



# No First Use Can Still Help to Reduce US-China Nuclear Risks

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## ABSTRACT

No first use declaratory statements are unlikely to significantly affect US-China nuclear crises. China's nuclear buildup raises serious questions about the meaning and durability of its longstanding declaratory policy, while the United States is unlikely to issue a similar statement. However, no first use can still play an important role in reducing risks between the two countries. First, both countries can take practical planning and posture measures to reduce their reliance on nuclear first use. Second, a bilateral discussion on no first use could lead to a valuable dialogue on the role of nuclear weapons in each country. It may be more consequential to do and discuss no first use than it is to say it.

## KEYWORDS

Nuclear; no first use; China



## INTRODUCTION

China's rapid expansion of its nuclear arsenal, and the US response to it, will shape strategic stability for the remainder of the century. Much of the debate in the United States on "tripolar deterrence" or the "two peer problem" has concentrated on the strategic level, evaluating how the increase in China's arsenal affects the quantitative and qualitative requirements for the US strategic arsenal (Center for Global Security Research Study Group 2023; Fravel, Hiim and Trøan 2023; Glaser, Acton and Fetter 2023; Mount 2023). At the same time, the risks of limited nuclear use in the context of a US-China theater conflict are also in flux.

One way to understand the evolving risks of nuclear escalation in a US-China conflict is through the ongoing debate on no first use. While Beijing has not altered its long-standing policy on no first use, dramatic shifts in its strategic force structure raise questions about whether China is also reconsidering its historical position that nuclear weapons cannot help to manage escalation in a limited conflict. Though the United States remains unlikely to adopt a no first use statement, ongoing debates on nuclear declaratory policy will affect how US leaders understand their options in a crisis.

Though no first use declaratory statements are unlikely to have a significant effect on either country's behavior in a crisis over Taiwan or other flashpoints, no first use could still play two important roles in reducing the risk of nuclear conflict. First, it may be easier and more consequential to do no first use than to say it. Even if they will not issue a declaratory statement on no first use, US leaders can develop an internal policy of no first use—a set of changes to presidential guidance and force posture designed to reduce their reliance on nuclear first use to manage plausible contingencies. By cultivating expectations of nuclear restraint and effective nonnuclear options, officials can ensure that they are never in a position where they have no better option than nuclear first use. Second, though bilateral discussions on no first use are unlikely to lead to a change in US declaratory policy, they could represent a valuable opportunity to discuss the risks of nuclear escalation, better understand each country's doctrine, and identify an agenda for ongoing risk reduction talks.

## CHINA'S NO FIRST USE POLICY

China's no first use policy is as old as its nuclear arsenal. In the statement announcing its first nuclear test, China also declared that it "will never at any time and under any circumstances be the first to use nuclear weapons."<sup>1</sup> Successive generations of leaders have consistently reaffirmed the statement, without revision, since it was first issued in 1964. Moreover, China has maintained its commitment to "unconditional commitment not to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear-weapon States or nuclear-weapon-free zones."<sup>2</sup> It is the most restrictive nuclear declaratory policy of any nuclear-armed nation.<sup>3</sup>

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1 Statement of the Government of the People's Republic of China," October 16, 1964, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, PRC FMA 105-01262-01, 22-26. Obtained by Nicola Leveringhaus. <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/statement-government-peoples-republic-china>

2 UN Security Council, 9300th Meeting, March 31, 2023, S/PV.9300, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4008427?ln=en>

3 For significant qualifications in India's no first use policy, see Joshi (2015, 14), Sanders-Zakre (2017, 28).



China has also structured and postured its nuclear forces in ways that are consistent with a no first use policy. For decades, China's operational nuclear warheads were stored at central sites for each base. To carry out a nuclear strike, regiments would disburse warheads to launch units and mate them to delivery vehicles (Stokes 2010). The practice not only required additional time but also decreased the survivability of China's nuclear deterrent, making it a costly signal of commitment to a no first use policy. Though many of China's mobile missile units continue this practice day-to-day, the United States now believes that a portion of its forces are now kept at a higher state of readiness (US Department of Defense 2023, 106).

Chinese experts and officials commonly argue that no first use is a central principle of their country's nuclear strategy, grounded deeply in strategic culture. According to this perspective, China's no first use policy and its limited nuclear force structure are mutually-supportive. According to former PLA General Pan Zhenqiang, in order to abandon its no first use policy, "China would need to greatly expand its nuclear arsenal, which would give rise to a new arms race with the United States" (Pan 2018).

