## Proposed Changes

### TL;DR

#### Additional cards relevant to these questions are in the other BK doc from earlier today.

#### PROPOSED CHANGES

**1) I think that we should include Sole Purpose**

**2) For the less-restrictive list: I specifically propose that we split apart NFU and Sole Purpose, and also possibly add NFS to the former. Like so:**

The United States should restrict its nuclear forces by at least:

* Adopting a no-first-use and/or no-first-strike nuclear policy;
* Declaring a sole purpose for its nuclear weapons arsenal;
* Eliminating or substantially reducing one or more legs of its nuclear triad (or whatever we use for this); and/or
* Eliminating all or nearly all of its nuclear weapons.

**3) I think that we need to further vet/stress-test the differences between “conditions of nuclear first-use” vs. “circumstances under which it might consider using nuclear weapons” vs. “first-use nuclear strikes”**

### RE: Proposal #1: Sole Purpose should be included

#### Another example of a proponent of “sole purpose” who also speaks to the difference between this and NFU

Panda & Narang 21

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<https://warontherocks.com/2021/02/sole-purpose-is-not-no-first-use-nuclear-weapons-and-declaratory-policy/>

Nuclear weapons by themselves can say a lot. They may deter aggression, for example, through their simple existence, generating a “threat that leaves something to chance,” as Thomas Schelling famously put it. Sometimes the less said about them the better: This leaves adversaries guessing what may trigger their use. So why do states bother declaring why they have nuclear weapons or when they might use them? In the case of the United States, at least, nuclear weapons do more than deter adversaries — they should also reassure allies about America’s commitment to extending deterrence to them and assure the world that the United States is a responsible steward of nuclear weapons. As such, when U.S. government officials issue statements about the role or employment of the country’s nuclear arsenal — what’s known as nuclear declaratory policy — they are attempting to signal to adversaries, allies, and the rest of the world the role that nuclear weapons play in American security policy, and when they may potentially be employed. Rather than simply relying on an unstated threat that leaves something to chance, the United States broadly outlines when it might consider making such threats, and to what ends, in the first place. Although declaratory policy may sometimes be derided as irrelevant — adversaries care more about what America can do with nuclear weapons than what it says about them — the fact is that allies care a lot about what the United States says about its nuclear weapons, because their very existence may depend on the American pledge to use nuclear weapons in their defense. Given this, it is important to get declaratory policy right.

There is likely to be a lively and contentious debate within and outside of the administration of President Joe Biden on this particular aspect of U.S. nuclear policy in the coming months. Momentum to narrow the declared role of nuclear weapons in American security strategy is high on the agenda. Given significant American conventional capabilities and advantages, there are few, if any, realistic scenarios where the United States would consider using nuclear weapons first in a conflict. Some progressive members of Congress have in fact proposed that this reality become official declaratory policy, and that the United States declare a “no first use” pledge: that it would not be the first to use nuclear weapons in a conflict, no matter what the circumstances, reserving them strictly for retaliating after the United States or its allies had suffered a nuclear attack. Not only has that been met with skepticism from adversaries such as Russia and North Korea, who would doubt the sanctity of any such pledge in a crisis, but it makes certain allies — notably Japan — exceptionally nervous, as they depend on at least the possibility that the United States may use nuclear weapons first to stave off a conventional attack against them.

Biden, both as vice president and as a presidential candidate, proposed an alternative nuclear declaratory formulation known as “sole purpose”: that the sole purpose of U.S. nuclear weapons is to deter nuclear use against it or its allies. Is this the same thing as a no-first-use pledge? Proponents of a no-first-use declaration hope, and allies fear, that it may be.

But a sole purpose declaration need not be exactly or tantamount to a no-first-use pledge. Fundamentally, a no-first-use declaration is an explicit ex ante constraint on the employment of nuclear weapons, whereas sole purpose is statement about why the United States possesses nuclear weapons, without necessarily imposing constraints on their use. As always, however, the devil is in the detail. For instance, there are sole purpose formulations that leave enough room for the United States to use nuclear weapons preemptively or first, in the event of extreme and unforeseen non-nuclear attacks against it or its allies. Because declaratory policy purports to describe what an administration or president — who still retains the sole authority to use those weapons — thinks about the role of nuclear weapons, it can have powerful stabilizing or destabilizing effects in peacetime or crises.

After President Donald Trump’s cavalier rhetoric questioning why the United States “couldn’t use its nukes,” the Biden administration has an opportunity to re-establish sobriety in American declaratory policy. We argue that a new declaratory policy that simply states that the “sole purpose of the U.S. nuclear arsenal is to deter nuclear attacks against the United States and its allies” can meaningfully de-emphasize the role of nuclear weapons in American security strategy — reflecting the reality that they are weapons of extreme last resort — without undermining the robustness of extended deterrence commitments. Instead of adopting a no-first-use policy, which may lack credibility absent broader force structure changes that are not feasible and may not be desirable in the near term, the president should follow his instincts and adopt a sole purpose declaration. Precisely what wording he uses, however, will make all the difference.

Talking about the Role of U.S. Nuclear Weapons

What is the stated role of nuclear weapons in U.S. national security strategy today? For much of the Cold War, the purpose of American nuclear weapons was broad and central to the country’s grand strategy: to deter nuclear and conventional attacks against the United States and its allies in Europe and East Asia. This required that the United States leave open the possibility — and, indeed, generate the risk — that it would use nuclear weapons first if faced with an overwhelming conventional attack. But even by the late Cold War, massive, survivable strategic nuclear arsenals, where any nuclear use could lead to mutual suicide, had already spurred thinking on the practical purpose of the U.S. nuclear arsenal, at least with respect to the Soviet Union. Writing in 1983, Robert McNamara observed, for instance, that when it came to U.S. nuclear weapons, their “sole purpose, at present, is to deter the other side’s first use of its strategic forces.”

