For these anxious allies, NFU is troublesome in every way. It signals clearly that the US will not be prepared to use all means available to it when their vital interests are at risk, declining to do so unless the enemy is foolish enough to cross the nuclear red line. NFU thus sends a message of restraint to dangerous neighbours, encouraging conventional provocations and risk-taking. It signals that the United States doesn't understand the unique value for their defence of the US threat of the first use of its nuclear weapons. The preference of some Americans to deter by non-nuclear means reinforces their anxiety that they will be left to die in large numbers while the US masses, dispatches and assembles its conventional forces rather than issuing threats of nuclear first use. For some allied experts, the US flirtation with NFU is one more sign that the United States no longer has the will to do what is necessary for their security, which could portend significant shifts in the political allegiance of US allies.

The impact of NFU on the assurance of allies ought to be especially salient for the 116th Congress. That session began with abundant indications of bipartisan efforts to reassure allies at a time of unhelpful presidential statements about the value to the United States of its alliances. Perhaps the best example was the ‘reassurance tour’ to the February 2019 Munich Security Conference by a bipartisan congressional delegation. In the words of one of its members, ‘We can go a long way to satisfying our allies that support for the relationship is not only strong but it is bipartisan, even if it is not always reflected in the Oval Office.’²² Adoption of NFU would thwart this effort by signalling that Congress puts a unilateral assessment of the requirements of stability and reactions to presidential unpredictability above the near-term requirements of those whom the United States has pledged to defend. Congress cannot have it both ways.

The positive case for NFU adoption with respect to non-proliferation and disarmament is widely asserted by NFU advocates. Smith and Warren, for example, argue that NFU adoption would ‘help us maintain our moral and diplomatic leadership’.²³ But precisely how this would be so, and how such leadership would result in improved non-proliferation and disarmament performance by the international community, is far from clear.

My own experience points me to the following conclusion: while NFU would be welcomed by the many advocates of more action on disarmament by the nuclear-armed states, its actual impact on non-proliferation and disarmament would be at best modest and short-lived. This assessment follows the experience of the Obama administration, which took numerous steps to reduce the number and role of US nuclear weapons, many of which had been recommended to it by NGO advocates. These helped to contribute to a successful Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) review conference in 2010 (assuming the measure of success is the agreement of a final statement). But the actual practical result in the disarmament community was the negotiation of a workaround to the NPT – namely, the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons – and the creation of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, which aims to pressure and shame the democracies in reaction to their supposed bad faith in negotiating the elimination of nuclear weapons.

In my view, leadership of the global nuclear order cannot be achieved with palliatives like NFU. Leadership requires a proper blend of idealism and pragmatism. There is too much of the former and too little of the latter in the claim that NFU adoption by the United States would make a positive impact on non-proliferation and disarmament.

Finally, regarding the impact NFU adoption would have on the broader future of US nuclear policy, we should be wary. We have already seen an erosion of the bipartisanship on nuclear policy in the US Congress that was one of the legacies of the Obama administration. NFU adoption would accelerate that erosion. Other special nuclear projects would likely come to the political fore from other parts of the political spectrum (there are plenty waiting on the sidelines). The drift of events is back toward a time that few in the current Congress would remember – the deep division and paralysis of 2009 and 2007. This brings us to a simple question: is the advice of the bipartisan Strategic Posture Commission from a decade ago still relevant and useful?

As noted above, the Strategic Posture Commission concluded that US nuclear policy must have a long lifespan and thus must enjoy a measure of bipartisan support sufficient to ensure continuity as the congressional majority shifts back and forth. Toward that end, they recommended adoption of a balanced approach to strategy encompassing political measures to reduce nuclear threats and military measures to deter nuclear attack so long as nuclear weapons remain. They advised policymakers to eschew bold policy debates and instead seek compromise sufficient to ensure policy continuity.

Today, congressional leaders should again shore up this consensus. To help do so, they should refrain from bold actions that are deeply opposed by one side or the other.

* * *

Halperin argued in 2010 that NFU is ‘a good idea whose time has not come’.²⁴ It still hasn’t come. NFU adoption at this time would undermine deterrence in significant ways at a time when deterrence is already weakening for other

reasons. It would contribute to a further erosion of the assurance of allies and at a time when such assurance is already being tested for other reasons. It would add no meaningful leadership to non-proliferation and disarmament efforts. And it would have a corrosive impact on the residual elements of bipartisanship on nuclear policy in the Congress. At a time of rising nuclear dangers, such results would only magnify those dangers. No-first-use is a step in the wrong direction.

Notes

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- 16 Paul Bernstein, 'Post-Cold War Nuclear Strategy', in Jeffrey A. Larsen and Kerry M. Kartchner (eds), *On Limited Nuclear War in the 21st Century* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014), p. 89.
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