For this reason, the dramatic expansion of China's nuclear forces after 2020 raises legitimate questions about whether Beijing will retain its no first use policy, adjust its meaning, or continue force posture practices designed in part to increase the credibility of the policy. Even if mobile missile regiments continue to store warheads centrally, the United States believes that large numbers of new silo-based and submarine-based nuclear weapons will likely be prepared to launch on warning of an incoming attack (US Department of Defense 2023, 106). At the theater level, the Pentagon also believes that China "probably seeks lower yield nuclear warhead capabilities to provide proportional response options," noting several public statements that suggest acquisition of these options (US Department of Defense 2023, 111-112).

It is possible that China maintains its no first use policy while expanding its arsenal, shifting to a launch on warning posture, and acquiring low-yield theater options. However, all three measures imply that, since 2020, there has been a fundamental shift in the strategic culture that has historically structured China's arsenal. Gen. Pan and other Chinese experts argue that Beijing's declaratory policy and force structure decisions were closely linked—that the no first use policy enabled a restrained force structure in practical ways. Though there is no direct evidence that this shift in strategic culture will result in a shift in declaratory policy, many US officials assume so and will be watching closely for evidence to confirm their assumption.<sup>4</sup>

As China arms its silo fields, expands its submarine fleet, and continues to acquire a wide array of new theater delivery vehicles, its arsenal will grow larger and more diverse. Fielding discriminate theater capabilities, as well as a survivable reserve force, may signal that the arsenal's mission set could expand beyond countervalue targeting to include damage limitation and theater war-fighting objectives. If China's strategic forces are prepared to launch on warning of a nonnuclear attack, or if its discriminate theater options are prepared to respond to a perceived conventional threat, these

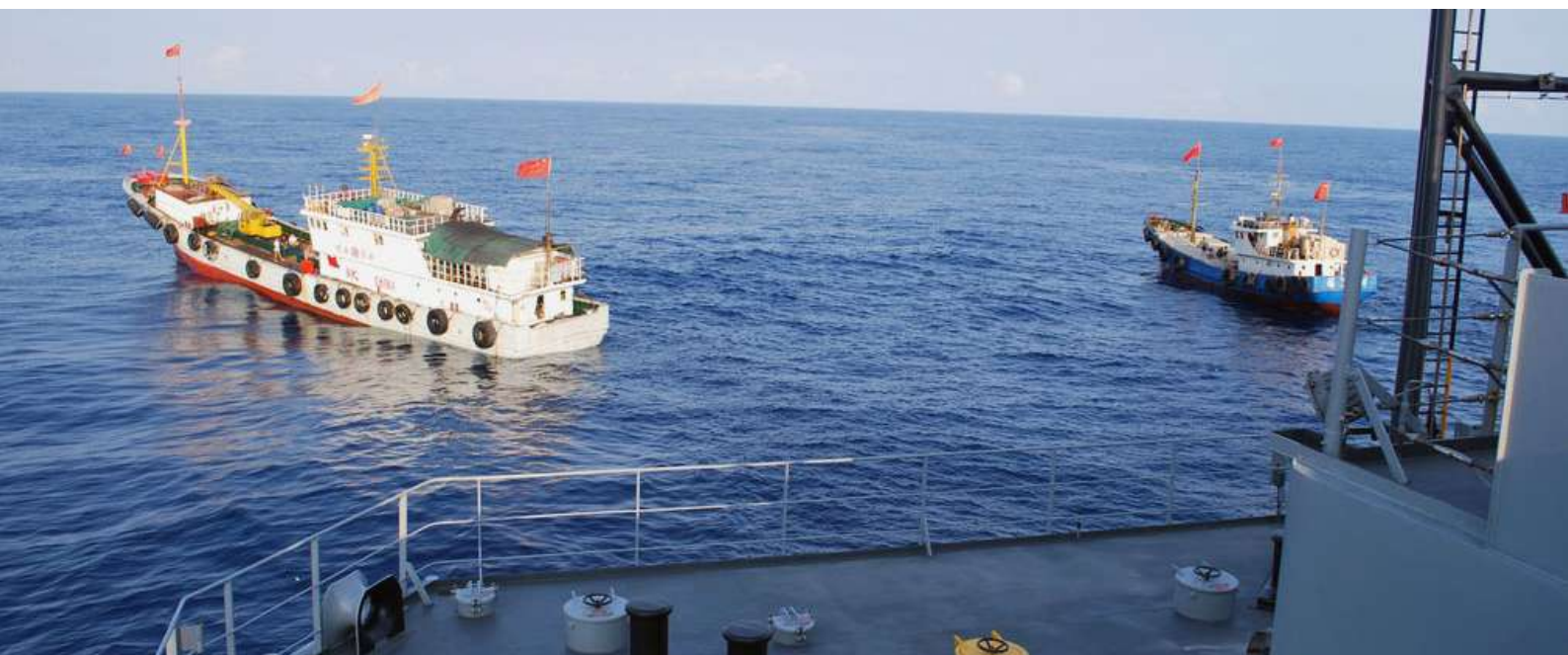
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<sup>4</sup> A similar argument pertains to China's stance on escalation management. If and when China does acquire low-yield warheads, it would signal an acceptance of the logic of escalation management, contravening decades of doctrine predicated on the belief that a nuclear conflict could not be controlled (Cunningham and Fravel 2019).