At the end of the Cold War, American nuclear forces adapted to new challenges, including a focus on so-called “rogue nations” such as Iraq and North Korea, but retained an expansive view of the types of threats — both nuclear and non-nuclear — that ought to be deterred by nuclear weapons. In the 2010 Nuclear Posture Review, the Obama administration laudably attempted to de-emphasize the role of nuclear weapons in American security strategy as part of a broader effort to reduce the centrality of nuclear weapons in crises and to lessen risks of miscalculation, declaring that the “fundamental role of U.S. nuclear weapons … is to deter nuclear attack on the United States, our allies, and partners.” This language was aspirational and, insofar as declaratory policy was concerned, it narrowed relevant contingencies to little more than deterring enemy nuclear attack — coming close to but stopping short of making this mission the “sole purpose” of U.S. nuclear weapons. And it had a limited effect on actual nuclear employment options.

At the very end of the Obama administration, the notion of further narrowing the declared role of American nuclear weapons was resurrected. In January 2017, Biden gave a wide-ranging speech on nuclear security, a topic he has worked on for decades and is seen as holding relatively progressive views on. In that speech, he declared: “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.” Biden reiterated his interest in such a declaration in Foreign Affairs as a presidential candidate, pledging to “work to put that belief into practice, in consultation with the U.S. military and U.S. allies.” This language was adopted in the Democratic Party’s official 2020 platform.

The Trump administration, however, had different ideas and the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review declared that the role of American nuclear weapons explicitly included the deterrence of “significant non-nuclear strategic attacks,” leaving the definition of what constitutes a “significant” or a “non-nuclear strategic attack” intentionally ambiguous — carving out a role for nuclear weapons more expansive than in the 2010 review. The Biden administration now has an opportunity to revisit various facets of U.S. nuclear policy. In addition to the nuclear modernization program and questions about presidential sole authority, we should now expect serious consideration of a sole purpose declaration.

An Enduring Debate: Words That Matter

Many arms control advocates are attracted to the sole purpose declaration because it is close to a no-first-use declaration, and some have argued the two are effectively the same. Some Democrats, such as Sen. Elizabeth Warren and Rep. Adam Smith, have even introduced legislation proposing the adoption of a no-first-use policy. Advocates of an American no-first-use policy argue that such a declaration would set a model for the world, reducing the role of nuclear weapons in global security and easing pressures on nuclear postures during peacetime, while lowering the risk of inadvertent nuclear use in a crisis.

A no-first-use declaration is unambiguous: A country pledging no first use conveys to its adversaries that it will not under any circumstances use any nuclear weapons before it has suffered a nuclear attack itself. Whether a no-first-use declaration allows for a state to launch nuclear weapons once the other side has launched (launch-under-attack) or is imminently judged to be launching nuclear weapons (preemption) is ambiguous, but an absolute no-first-use policy restricts the role of nuclear weapons to one, and only one, scenario: retaliating against a nuclear attack.

Few countries maintain a no-first-use policy because of the difficulty of making such a pledge credible. China is the only country to maintain such a policy without any explicit reservations or qualifications. It has done so since 1964, and for decades undertook costly restraining measures — such as keeping nuclear warheads de-mated from most of its missile force — to make its pledge about as credible as possible (and yet the United States is still skeptical of its commitment). India, meanwhile, also includes a no-first-use declaration in the public version of its 2003 nuclear doctrine, but carves out a major exception: “in the event of a major attack against India, or Indian forces anywhere, by biological or chemical weapons, India will retain the option of retaliating with nuclear weapons.” This is not and has never been a real no-first-use policy. India has also steadily eroded its no-first-use declaration over conventional attacks and preempting nuclear attack over the past two decades as security dynamics, with Pakistan in particular, have evolved.

The remaining seven nuclear states, including the United States, do not maintain “first use” policies per se, but simply reserve the right to use nuclear weapons first under certain circumstances, which are described with varying degrees of ambiguity in national doctrines and statements. Per the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review issued by the Trump administration, the United States reserves the right to use nuclear weapons “in extreme circumstances to defend the vital interests of the United States, its allies, and partners” (language nearly identical to the 2010 Obama administration review). This is consistent with the long-running U.S. policy of calculated ambiguity: Instead of spelling out exactly what “extreme circumstances” mean in practice, the matter is left to the imagination. The reasoning behind this is ultimately to minimize the possibility of commitment traps while simultaneously maximizing the deterrent potential of U.S. declaratory policy: In a crisis, as an adversary chooses to escalate, U.S. planners hope that they would remain uncertain whether their action might amount to what the United States considers “extreme” and, subsequently, whether the United States might respond with nuclear weapons. In short, the United States explicitly reserves the right to presently use nuclear weapons first.

Detractors of a no-first-use policy in the United States argue that without drastic changes to American nuclear posture or alert levels to preclude at least rapid first use to make such a pledge credible — such as separating warheads from intercontinental ballistic missiles, as China is believed to do, or eliminating them altogether because they can be launched so promptly — the costs significantly outweigh the benefits. The military strongly opposes those changes, however, since they may reduce the overall survivability of U.S. nuclear forces. Furthermore, absent these practical changes to force posture — or even with them, for that matter — U.S. adversaries would never believe a no-first-use pledge because nothing would physically prevent the United States from violating it in a crisis or conflict.

Meanwhile, American allies might find such a declaration too credible. For allies, such as Japan, the fear that the United States may abandon them at the most crucial moment and fail to use nuclear weapons to defend them may drive them to develop their own nuclear weapons, as detractors often note. Allied fears have intensified in recent years in Northeast Asia in particular, where rapid advances in North Korea’s nuclear capabilities have introduced the Cold War specter of “decoupling” to the U.S. alliances with both South Korea and Japan. Furthermore, for Japan if not South Korea, the prospect of U.S. nuclear use to deter large-scale Chinese conventional aggression is a crucial pillar of its security strategy. They have therefore strongly opposed any movement toward an American no-first-use declaration. A no-first-use pledge may similarly cause concern in European capitals that Moscow would have a free hand to use overwhelming conventional force against them. A final argument against a strict no-first-use policy is that it would require the United States or its allies to suffer a nuclear attack — and countless fatalities — before retaliation. The risk of a no-first-use declaration, opponents therefore argue, is that not only would it fail to generate crisis stability against adversaries and incentivize allies to seek their own nuclear weapons, but that it is also immoral — even if U.S. retaliation against any aggressor were assured. Even if there are very few scenarios at present where the United States would ever contemplate using nuclear weapons first, skeptics of no-first-use argue that some scenarios do exist even today, and that others may arise in the future.

