

Declare no first use of nuclear weapons

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This is the sixth in a “Letter to President Biden” series aimed at conveying policy recommendations in an open letter from politicians, scholars and experts to the new U.S. president following his Jan. 20 inauguration. — ED.

By Ramesh Thakur

Dear Mr. President,

In 2016, during your time as vice president, President Barack Obama briefly considered but did not adopt a policy of No First Use (NFU) of nuclear weapons. You should revisit that decision. Several developments over the five years since then justify a shift to an NFU posture for the United States as a matter of some urgency.

The chaos and near-anarchy around and in the Capitol last month threw into stark relief the risks that are inherent in the U.S. president possessing unchecked authority to order nuclear strikes. The rationale for such sole authority is the operational requirements of a posture that keeps over 1,000 warheads on high alert, ready to launch on command. NFU would encourage a shift to less risky postures such as “de-alerting” and remove the need for sole launch authority.

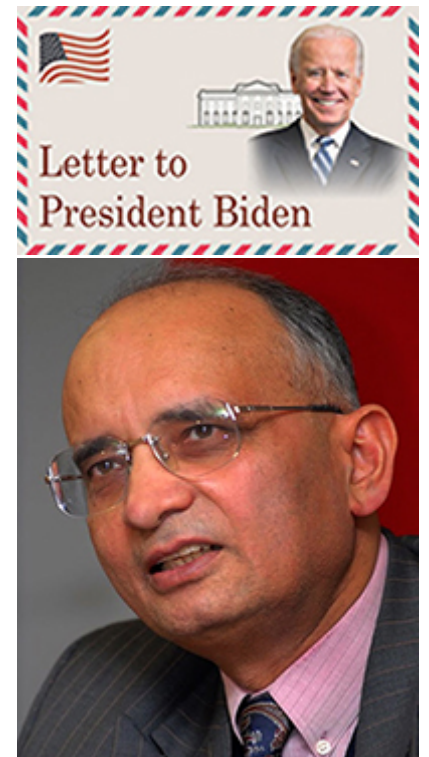
For four years, President Donald Trump was as much a disruptor-in-chief of the global nuclear order as of the normative architecture of world order in general. Allies as well as adversaries became fearful of potential risky nuclear behavior by the U.S. They began to hedge against that possibility by modernizing and expanding their own nuclear arsenals, or contemplating getting their own bomb to reduce reliance on the U.S. nuclear umbrella.

Trump unilaterally abandoned the multilateral deal with Iran, a signature diplomatic triumph of Obama's that had successfully shrink-wrapped Iran's suspected nuclear-weapon program. He killed the INF agreement that had underwritten strategic stability in Europe for thirty years, and pulled out of the Open Skies Treaty that had reduced risks and built NATO-Russia confidence against surprise attack.

NFU would signal the U.S. is back as a responsible custodian of world order and as such would be welcomed around the world. Meanwhile, increasingly exasperated at the nuclear powers' willful blindness to rising nuclear threats and giving up on hopes of progress towards practical nuclear disarmament by them, the international community adopted a nuclear Ban Treaty at the United Nations in 2017.

This entered into force three weeks ago and its shadow will be visible during the postponed 50th anniversary NPT Review Conference later this year. It has already created an embarrassing dilemma for U.S. allies that advocate for responsible disarmament from within the alliance. An NFU policy that assists also in de-alerting nuclear weapons and facilitates the removal of tactical U.S. weapons from Europe will greatly ease their embarrassment.

Mr. President, the risks of nuclear war are real and growing. Everyone who lives on the Korean Peninsula is well aware of this. In 2019 India and Pakistan became the first nuclear-armed states to engage in aerial dogfights and launch missiles against each other. Last year China and India were caught in the deadliest military clashes in over half a century.



The India-Pakistan clashes always produce cries of a nuclear apocalypse but there was no such heated rhetoric from the Chinese or Indian leadership. One likely reason for their reciprocal reticence is that both countries — and the only two of the nine nuclear-armed states — subscribe to NFU. This is backed by nuclear force postures, doctrines and deployments that give credence to the declaratory policy. Therefore both sides felt confident enough that NFU acted as an effective crisis stabilizer.

Mr. President, what gives teeth and credibility to U.S. nuclear deterrence for assuring national security, and to the U.S. nuclear umbrella for guaranteeing the security of allies, is not America's first strike but its invulnerable second-strike capability to retaliate against any nuclear attack on U.S. territory or personnel, or on U.S. allies. Conversely, the circumstances in which you might be called upon to launch a first strike is simply not conceivable enough to be realistic.

Your powerful and accurate conventional firepower can overwhelm and defeat any non-nuclear adversary anywhere in the world. Using nuclear weapons would neither be necessary nor morally acceptable to American or global public opinion: the political and diplomatic price would vastly exceed any extra military advantage compared to conventional weaponry. Against a nuclear-armed adversary, any first use would invite a second-strike retaliation and be tantamount to mutual suicide.

There is little military cost or disadvantage, therefore, to adopting NFU. Unlike typical arms control advances, this does not require painstaking and protracted negotiations but can be done unilaterally. The world has warmly welcomed your decision to extend the New START, the only surviving agreement with Russia, for another five years. The world would similarly applaud U.S. nuclear leadership if you declared a policy of No First Use and challenged all nuclear-armed states to come together to negotiate a global NFU convention.

The renewed moral authority would also give you the necessary space to lead-sponsor parallel resolutions in the United Nations Security Council and General Assembly, reaffirming that a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought. All these would make the atmosphere for the NPT Review Conference far more propitious for a successful outcome than was the case under your predecessor.

Respectfully,
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