measures would obviate or severely limit the applicability of the no first use commitment. In short, recent decisions on force structure imply that Chinese leaders have come to believe that nuclear use can serve military and political objectives, a belief that Mao Zedong had understood as irrational and imperialist (Lewis 2014). Each of these developments may have implications for how China understands its no first use policy.

At the level of grand strategy, Chinese experts have also argued that the no first use declaration is evidence of a strategic posture of self-defense (Pan 2018). However, if this policy of self-defense is consistent with China's encroachment into the South China Sea and violation of its neighbors' borders, Beijing may interpret defensive actions by US allies and partners as aggression, justifying nuclear use. Specifically, US experts question whether the policy would hold in the event that Chinese leaders expected attacks against (a) nonnuclear or dual-capable units; (b) nuclear command and control or early warning assets; (c) occupation of territory claimed by China; (d) major military or civilian assets of national importance; or (e) nonnuclear mass-casualty or WMD attacks.



Two Chinese trawlers stop directly in front of the Military Sealift Command ocean surveillance ship USNS Impeccable (T-AGOS-23), forcing the ship to conduct an emergency "all stop" in order to avoid collision. The incident took place in international waters in the South China Sea about 75 miles south of Hainan Island. The trawlers came within 25 feet of Impeccable, as part of an apparent coordinated effort to harass the unarmed ocean surveillance ship. U.S. Navy photo/Wikimedia Commons

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Lastly, China has not publicly clarified whether allies who are covered by US extended deterrence guarantees qualify as nonnuclear weapon states and are therefore exempt from Chinese nuclear use or threats of nuclear use. Furthermore, it is uncertain but doubtful that US conventional forces operating in nuclear weapon free zones also qualify for this negative security assurance. As the United States determines how to respond to China's buildup, its alliances' extended deterrence decisions could shift the borders of China's no first use policy.

For these reasons, US experts and officials have been dismissive of China's no first use statement. Former Commander of US Strategic Command Adm. Charles Richard testified to Congress in 2020 "I could drive a truck through that no first use policy" (Richard 2020). Similarly, the 2023 Congressional Strategic Posture Commission stated that the policy "likely includes contemplation of a nuclear strike in response to a non-nuclear attack threatening the viability of China's nuclear forces or command and control, or that approximates the strategic effects of a nuclear strike" (Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States 2023, 12).

## US DECLARATORY POLICY

The United States has consistently declined to adopt a policy of no first use. The manifold reasons for this decision include assessments of certain threats and contingencies; strategic culture and politics; and allied preferences.