In short, U.S. adoption of a no-first-use pledge in the near term would likely be highly controversial.

Sole Purpose Is Not No First Use

The constituencies in allied states that have vociferously objected to a no-first-use U.S. policy view a sole purpose declaration as effectively tantamount to one. It was these precise concerns that kept the Obama administration from ultimately adopting a sole purpose declaration. The administration, at the eleventh hour, deemed that the “conditions” for a sole purpose declaration were not present in 2016. Furthermore, in the present environment in East Asia, the challenge of sustaining extended deterrence is more — not less — difficult than it was then, largely because of the Trump administration’s behavior toward allies. The allies may profess an even stronger allergy to sole purpose today than they did in 2016.

But is sole purpose equivalent to a no-first-use declaration, as so many have argued? Not quite. Even in its most stringent formulation, a sole purpose declaration is not equivalent to a no-first-use pledge — it comes close, but is not the same thing. No first use is a statement about when the United States would (and would not) use nuclear weapons. It is an explicit employment constraint: It commits a state to not use nuclear weapons except in retaliation for nuclear attacks. Sole purpose, in contrast, is as its name implies a statement about why the United States possesses the nuclear arsenal that it does, not how it will use it. It does not, in extremis, impose employment constraints as a no-first-use policy might. Rather, it explicitly de-emphasizes the role of nuclear weapons in overall U.S. national security strategy.

A person can possess a car for what she declares to be the sole purpose of driving to work, but if one day she has to drive to the emergency room, nothing will stop her from using the car for that purpose. A no-first-use pledge, by contrast, explicitly declares ex ante that the car will never be used to drive to the emergency room. Sole purpose stops well short of that.

As such, a meaningful sole purpose declaration can be constructed that is not, in fact, tantamount to a no-first-use declaration — one that simultaneously de-emphasizes the role of nuclear weapons in American security strategy without eroding the robustness of extended deterrence. The search for an alternative formulation to a no-first-use declaration is itself informative — if the administration wanted to declare a no-first-use policy it could simply attempt to do so. We argue that, instead, an appropriately crafted sole purpose declaration could help to realize the president’s stated vision on nuclear weapons without unduly jeopardizing U.S. alliances. Allies, too, once fully consulted, should be ready to avoid a knee-jerk response to policy shifts — especially if U.S. declaratory policy continues to account for their interests.

Whereas a no-first-use declaration is relatively straightforward, sole purpose maintains some of the traditional ambiguity in U.S. nuclear declaratory policy. How it does so depends on the precise formulation. The amount of daylight between these various formulations and “we will not use nuclear weapons first” varies from a sliver to a bay window. Despite this, some formulations do come very close to a no-first-use pledge and might understandably cause concern in allied capitals.

Consider the three following alternative sole purpose declarations:

Sole Purpose 1: The sole purpose of the U.S. nuclear arsenal is to deter — and, if necessary, to retaliate against — a nuclear attack against the United States and its allies.

Sole Purpose 2: The sole purpose of the U.S. nuclear arsenal is to deter nuclear attacks against the United States and its allies.

Sole Purpose 3: The sole purpose of the U.S. nuclear arsenal is to deter significant strategic attacks, including nuclear attacks, against the United States and its allies.

Each of these formulations stipulates what the “sole purpose” of the U.S. nuclear arsenal might be, but the practical consequences of the adoption of each declaration by the United States are very different. The closest to a no-first-use policy would be option 1 — the phrasing largely adopted by Biden before entering office. The addition of the embedded clause — “and, if necessary, retaliating against” — clearly stipulates that nuclear weapons are not envisioned for first use, perhaps not even to preempt imminent nuclear use against the United States or its allies. The first statement may, however, still allow for the possibility of launching-under-attack — a scenario where the United States would release nuclear weapons before any incoming warheads detonated, but upon confirmation with a high degree of confidence that an adversary had initiated a nuclear launch against American or allied soil. (While practicable with China and Russia, short missile flight times to South Korean and Japanese soil from North Korea may render this impractical in Northeast Asia.) But by including a clause about possessing nuclear weapons for the sole purpose of retaliating following nuclear use against the United States or its allies, option 1 turns entirely on litigating what point in the process of an adversary launching nuclear weapons constitutes “use” — a very narrow set of circumstances to begin with.

The second sole purpose statement, by omitting this embedded clause about retaliation however, leaves substantially more room for U.S. allies to be reassured, leaving the “chance” of first use on the table.

Take a realistic example to illustrate the distinction between the first and second statements, relevant especially to U.S. allies in Seoul and Tokyo. Imagine that North Korea has begun to disperse nuclear warheads to ballistic missile operating areas. U.S. and allied intelligence believe North Korean leader Kim Jong Un is in the early stages of a preemptive nuclear attack. This attack may be the result of a miscalculation by North Korea, or it may be a response to an allied attempt to attack or invade. The specifics of why Kim is readying nuclear missiles are unimportant. Under existing U.S. nuclear policy, the fact of North Korean launch preparations may not trigger the use of nuclear weapons, but U.S. allies could reasonably expect that a U.S. president would at the very least contemplate the preemptive use of nuclear weapons to maximize the probability that North Korean missiles are successfully destroyed. The United States could consider employing precision-guided conventional munitions, but the task of finding, fixing, and finishing North Korean missile launchers may be too difficult and risky. An American president consulting with military advisors may be told that the prospects for disarming North Korea are significantly higher if he or she uses nuclear weapons to do so, rather than conventional weapons.

In this scenario, the first statement leaves little wiggle room. Under a strict interpretation, only after the launch of the first North Korean nuclear warhead — or even more strictly, after the first detonation — on allied soil could the United States then contemplate nuclear use. Such a scenario, along with concerns about China’s growing conventional missile arsenal, is largely why Tokyo has strongly opposed sole purpose in the past. The second sole purpose formulation, however, leaves the matter open. If the sole purpose of U.S. nuclear weapons is to deter nuclear attacks, then it follows that the president could threaten nuclear first use in a crisis to deter an adversary from following through on preparations to launch nuclear weapons. Critically, unlike a no-first-use pledge and sole purpose option 1, the second sole purpose formulation does not make any statement about the conditions under which the United States would use nuclear weapons. Instead, it merely describes the purpose of the U.S. nuclear arsenal, leaving a wider scope of employment, including first use, if it were in the service of “deterring nuclear attacks” against the United States or its allies. Instead of constraining use, option 2 explains to allies and adversaries alike that the role of nuclear weapons and nuclear threats is limited to nuclear deterrence, which may include threats of preemption or even broader use options that seek to deter nuclear use. It is these latter possibilities that distinguish the second sole purpose statement from the first.

The third sole purpose formulation, meanwhile, expands the bounds further, allowing a U.S. president to deploy nuclear weapons against “significant strategic attacks,” which may include the use of biological or chemical weapons, or even a major conventional attack. This option is, essentially, status quo U.S. nuclear policy reformulated in the language of sole purpose and, indeed, includes multiple expansive purposes for American nuclear weapons.

No sole purpose declaration — nor a no-first-use declaration — by itself is likely to convince adversaries such as Russia, China, or North Korea that the United States would not or could not use nuclear weapons first in a crisis or conflict. The simple fact is that no matter what the United States says about restricting the role of nuclear weapons, adversaries will remain skeptical that Washington will adhere to any such strictures because nothing physically prevents the United States from violating them. The concerns they have today will thus likely persist irrespective of American declaratory policy absent drastic force structure and procedural changes that are unrealistic in the foreseeable future.

The sole purpose debate primarily concerns U.S. allies, and this is where the precise formulation matters the most. Even if the Biden administration chooses to adopt the narrowest possible sole purpose declaration (option 1) — the one proposed by Biden himself for several years now — there may be just enough of a sliver of daylight between it and a no-first-use declaration to assure allies that even if the envisioned purpose of American nuclear weapons is to retaliate against nuclear use against the United States or its allies in extremis, it does not explicitly commit the United States to not using nuclear weapons first in extreme unforeseen circumstances. This may be too clever by half, however. And it is unlikely to alleviate abandonment concerns in Seoul and Tokyo.

As such, the second formulation may square the circle. By declaring simply that “the sole purpose of U.S. nuclear weapons is to deter nuclear attack on the United States, our allies, and partners,” the United States can meaningfully de-emphasize the role of nuclear weapons in its security strategy without undermining the robustness of its extended deterrence commitments. It is not a no-first-use declaration — and allies would have a harder time believing or arguing that it is — but it declares and states the reality that the United States currently possesses nuclear weapons solely — not primarily or fundamentally, but solely — to broadly deter nuclear attack on itself and its allies. And it leaves just enough ambiguity about how the United States may do so and against what threats to avoid eroding primary or extended deterrence. This formulation does not constrain U.S. nuclear employment options, but it assures the world — adversaries and allies alike — that the United States would only ever use nuclear weapons in the most extreme of circumstances. Advocates of American alliances, extended deterrence, and a more restrained U.S. nuclear posture alike should welcome such a declaration. And now-President Biden should deliver on the vision he sketched out first as vice president, and later as a presidential candidate: The sole purpose for American possession of nuclear weapons is to deter nuclear attack against the United States and its allies.

#### Another solvency advocate, and there are many others

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/05/12/biden-nuclear-weapons-review-sole-purpose/>

#### There are many very good Neg DA articles specific to retaining this strategic ambiguity. Here is one quick OK example which directly cites the above Aff article.

Costlow 21

senior analyst at the National Institute for Public Policy and the author most recently of A Net Assessment of “No First Use” and “Sole Purpose” Nuclear Policies

<https://warontherocks.com/2021/08/believe-it-or-not-u-s-nuclear-declaratory-policy-and-calculated-ambiguity/>

Nuclear weapons are typically seen as the state’s bluntest instruments available, seemingly indiscriminate in their power. Yet nuclear declaratory policy is precision-crafted with each word carefully chosen for its effects on opponents and allies alike. Though he governed in the pre-nuclear age, former U.K. Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary Lord Balfour, to whom these words above are credited, understood the power and complexity of policy. But senior government officials cannot simply craft national policy with “fine distinctions” and let it be. They should express it in both words and deeds so that adversaries and allies will not only receive the message, but understand it and hopefully find it credible.

Words in the age of nuclear weapons have taken on even greater importance as the consequences for misperceptions can change — perhaps even end — civilization. Paradoxically though, clarity is not always preferable. U.S. nuclear strategists have long recognized there is a place for ambiguity in declaratory policy — stating one’s intentions and “red lines” clearly enough to deter attacks, but not so explicitly as to restrict freedom of action or encourage adversary aggression just short of the “red lines.” The current U.S. policy of “calculated ambiguity” states that America will only consider nuclear employment under “extreme circumstances” when its “vital interests,” or those of its allies and partners, are threatened. This leaves it to America’s adversaries to wrestle with whether the United States would consider their actions “extreme” or threatening “vital interests.” Most of the long-running debate on U.S. nuclear declaratory policy centers on the question of the value of this purposeful ambiguity, and in what circumstances it should apply, for deterring attack and assuring allies and partners.

The Obama administration twice reportedly considered adopting a new, more restrictive, nuclear declaratory policy. However, it twice rejected the move as unwise because the security environment had not improved enough and because allies such as Japan, South Korea, the United Kingdom, France, and Germany fiercely objected. More recently, then-candidate for president, Joe Biden, wrote that he wants to revisit this issue at least once more, likely in a forthcoming Nuclear Posture Review. Given the potential consequences of a changed U.S. nuclear declaratory policy — whether it is shifting adversaries’ threat perceptions, alliance dynamics, or domestic weapons procurement — it is well worth exploring whether change is desirable.