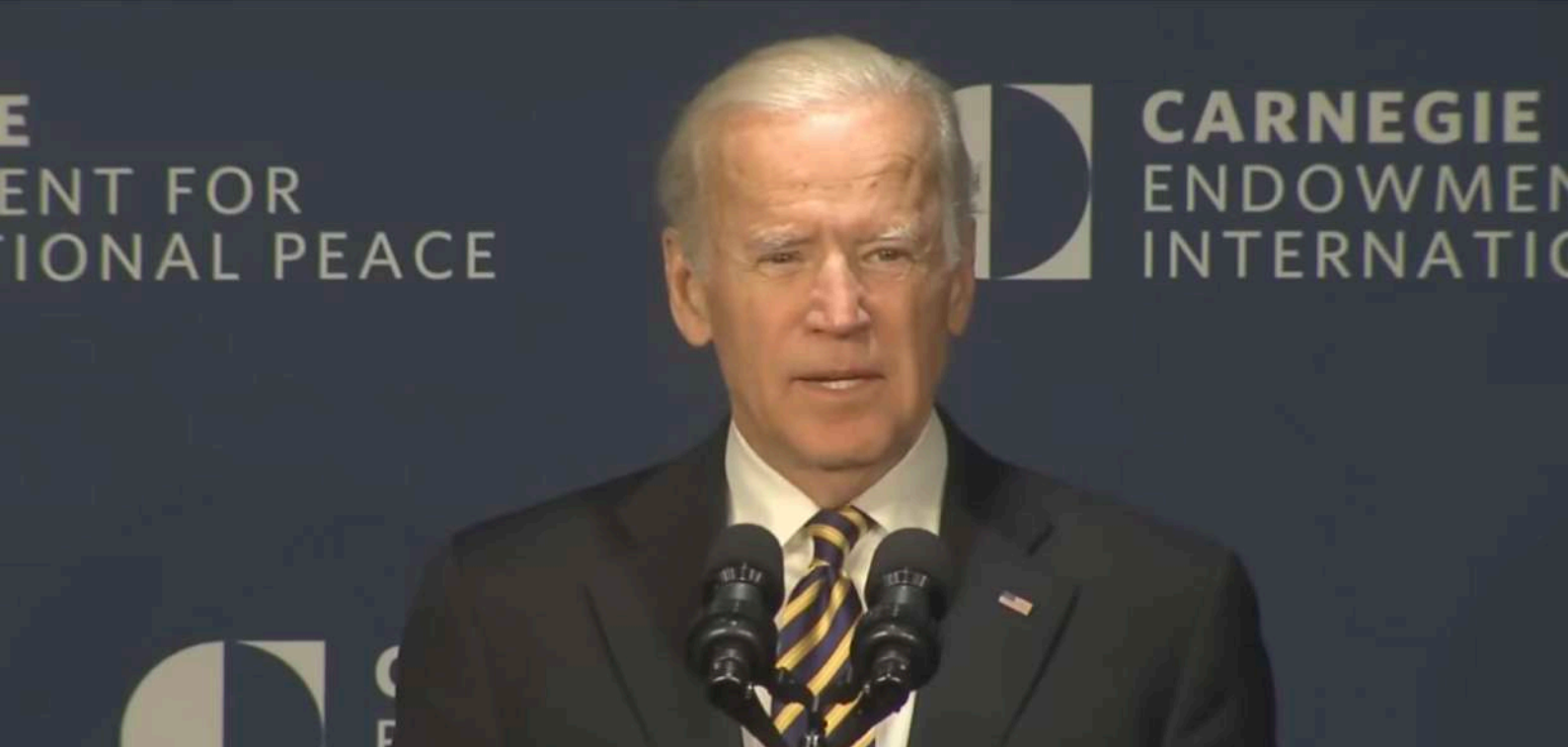
During the 2010 Nuclear Posture Review process, the Obama administration considered whether to adopt no first use as a way to implement the president's direction to reduce reliance on nuclear weapons (Miller 2022). At that time, the administration was concerned that the threat of nuclear first use may be necessary to deter a North Korean conventional invasion, perhaps backed by chemical and biological weapons (Miller 2020). As South Korean conventional forces have continued to tilt the balance of power on the peninsula further south, this concern has receded but not evaporated.

In a speech on nuclear weapons policy in the final weeks of the Obama administration, then-Vice President Biden stated that "given our non-nuclear capabilities and the nature of today's threats, it's hard to envision a plausible scenario in which the first use of nuclear weapons by the United States would be necessary. Or make sense." The speech went on to state that Biden and President Obama "strongly believe that deterring—and, if necessary, retaliating against—a nuclear attack should be the sole purpose of the US nuclear arsenal" (Biden 2017). In fact, Biden had delivered that speech after several cabinet members had scuttled a last-minute effort to adjust declaratory policy in the last months of the Obama presidency (Sanger and Broad 2016).

During his campaign for the presidency, Biden declared that "the sole purpose of the US nuclear arsenal should be deterring—and if necessary, retaliating against—a nuclear attack" (Biden 2020, 64). Without further definition, sole purpose is an ambiguous and flexible concept. For example, the above sentence can be interpreted to include no first use or not, depending on whether deterring an attack requires the ability to preempt it (Mount 2021). In the ensuing debate, some observers who opposed sole purpose identified it with no first use, partly as a way to portray sole purpose as a rigid and extreme formulation.







Screenshot, U.S. Vice President Joe Biden on Nuclear Security, Carnegie Live, January 11, 2017.