America’s current policy of “calculated ambiguity” is worth keeping because it contributes to deterring a growing range of strategic non-nuclear threats (chemical, biological, and conventional), provides U.S. leadership freedom of action in a crisis or conflict, and assures allies and partners. However, influential politicians such as House Armed Services Committee Chairman Adam Smith and Sen. Elizabeth Warren, plus a host of non-government analysts, are proposing changes to U.S. nuclear declaratory policy now because the Biden administration is in the early stages of formulating U.S. nuclear policy. As nuclear modernization programs advance through Congress, the likelihood of restricting or outright eliminating them falls. They hope that if the Biden administration adopts new declaratory policy, that may provide enough impetus to achieve their visions of a reduced U.S. nuclear arsenal. These alternative policies — including nuclear “no first use,” “sole purpose,” and an “existential threat policy” — miss the mark because they seek to restrict U.S. deterrence options through declarations that opponents are unlikely to believe, and allies and partners believe are to their detriment. Instead, U.S. officials should articulate a strong defense of the current nuclear declaratory policy of calculated ambiguity because its flexibility is its strength, and a true necessity in a dynamic security environment.

Calculated Ambiguity: The Deterrent Benefits

The current U.S. policy of calculated ambiguity seeks to signal U.S. intent clearly enough to highlight “red lines,” or situations in which the United States may consider employing nuclear weapons. Yet, it also refrains from telegraphing the type and size of an attack an opponent should expect, should it choose not to be deterred. In essence, it leaves open the possibility of a U.S. nuclear first employment to defend its vital interests, or those of its allies and partners in extreme circumstances. Without using the words “calculated ambiguity,” official U.S. policy states:

The United States would only consider the employment of nuclear weapons in extreme circumstances to defend the vital interests of the United States, its allies, and partners. Extreme circumstances could include significant non-nuclear strategic attacks. Significant non-nuclear strategic attacks include, but are not limited to, attacks on the U.S., allied, or partner civilian population or infrastructure, and attacks on U.S. or allied nuclear forces, their command and control, or warning and attack assessment capabilities.

Except for the sentence identifying what could constitute a strategic non-nuclear attack, the Trump administration’s declaratory formula is essentially a word-for-word copy of the Obama administration’s policy.

Regrettably, U.S. defense officials have rarely discussed publicly the deterrence and assurance benefits of the U.S. policy of calculated ambiguity. When they have, they mostly frame their thoughts by discussing why they would disagree with a possible shift to an alternative policy like nuclear no first use. However, as I discuss in my latest report, there are a number of benefits to retaining a policy of calculated ambiguity.

First, the policy of calculated ambiguity provides a potentially vital deterrent threat before the outbreak of major conflict. By keeping the option open of employing nuclear weapons first, U.S. leaders can make a last-ditch deterrent threat to prevent a major crisis from escalating or a conflict from growing more costly. There is, of course, no guarantee such a threat would work. But alternative policies like sole purpose and nuclear no first use essentially eliminate the possibility of U.S. officials even being able to try in certain dire circumstances. When a crisis or conflict has reached a level of severity where leaders are considering nuclear employment, that is not the time they should be denied what could be their least bad option, threatening nuclear first use to stave off an even worse outcome.

U.S. nuclear declaratory policy requires an adversary to gamble twice. First, they gamble that the United States will not respond to an attack with its nuclear forces, and second, that the attack will achieve its goals in the face of a U.S. conventional response. These gambles, enabled by a policy of calculated ambiguity, can aid deterrence by increasing an adversary’s uncertainty regarding the type and consequences of a U.S. response.

Second, the policy of calculated ambiguity provides U.S. officials with a range of options for crises and conflict that, by their nature, will require U.S. flexibility. They are neither forced to threaten or carry out nuclear first use, nor are they constrained to only consider conventional responses. U.S. officials can keep the threat of nuclear first use implicit or make it more explicit depending on what type of signal they want to send to an adversary. Should they wish to signal their resolve or deter particular behavior, they can clarify U.S. nuclear policy either privately or publicly as the United States did during the Gulf War in 1991 to some effect. Despite the concerns of some like nuclear scholar Scott Sagan, leaving open the possibility of nuclear first use does not commit a U.S. president to employ nuclear weapons first in order to reinforce some vague notion that America keeps its word. When America’s word on the subject of nuclear employment is intentionally vague and non-committal, there is little reason to fear an overriding impulse to unnecessarily employ nuclear weapons. Again, keeping U.S. options open, even extreme ones, during a crisis or conflict allows greater freedom of action to pursue de-escalatory outcomes in addition to providing more chances for nuclear deterrence to “work.”

Third, the current policy of calculated ambiguity allows U.S. officials to consider all options, including nuclear first use, for deterrence in the face of a growing set of non-nuclear threats. The policies of sole purpose or nuclear no-first-use, on the other hand, would (depending on how they are formulated) exclude the possibility of the United States even issuing a nuclear first-use-deterrent threat. Nor would they allow a U.S. nuclear response to strategic non-nuclear attacks on itself, or its allies and partners. U.S. allies and partners, given their geographic location near or neighboring Russia, China, and North Korea, are at the highest risk of suffering large scale chemical or biological attacks — threats that certainly do not appear to be declining.

The United States itself will likely want to at least keep open the option of threatening or employing nuclear weapons first, not only to defend allies and partners, but also to deter or respond to attacks on critical U.S. targets. For example, a Russian conventional cruise missile attack on the U.S. homeland could destroy U.S. nuclear submarines in port (with potentially hundreds of nuclear warheads onboard), disable power plants, or damage terrestrial radars and sensors. Likewise, non-nuclear anti-satellite capabilities Russia and China are developing could target U.S. nuclear command, control, and communications.

Put simply, a U.S. nuclear no-first-use or sole purpose policy, depending on how it is crafted, will not allow the United States to make explicit nuclear threats to deter some of the potentially most-damaging non-nuclear attacks, much less conduct a nuclear response. In effect, these policies could essentially signal, whether intentionally or not, that U.S. policy values withholding even the deterrent threat of nuclear employment over sustaining massive casualties from strategic non-nuclear attack, perhaps up to the point of defeat. Critics may respond that withholding the threat of nuclear employment makes the U.S. commitment to defeating the adversary with conventional means that much more credible. However, like a boxer who ties one of his hands behind his back, it may demonstrate he is committed to only using his other hand, but he will inevitably take a greater beating in the end.

Yes, the United States may eventually win such a contest with its superior conventional forces, but this result is not guaranteed and may come at too high a cost. Given this possibility, why eliminate a valuable deterrent threat, especially when the threat of a U.S. nuclear response can help tip the balance towards preventing a conflict in the first place?

Why Change Policies Now?

Those who wish to make cuts to the U.S. nuclear arsenal see President Biden’s Interim National Security Guidance’s pledge to “take steps to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in our national security strategy” as a golden opportunity to advance their preferred policies. As the Obama administration demonstrated, however, a reduction in the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. national security strategy does not, in fact, require a change in declaratory policy. Rather, the 2010 Nuclear Posture Review cited an improved security environment, increasingly capable conventional weapons, and more regional missile defenses as factors that allowed a reduction in reliance on nuclear weapons, without a significant change to declaratory policy.

Twice the Obama administration reportedly considered replacing current U.S. policy with a sole purpose or nuclear no-first-use policy. Though we do not know the exact formulation officials were considering, it likely would have stated that the sole purpose of the U.S. nuclear arsenal is to deter, and if necessary respond to, nuclear attacks on itself, its allies, or its partners. Then-candidate for president Joe Biden wrote that he supported such a change, but the Obama administration ultimately decided against it, based on a worsening security environment and the objections of allies. Multiple senior Obama administration defense officials remain opposed to adopting such a policy.

Yet there is pressure from the progressive wing of the Democratic Party to pursue bold initiatives that they hope will lead to U.S. nuclear reductions. Thus, Sen. Warren and Rep. Smith introduced a one-sentence bill that would make it the policy of the United States “to not use nuclear weapons first.” Others care less about what the policy is called, whether no-first-use or sole purpose, as long as it results in U.S. nuclear weapons reductions and further restrictions on their employment.

The Biden administration may consider replacing the current policy of calculated ambiguity with one of three different types of alternative policies: sole purpose, no first use, or existential threat.

Sole Purpose: Avoiding the Subject

Advocates of sole purpose or nuclear no-first-use policies acknowledge that, depending on how they are written, they can effectively mean the same thing. For example, Ankit Panda and Vipin Narang acknowledge that Biden’s formulation: “the sole purpose of the U.S. nuclear arsenal should be deterring – and, if necessary, retaliating against – nuclear attack” is substantively the same as a nuclear no-first-use policy. Indeed, other analysts believe they are “equivalent” policies, or different ways of saying the same thing. The Evans-Kawaguchi report even goes so far as to acknowledge that nuclear no-first-use pledges, both past and current, are widely doubted as credible, so states should adopt “a different formulation of essentially the same idea,” that is sole purpose, to avoid being associated with a policy that others have not found credible.

Panda and Narang, on the other hand, prefer a different, more streamlined sole purpose formulation: “The sole purpose of the U.S. nuclear arsenal is to deter nuclear attacks against the United States and its allies.” This phrasing is meant to reassure allies by keeping silent on the issue of “use” (whether first or in response), but they claim there is still room for first use implied within the policy, but it is unclear under what circumstances.

Yet, the United States keeps the option open of employing nuclear weapons first to deter massive conventional, chemical, or biological attacks as well as a number of other strategic non-nuclear attacks. It is precisely these sorts of attacks that allies and partners are greatly worried about, and which U.S. officials could likely not even threaten nuclear employment against for deterrence purposes under their preferred policy. A policy that essentially forbids even threatening nuclear employment in defense of an ally unless it is under imminent threat of attack by nuclear weapons is hardly reassuring. When allies inquire about U.S. nuclear policy, they are not asking U.S. officials to wax eloquent on the purpose of the U.S. nuclear arsenal, they are asking how it would apply in real world situations, (i.e., “use”), exactly the kind of conversation the sole purpose policy is meant to avoid.

Panda and Narang also fail to establish exactly why the United States should switch its nuclear declaratory policy from calculated ambiguity to their version of sole purpose. They rightly acknowledge that adversaries will not believe U.S. statements in either case so there is no benefit there, and given allied pushback on the Obama administration’s attempts to adopt a sole purpose policy there appears to be little benefit in terms of alliances. In fact, they devote only about a sentence-worth of words to the purported benefits of their new policy, saying that it could “meaningfully de-emphasize the role of nuclear weapons in American security strategy” and that it “assures the world — adversaries and allies alike — that the United States would only ever use nuclear weapons in the most extreme of circumstances.” However, current U.S. nuclear declaratory policy already explicitly identifies “extreme circumstances” as the only time the United States would consider employing nuclear weapons. A sole purpose policy’s lack of clear benefits, combined with the likely adverse allied reactions and the growth of strategic non-nuclear threats, makes it both unnecessary and unwise.

No First Use: A More Radical Alternative

While a sole purpose policy actively avoids discussing the possible employment of nuclear weapons, a no-first-use policy opts to emphasize the subject. Ultimately, the end goal is the same: restricting the scenarios in which the United States could threaten to employ, or actually employ, nuclear weapons. But, according to most proponents, like Daryl Kimball, they believe the no-first-use policy’s explicit restrictions are part of its value as a signal to potential adversaries that they need not fear a U.S. preemptive nuclear strike, thus theoretically reducing the possibility of nuclear use in a conflict.

Advocates of nuclear no-first-use (and sole purpose) policies generally articulate six inter-related benefits that the United States might gain from adopting these policies: reduced risk of adversary nuclear first use due to fear of U.S. preemption; a general reduction in bilateral and multilateral tensions; advances in nuclear nonproliferation and perceived commitment to disarmament; foreclosure of an unthinkable and escalatory option; encouragement to keep a conflict at the conventional level; and the creation of the conditions necessary for nuclear weapon reductions whether unilaterally or with others.

To test whether the United States is likely to reap these benefits if it adopted one of these policies, I examined four cases where states adopted a no-first-use policy to see if they benefited in the expected ways: the Soviet nuclear no-first-use policy (1982–1993), the Chinese nuclear no-first-use policy (1964–present), the Indian nuclear no-first-use policy (2003–present), and the Soviet chemical weapon no-first-use policy (1928–present). Remarkably, in each of the cases, the six benefits listed above were almost entirely absent. Simply put, no-first-use policies have a perfect record of failure.