Though the 2018 NPR considered various changes to US declaratory policy, the document declined to issue either a sole purpose or a no first use statement. One reason is that the Biden administration, having solicited input from allied governments on US nuclear weapons policy, received broad and strong feedback against no first use, including from allies in Asia (Sevastopulo and Foy 2021). Though the administration never formulated a clear concept of either idea, allies took the initiative to discourage any changes on the grounds that they would reduce deterrence credibility or embolden adversaries. These requests were particularly influential on Biden administration officials who were anxious to shore up US alliances after four years of turmoil.

In the years since Vice President Biden's speech, nuclear threats from China, Russia, and North Korea have continued to intensify and US acquisitions programs for a nuclear generation of nuclear systems have gained momentum. It is increasingly common for analysts to criticize the 2010 NPR's goal of reducing reliance on nuclear weapons. A significant group of politicians, officials, and experts continue to support no first use, publicly and privately, as a way to reduce the risk of miscalculation or unnecessary US first use.<sup>5</sup> However, proposals for no first use continue to elicit broad, bipartisan, and often vehement criticism (Moulton 2021; Edelman and Miller 2021). Even experts who are sympathetic to the logic of no first use or recommend tightening declaratory policy tend to favor alternative formulations (Perkovich and Vaddi 2011).

In the United States, most arguments for and against no first use depend on general principles, and not analyses about how adversary leaders perceive US deterrent threats or what actions could best manage specific contingencies. For example, the 2018 NPR introduced a new category to describe cases in which the United States would consider nuclear use, that of non-nuclear strategic attacks.

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<sup>5</sup> "Warren, Smith, Colleagues Introduce 'No First Use' Bill for Nuclear Weapons," April 15, 2021, <https://www.warren.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/warren-smith-colleagues-introduce-no-first-use-bill-for-nuclear-weapons>. On the case for no first use, see Glaser and Fetter (2016).



Though officials claimed that this language did not lower the nuclear threshold, they gave unclear and contradictory accounts about the types of attacks that comprise this category, including cyberattacks (Mount and Stowe-Thurston 2018). As another example, the 2023 Strategic Posture Commission argued that “additional U.S. theater nuclear capabilities will be necessary in both Europe and the Indo-Pacific regions to deter adversary nuclear use and offset local conventional superiority” without explaining when, why, or how (Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States 2023, 35).

It is relatively uncommon for US experts to argue that nuclear threats or nuclear first use would be necessary to prevail in specific contingencies. However, many analysts still believe that US nuclear first use may be necessary to compensate for local conventional inferiority. One former Trump administration official argued that US nuclear first use against China may be justified—first, because a limited nuclear detonation over the aggressing forces in the Taiwan Strait would be preferable to accepting Chinese control over Taiwan; and second, because a detonation over an uninhabited location or austere airstrip in the South China Sea could truncate a conflict that might otherwise escalate (Colby 2018).<sup>6</sup> Others have argued that existing conventional delivery systems cannot replicate the promptness or damage expectancy currently available in the nuclear arsenal, which preserves a role for nuclear first use as part of preemptive counterforce operations against North Korea.

In summary, momentum in Washington points toward increased reliance on nuclear weapons for management of limited crises. The United States is unlikely to adopt a no first use commitment in the foreseeable future.

However, for most members of the US defense community, including most officials, first use would not only be unnecessary and costly, but virtually unthinkable. This belief is broad enough that many believe the United States has a virtual no first use policy in any plausible contingency. If the United States could attain its objectives without resorting to nuclear use, it almost certainly would. Furthermore, it is likely that a president would be willing to run significant risks to avoid the costs the country would incur from nuclear first use. Many doubt that nuclear first use could salvage a contingency where the United States and its allies cannot meet their objectives with conventional forces.

In summary, the United States retains the option for nuclear first use not because it is required by any specific operational plan but because of a desire to maintain flexibility in uncertain contingencies, out of deference to the preferences of allies, and the hope that it will induce caution on the part of adversaries who may believe they can prevail in a rapid conflict or coercive campaign.

## CONSEQUENCES OF NO FIRST USE STATEMENTS

Nuclear declaratory policy is consequential to the extent that it affects posture, plans, and behavior in a crisis. In principle, the decision to issue a no first use statement could drive changes in operational plans, readiness, and numerical requirements in ways that reduce reliance on nuclear

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<sup>6</sup> For a similar analysis of the Taiwan contingency from another former US official, see Weaver (2023).



forces for crisis management. It is also possible that issuing a declaratory policy could lead to changes in an adversary's posture, plans, and behavior.