Why? The greatest obstacle to a nuclear no-first-use policy producing the purported benefits for crisis stability or arms race stability is that the other side should believe it, even under the most stressful circumstances. But the examples above indicate that the primary target audience of a state’s no-first-use policy has never believed it fully, whether it was the Soviet Union during the Cold War, or China and India today.

What is even more remarkable is that China and India have, at least until recently, what should be the quintessential nuclear arsenals to project a credible nuclear no-first-use policy. Specifically, they have much smaller nuclear arsenal sizes than Russia and the United States, the weapons are generally de-alerted, and it’s possible that the warheads are separated from the missiles themselves in some systems. If it is possible to create a believable no-first-use policy, then China and India are the ideal test cases. And yet, there is reportedly widespread disbelief among officials and analysts in both countries about each side’s commitment to their respective nuclear no-first-use policies. Recent U.S. defense officials have also claimed they do not believe China’s nuclear no-first-use policy, and the Department of Defense more generally has had long-standing doubts, even before China began its massive current buildup of nuclear weapons.

In short, if a nuclear no-first-use policy does not provide the purported benefits in the best-case scenario, it is even less likely to produce those benefits for the United States.

Existential Threat Policy: The (Somewhat) New Kid on the Block

There exists yet a third camp in the debate over U.S. nuclear declaratory policy that recognizes the potential need to threaten or employ nuclear weapons first to deter or respond to strategic non-nuclear threats, while also signaling a further restriction in the circumstances in which the United States might consider employing nuclear weapons. The “existential threat policy” has the backing of some respected analysts and is worth examining as an alternative to the current policy of calculated ambiguity.

According to George Perkovich and Pranay Vaddi, an existential threat policy would make it U.S. policy to only consider employing nuclear weapons, “when no viable alternative exists to stop an existential attack against the United States, its allies, or partners.” Or, in the words of James Acton:

because of the possibility of escalation, it [the United States] considers that any use of nuclear weapons against itself, its allies, or its partners would constitute an existential threat. But, because existential threats are not limited to nuclear use, this declaratory policy would allow the United States to employ nuclear weapons to defend allies from the most extreme nonnuclear threats.

As its proponents acknowledge, a great deal hangs on the word “existential” and at what point a threat transitions from “severe” to “existential.” Therein, however, lies the weakness of the existential threat policy. For smaller U.S. allies and partners neighboring revisionist powers like China and Russia, even relatively small conventional incursions can be considered “existential threats.” Or, in the example of Seoul, South Korea, massive conventional attacks on the city combined perhaps with chemical and biological weapons use would undoubtedly permanently affect the sovereign political entity of South Korea. But with a potentially sustained and very bloody U.S. response to defend its ally, South Korea could remain a functioning political unit on the world stage. But in those moments when Seoul is under siege and millions of people are fleeing, South Korean and U.S. leaders cannot be absolutely certain that North Korea has war aims that represent an existential threat. Put simply, the United States and its allies may not agree on the severity of an emerging threat during a crisis or conflict and whether it warrants a threat of nuclear first use. But the growing speed and destructiveness of strategic non-nuclear weapons makes an existential threat policy untenable because by the time the United States and an ally agree that a threat has become existential, it may be too late for the threat of U.S. nuclear employment to have the potential deterrent effect.

In addition, an existential threat policy is arguably more vague, detrimentally so, than the current policy of considering nuclear employment only under “extreme circumstances.” Perkovich and Vaddi do not deny that raising the threshold at which the United States would consider employing nuclear weapons may tempt Russia and China to engage in aggression right up to, but not crossing, the “existential threat” line. Their proposed solution is to essentially increase U.S. conventional forces to strengthen deterrence below the nuclear threshold, which the United States is already doing under its current declaratory policy. Thus, it is unclear what net security benefit the United States would gain from adopting an existential threat policy given likely allied reactions and potential adversary responses.

What to Do?

As the Biden administration considers whether the United States should retain the longstanding policy of calculated ambiguity or replace it with some form of sole purpose, no-first-use, or existential threat policies, it should keep in mind that the Obama administration faced much the same situation. It also entered office seeking to reduce the role of nuclear weapons, but found that threats around the world had not diminished in size or severity enough to justify a precedent-breaking change in U.S. nuclear policy. Allies also expressed their opposition to the policy. While it will certainly anger more progressive members of his caucus, though likely not enough to change any votes, Biden should consider following the Obama playbook in two respects.

First, strengthened homeland and regional missile defenses may help reduce U.S. reliance on nuclear weapons by providing supplemental deterrence by denial, lessening the burden on nuclear weapons and their deterrence by threat of punishment. Improved missile defenses can also reduce the risk of inadvertent nuclear escalation by providing U.S. leaders the option of absorbing what appears to be an incoming attack before responding. Second, additional options for long-range precision strike conventional weapons can improve deterrence of regional threats, perhaps lessening the chances of an ally finding itself on the brink of defeat and thus requiring U.S. nuclear threats. These developments may offer an avenue for the Biden administration to achieve its goal of reducing U.S. reliance on nuclear weapons without a change in declaratory policy.

But, potential adversaries also have a vote in just how much nuclear and strategic non-nuclear capabilities grow in salience. The security environment in which the United States and its allies and partners operate is certainly no better, and in some respects much worse, than in 2010 and 2016 when the Obama administration considered and rejected changing nuclear declaratory policy. As Toby Dalton has noted, even after thorough consultations with allies, well-intentioned U.S. nuclear signals can cause adverse allied reactions that make the original action a net loss.

Though the impulse for the Biden administration to differentiate itself from its predecessors will be strong, U.S. nuclear policy should not be the focus for radical breaks from the past. The Obama administration, to its credit, did not confuse its long-term hopes for nuclear disarmament with the short-term reality of rising nuclear and strategic non-nuclear threats, and the subsequent need to modernize the U.S. nuclear arsenal. The Trump administration agreed with the threat characterizations, continued the Obama nuclear modernization program, and did not change U.S. nuclear declaratory policy — it only sought to prudently clarify the policy.

Calculated ambiguity is best positioned among all the other alternative policies to provide U.S. and allied leaders the freedom of action necessary to respond to a growing range of threats. This freedom of action reinforces deterrence against America’s adversaries. Nuclear declaratory policy is far too consequential to become a vehicle for merely signaling U.S. good intentions on nonproliferation and disarmament — a job far more appropriate for U.S. arms control proposals and dialogue. Instead, U.S. officials should clearly articulate why U.S. nuclear declaratory policy is important not only for its deterrence and assurance effects, but also for the range of policy options it can provide that have the best chance of achieving U.S. political and military goals. The tension between when to clarify and when to be ambiguous about U.S. intentions will remain, but preemptively removing the ability to make particular deterrent threats continues to be unwise. The policy of calculated ambiguity may remove the “fine distinctions” that Lord Balfour treasured, but for the purposes of deterring nuclear and non-nuclear threats, it is a “high policy” worth keeping.

#### --And, if you want more detail on the arguments, here is a much longer-form version of this position: an >100 page report by the same author, quoting from numerous Aff solvency advocates and comprehensively refuting the argument that we should adopt each “sole purpose” and an “NFU”

<https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/OP-7-for-web-final.pdf>

### --FYI: Sole Purpose would ALLOW the NFU Aff

#### “Sole purpose” would include the NFU Aff but also include others

https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-nuclear-first-use-and-presidential-authority/

Beginning in the early days of the Cold War, the United States has relied on the threat to use nuclear weapons first as a way to deter both nuclear and non-nuclear attacks. Yet, the world has changed significantly since then. In the contemporary era, the dangers and risks of a first-strike policy outweigh the hoped-for deterrence benefits. The United States should join China and India in adopting a declared no-first-use policy and should encourage the other nuclear-armed states to do likewise. A no-first-use policy means that the United States would pledge to use nuclear weapons only in retaliation for a nuclear attack. The sole purpose of U.S. nuclear weapons would then be to deter — and, if necessary, respond to — the use of nuclear weapons against the United States and its allies and partners. To be credible, this declaratory pledge would need to be reflected in a retaliatory-strike-only nuclear force posture.

https://atthebrink.org/no-first-use-what-are-nuclear-weapons-for/

What IS No First Use?

Simply put, a country that declares a policy of No First Use (NFU) is saying that it will not use a nuclear weapon unless it is attacked by nuclear weapons. Some countries expand that definition to include an attack by chemical or biological weapons. Sometimes the phrase “sole purpose” is used to mean essentially the same thing: that the sole purpose of nuclear weapons is to deter a nuclear attack.

### --BUT: “no first use” would NOT allow the other Sole Purpose Affs

<https://psr.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Fact-Sheet-on-No-First-Use-of-Nuclear-Weapons.pdf>

No first use (NFU) refers to a pledge or a policy by a nuclear power not to use nuclear weapons in a conflict unless attacked first with nuclear weapons by an adversary.

### RE: Proposal #2: Modifying first-use (e.g. “limit/restrict”) WOULD allow the “no first-strike” Aff. “NO first-use” probably would NOT.

#### Limiting “first use” would include the NFS Aff, whereas a policy of “no first-use” would not.

Imagine that the United States detected an imminent conventional attack on South Korea. The United States might decide to launch a first strike on North Korea’s nuclear facilities to prevent it from using its nuclear weapons against South Korea. (A “first strike” usually refers to a nuclear strike like this one, in which one state launches a nuclear attack designed to eliminate the opponent’s nuclear arsenal. “First use” describes the use of nuclear weapons before the opponent has done so and could entail the use of smaller tactical nuclear weapons on the battlefield. In these terms, all first strikes constitute a first use of nuclear weapons, but not all cases of first use would be considered a first strike.) This would protect both South Korea and American troops on the peninsula from a nuclear attack. North Korea does not yet have a missile capable of delivering a nuclear weapon to the continental United States, so the immediate risk to the American homeland would be minimal in the event that the first strike failed to eliminate all of North Korea’s nuclear weapons.

### --FYI: “First-use nuclear strikes”=any nuking of an enemy who hasn’t nuked

#### Defining “first-use nuclear strikes”

https://www.commondreams.org/news/2021/08/04/us-peace-groups-call-biden-and-congress-adopt-no-first-use-nuclear-weapons-policy

The "No First Use: Decrease the Danger of Nuclear War" coalition defined a first-use nuclear strike as "an attack using nuclear weapons against an enemy that did not first launch a nuclear strike against the United States, its territories, or its allies." The coalition is pressuring Biden to declare--and Congress to legislate--that the U.S. "will neither initiate nor threaten to initiate the first use of nuclear weapons."

### RE: Proposal #3

### --another contentual example of “circumstances”

#### Another contextual use of “restricting the circumstances under which”:

<https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2013_10/Trident-Tribulations-Understanding-the-UKs-Trident-Alternatives-Review>

Such a move would be in keeping with the UK’s self-identification as the most forward leaning of the nuclear-weapon states on nuclear disarmament. London has taken a number of important steps to reduce the size of its nuclear arsenal and increase transparency of its production of fissile materials and warhead numbers. It has modified its declaratory policy by further restricting the circumstances under which it might consider using nuclear weapons. It has ended nuclear testing, ratified the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, ended production of fissile materials for use in nuclear weapons, and declared its full commitment to a nuclear-weapon-free world and supported a number of initiatives toward that end.

### \*\*\*Re: “use/employment/etc.”

### Defn of “Nuclear Use”—AT: “threatening people at the UN is use!”

#### Defining “nuclear use”

<https://press.armywarcollege.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1003&context=monographs>

DEFINING NUCLEAR USE

We begin by defining a key term: nuclear use. We define nuclear use as the detonation of a nuclear weapon against an enemy target. Some Department of Defense officials declare: “Nuclear weapons are used every day,” to emphasize that nuclear weapons play an important and enduring role in maintaining strategic deterrence and keeping the peace.2 Similarly, scholars have explored the deterrent, coercive, and symbolic effects of nuclear weapons.3 We do not mean nuclear use in this sense. We also exclude from our definition nuclear tests or nuclear demonstration shots that could be used for political effect, but that do not result in death or destruction. Rather, for the purposes of this chapter, nuclear use is defined as a nuclear attack resulting in physical damage of enemy targets.