However, in the context of increased nuclear competition between China and the United States, nuclear declaratory policy has modest, if any, effect on crisis or arms race stability. In practice, China's no first use policy does not affect US military planning for plausible contingencies over Taiwan, Korea, or the South China Sea that could bring the countries into conflict. Likewise, it is unlikely that a US no first use statement would cause China to adjust its plans for procurement, military operations toward its neighbors, or relations with US allies—especially given that the United States is unlikely to adjust force posture to attempt to increase the credibility of the statement. Military planners and civilian officials in both countries will continue to plan for the possibility that their opponent will resort to nuclear first use regardless of declaratory policy.

It is tempting to propose conditional no first use arrangements. Beijing and Washington might consider issuing a symmetrical statement that pertains to a specific or geographical area—around Taiwan, for example (Zhao 2023). In practice, neither the United States nor China understand no first use in conditional terms. China frames its policy in unqualified and even moral language that does not vary by circumstance or location, making it unlikely that it would value a conditional pledge. As US officials increasingly disapprove of no first use on general principle, rather than out of a conviction that nuclear first use is a necessary instrument for specific contingencies, they are also unlikely to value a conditional commitment. There is no indication that conditionality would render a no first use agreement more credible to either country and therefore more likely to affect plans, posture, or crisis behavior.<sup>7</sup>

Though unilateral or bilateral commitments are unlikely to have a significant effect on stability in the region, it does not follow that no first use is irrelevant. No first use could have major effects in two ways: first, as a mechanism for bilateral discussions on escalation management; and second, as a principle to guide posture and planning.

## A POLICY OF NO FIRST USE

In the United States, statements about policy are often an important mechanism for setting policy. Over and above the planning and acquisitions processes that develop military options, stakeholders most often debate the consequences of those options when drafting a policy review or a speech for a principal. In debating diction in these documents, officials consider the implications of different versions of a policy for deterrence, for allies, and for the US agencies that will implement the policy. Once the language is presented, it often has the effect of suppressing further debate for a time. In principle, agencies then turn to interpreting and implementing the policy.

In practice, a presidential statement alone on no first use is unlikely to have transformative effects on posture, plans, and crisis behavior. By itself, a no first use statement does not entail specific changes to operational plans and force structure. How and when to adjust these policies will require additional presidential guidance and sustained effort from a range of stakeholders to implement.

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<sup>7</sup> In practice, the need to maintain first use options in contingencies outside of the agreement would prevent the United States from taking practical steps to increase the credibility of its commitment to the agreement.



Since the 2010 NPR committed to “work to establish conditions under which such a policy could be safely adopted,” most officials believe that geopolitical developments have moved away from these conditions ([US Department of Defense. 2010 16](#)). Beijing, in turn, is more likely to doubt the credibility of a US no first use statement if it sees that US officials are not unified behind the policy and are not taking steps that affect how the country is preparing for conflict. In this context, a US no first use statement is unlikely to significantly shift either US or Chinese behavior in a crisis or limited conflict.

Even if a no first use declaration is unlikely to result in rapid changes in plans and posture, it remains both advantageous and stabilizing for the United States to reduce its reliance on nuclear weapons. A US president would want to avoid a situation where their only choices are nuclear use or surrender. For this reason, the United States should plan to attain its objectives without nuclear use, developing the concepts and capabilities necessary to provide the president with credible and effective nonnuclear options.

The clearest way of reducing reliance on nuclear first use is to increase the credibility and effectiveness of nonnuclear options for managing crises. In most cases, improvements in the accuracy, promptness, and lethality of conventional weapons now provide the president with nonnuclear options for performing a range of missions that would previously have required a nuclear munition. Upcoming deployments of hypersonic theater-range systems will further expand the available set of nonnuclear options.

Conventional deterrence measures that buy time for US forces to reach the conflict and deny an adversary its objectives also increase the likelihood that the United States and its allies can defend against an attack without resort to nuclear use.

There are several ways that future presidential guidance could further reduce reliance on nuclear first use. To some extent, new capabilities can increase the credibility of nonnuclear options, but so can increased attention to developing these options. The president and senior Pentagon officials might issue guidance to concentrate on developing nonnuclear operational concepts for certain types of scenarios. The president may also affect planning processes by communicating that they are unlikely to authorize certain types of missions or adopt certain military objectives that are more likely to depend on nuclear first use. For example, a president could direct that US numerical or readiness requirements should not depend on preemptive counterforce, that they would not consider nuclear use in response to certain types of nonnuclear strategic attacks, or that they do not regard limited nuclear use as an effective means of compensating for conventional inferiority.

Presidential guidance could also decrease the chance of US nuclear first use in other ways. For example, a president might issue a “nuclear necessity” statement that they would not consider nuclear use in circumstances where they can expect to attain their military objectives with nonnuclear means ([Lewis and Sagan 2016](#)). Relatedly, a president could issue new guidance on how US combatant commands should interpret US obligations under the law of armed conflict, which might render nuclear use illegal in certain circumstances, invalidating certain nuclear employment plans. Guidance on how to interpret US obligations under international law could affect how the United States interprets the ability of nuclear weapons to distinguish between combatants and civilians (distinction), weighs the relative value of certain military objectives and inadvertent civilian casualties (proportionality), understands how and whether limited nuclear use or strategic bombing weaken the military forces of the enemy (necessity), or assesses the tendency of nuclear



weapons to cause unnecessary suffering (limitation). Alternatively, the president could also order the integration of the precautionary principle of international law into Pentagon manuals, which would enjoin uniformed options from carrying out orders that employed more force than necessary to attain lawful military objectives, potentially including nuclear first use (Sagan and Weiner 2021). Lastly, the president could put in place more robust procedures for how a nuclear decision conference would assess the legality of nuclear options (Mount 2024). Any such restrictions could reduce the range of cases in which the United States would consider, prepare for, or threaten nuclear first use.

Each of these changes may also be valuable for addressing the risk that an irresponsible president could make an impulsive decision on nuclear employment. As it remains uncertain whether the Biden administration will reform the process of presidential authorization, building a legal or cultural presumption against nuclear first use in certain circumstances, or for certain reasons, may help to limit the risk that an irresponsible president could order nuclear first use out of emotion or ignorance.<sup>8</sup>

Counterintuitively, it may be easier for US officials to do no first use than to say it. First, US allies, members of Congress, and defense officials are likely to resist declaratory policy shifts that they consider imprudent. Most US experts seek to increase the flexibility and worry that having to rescind a no first use statement in a crisis could lead to inadvertent escalation or a loss of credibility. For this reason, US officials are more likely to pursue measures that practically reduce the likelihood of US nuclear first use if they are understood as efforts to increase the options available to the president in a crisis. Second, practical steps that could reduce reliance on nuclear weapons are less visible and therefore less politically contentious than changing existing declaratory policy. For these reasons, an internal no first use policy may incur less resistance from Congress, from the Pentagon, and from allies than a public no first use statement.

## **BENEFITS OF NO FIRST USE NEGOTIATIONS**

Even if no first use declaratory statements are increasingly unlikely to affect an adversary's behavior in a crisis, US-China discussions on no first use could contribute to strategic stability. Tong Zhao, Senior Fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, has argued persuasively that an "open-ended discussion aimed at developing mutual understandings of credible NFU models" could represent an important step toward a broader dialogue on risk reduction (Zhao 2023).

Following the initial meeting between US and Chinese diplomats on nuclear matters in November, 2023, both sides will consider next steps for discussion (US Department of State 2023; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2023). In 2024, reports emerged that China declined to continue the dialogue in a second meeting (Hammer 2024). As neither side is prepared to discuss reciprocal quantitative limits on strategic weapons, an agenda for upcoming talks will likely focus initially on risk reduction measures and communication. A number of agenda items—including command and control, space, and communications channels—could make valuable contributions to strategic stability by reducing the risk of inadvertent escalation, but addressing the risk of advertent escalation is more difficult. A discussion on no first use is a promising way to start.

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<sup>8</sup> This risk is broadly recognized among US political leaders, but so far unaddressed (Sanger and Schmitt 2021).





President Joe Biden hosts a bilateral meeting with President of the People's Republic of China Xi Jinping, Wednesday, November 15, 2023, at the Filoli Estate in Woodside, California. Official White House Photo by Adam Schultz/Wikimedia Commons

For China, a dialogue on no first use may be a more amenable format than risk reduction or strategic stability talks. The format could represent an opportunity to press the United States on what it perceives as an irresponsible practice. Chinese diplomats have a long history of pressuring the United States and other nuclear powers to commit to no first use. They could ask their US counterparts to explain why Washington has resisted a no first use agreement and has denigrated China's policy. For Chinese experts, the US insistence on retaining the right to employ nuclear weapons first is not only a risky means of coercion and brinkmanship; it also allows the United States to think of nuclear weapons as an acceptable foreign policy instrument to influence US allies and to retain a large arsenal at an unnecessary state of readiness (Pan 2018). The discussion would present China with a platform to explain how its no first use policy has contributed to global peace and security and explain its function as China cultivates its image as a global power.<sup>9</sup> China may also be interested in discussing conditions in which US officials would consider nuclear first use on the Korean peninsula or how US extended deterrence and assurances practices contribute to the risk of nuclear first use.

For the United States, a dialogue on no first use could represent an opportunity to have a long-overdue conversation on stability near the nuclear threshold. US officials would have to be clear that they did not intend the talks to result in a unilateral or bilateral no first use statement and would likely frame the meeting as a discussion on risk reduction or doctrine. The discussion could improve their understanding of China's thinking on the role of its strategic weapons and its intentions in modernizing and posturing them (whether or not China sees it as an exercise in transparency).<sup>10</sup>

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9 However, no first use was notably absent in China's September, 2023 proposal on global governance reform, either as a unilateral policy or an opportunity for multilateral agreement (Havrén 2023).

10 Encouraging Chinese transparency has been a major objective of US officials. One rare example was the Chinese-led nuclear glossary, championed in part by Rose Gottemoeller (P5 Working Group on the Glossary of Key Nuclear Terms 2015).



They could press China to explain what its no first use policy means in practice. Specifically, they could ask how China considers its no first use statement consistent with recent acquisitions decisions and how the policy applies in important edge cases, including nonnuclear strikes on the Chinese mainland or other territory it claims; nuclear command and control systems; the territory or forces of US allies; and nuclear, dual-capable, or collocated conventional systems. US officials could also explain how their Asian allies perceive their exposure to China's nuclear activities and how that is likely to drive extended deterrence measures in the future.

In this way, the United States and China could open an invaluable dialogue on nuclear escalation risks in conventional conflicts. A dialogue could not only improve understanding around nuclear doctrine at an important time in the bilateral relationship, but could also identify opportunities for more detailed or more ambitious discussions in future iterations of the talks.

Though no first use declaratory statements are unlikely to directly affect the incentives of US and China in a future crisis, the concept can nevertheless play an indirect role in reducing the risk of nuclear use. Leaders in Beijing and Washington can develop internal procedures, plans, and capabilities to reduce the risk that they face pressure to order nuclear first use and can cultivate a mutually-beneficial dialogue by meeting to discuss their perspectives on no first use. Despite the political constraints and mutual mistrust that reduce its value as a declaratory policy, the concept of no first use can still help both countries avoid a nuclear war.

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The Asia-Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament (APLN) is a Seoul-based organisation and network of political, military, and diplomatic leaders and experts from across the Asia-Pacific region working to address global security challenges, with a particular focus on reducing and eliminating nuclear weapons risks.

The mission of APLN is to inform and stimulate debate, influence action, and propose policy recommendations designed to address regional security threats, with an emphasis on nuclear and other WMD (weapon of mass destruction) threats, and to do everything possible to achieve a world in which nuclear weapons and other WMDs are contained, diminished, and eventually eliminated.



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Nagasaki University is the only university in the world that has inherited a medical college having experienced the atomic bombing. Achieving a “world free from nuclear weapons” is thus a paramount concern to the University. Research Center for Nuclear Weapons Abolition, Nagasaki University (RECNA), located in a city that was attacked by an atomic bomb, is an educational and research institute which is the interdisciplinary center of local academia with a firsthand experience of the horror of nuclear weapons. Founded in 2012, its objectives encompass a twofold mission: firstly, through rigorous academic inquiry and analysis, to redefine the significance of Hiroshima and Nagasaki experiences in the light of the current world trend, and disseminate information and make proposals from various aspects towards abolishing nuclear weapons; secondly, to make best use of such a process and outcomes of its research and analysis, and contribute to university education. RECNA, as a think tank open to the local community longing for nuclear weapons abolition, operates in close cooperation with partners including Nagasaki City and Nagasaki Prefecture.



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Since its founding in 1992, the Nautilus Institute has evolved into a thriving public policy think-tank and community resource. Along the way it has addressed critical security and sustainability issues such as US nuclear policy, especially in Korea, energy insecurity in Northeast Asia, and the effect of the U.S.-China relationship on environmental insecurity. The Institute has built a reputation not only for innovative research and analysis of critical global problems, it also translates ideas into practical solutions, often with high impact. Nautilus Institute holds that the key to reducing global insecurity—in short, to making the world peaceful, equitable, and sustainable—lies in the creation of a global civil society committed to joint problem-solving. The Nautilus community is a global network built around this strategy serving thousands of people in over fifty countries and working with partners in every country in the region.



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