

No Nuclear First Use: No Excuses

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The perspective I offer today is that getting nuclear weapons states to sign a no first use declaration is both highly significant in its own right and a major step along the road to nuclear abolition.

Part I: A brief history and status report on no first use

I am pleased to be with you today and especially pleased to be a co-panelist with Ernie. Ernie and I have worked together in various capacities for almost thirty years and yet we have never been co-panelists before. The only stage we share these days is on the golf course. In fact, we are among a select few who possess a golf driving club made from discarded materials of a Russian SS-20 missile. From first-hand experience, we can attest that the SS-20's range was highly exaggerated and its accuracy also leaves much to be desired. Its true legacy is that it was among the first and only class of nuclear weapons to ever be abolished. That, hopefully, bodes well as regards the future of the remaining two classes of nuclear weapons. Someday hopefully only the remnants of nuclear weapons will be in our golf bags and I can assure you all that in our hands they are practically harmless.

The highly regarded American writer Ron Rosenbaum has just published a new book *How the End Begins: The Road to a Nuclear World War III. The Second Nuclear Age*, he writes, has "degenerated into a chaotic state of multipolar nuclear powers with

less control and less restraint and a greater chance of touching off a regional nuclear war that could escalate to a global scale.” It is these very same fears about the consequences of present day nuclear proliferation that have brought many – including hawks like the Gang of Four, i.e. Kissinger, Shultz, Nunn, Perry – to join the call for a nuclear weapons free world. I refer to them as hawks as you will no doubt remember that they were all central players in the escalation of the nuclear arms race and, of course, determined opponents of the nuclear freeze movement. Today they are our allies. Who says history doesn’t play tricks? Kissinger et al argue for practical steps towards nuclear abolition; “careful, cooperative concepts to safely dismount the nuclear tiger.” They mention a number of such steps but one – no first use – is conspicuous by its absence and it is here that I rejoin the discussion.

My exposure to the no first use issue, as I suspect it was for many of you, was the 1982 advocacy article written by another group of four – a more palatable group for my taste at least --- Kennan, McNamara, Bundy, and Smith in Foreign Affairs if I am not mistaken. I was not aware of it until recently, but it seems that George Kennan had recommended a no first use posture right from the get go of the nuclear arms race. It was about fifteen years after the Foreign Affairs article that no first use began to be seriously debated within NATO. Canada, through the good offices of Lloyd Axworthy, and Germany were in the forefront of pushing NATO to adopt no nuclear first use. By that time, of course, the old justification for a nuclear first use posture by NATO had become way out of date. No more was there a Soviet Union with massive conventional weapons capabilities that, as the argument went, necessitated the need for NATO to resort quickly to nuclear use so not as to be over run.

Here in Canada, Peggy Mason and I organized a statement in 1998 signed by a dozen notables (a few of whom are in this room) making the case for no first use and challenging those who are always looking for new missions for nuclear weapons; in particular the sophistry that the first use of nuclear weapons, or at least the threat of doing so, was necessary to meet the chemical and biological weapons challenge. Our work was coordinated with others in NATO nations, and in particular with former

American ambassador Thomas Graham, but alas we were not successful. Far from it.

Two major government reviews of nuclear weapons policies have been released during the past year. The first was Washington's Nuclear Posture Review and the other was NATO's Strategic Concept Review. Not too surprisingly, given the central role played by the Americans in NATO, both documents are largely joined at the hip.

The Nuclear Posture Review is what is known in the trade as "declaratory doctrine" and contains what Washington is willing to say in advance about the conditions under which the United States will use its nuclear arsenal. The key sentence is that, "the United States will not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states that are party to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and in compliance with their non-proliferation obligations." Now – except in extenuating circumstances – the United States will respond to chemical and biological weapons assaults with a "devastating conventional military response," thus reducing the role of nuclear weapons in American national security strategy. The document goes on to mention "the objective of making deterrence of nuclear attack ... the sole purpose of U.S. nuclear weapons."

This is largely good news. Compare it for a moment to the Bush Doctrine where new missions were being continually invented for nuclear weapons. Yet Obama's Nuclear Posture Review still invites questions about whether Washington might use its nuclear weapons against non-nuclear targets whose proliferation policies are not acceptable to the United States. Furthermore, additional clarification is needed on what precisely is the American policy in regards to other nuclear weapons states. This is most relevant at a time when approximately one thousand nuclear weapons are ready to be fired at a moment's notice. Sadly, there was no mention of the urgency for nuclear states to remove these weapons from alert status.

Quickly on the heels of the American Nuclear Posture Review came the review conference of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Thanks in part to the expected new U.S. – Russia Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty and also taking some comfort from the U.S. Nuclear Postures Review's reduced reliance on nuclear weapons, the NPT

got a relatively easy new lease on life. That as well is to the good, but complacency regarding nuclear proliferation is hardly warranted given the treaty has proven to be quite ineffective in stopping a country from going nuclear if it is determined to do so. It is frequently said that progress on nuclear proliferation is inextricably linked to nuclear disarmament progress among the major powers. I find this link to be somewhat tenuous at times and the centrality of an effective verification and compliance regime to serious progress towards nuclear weapons abolition cannot be overstated.

As one might expect, the new NATO strategic concept falls pretty much into line with Washington's Nuclear Posture Review. The circumstances in which the alliance could contemplate using its nuclear arsenal are now said to be "extremely remote." Again, compare this to the previous 1999 NATO review: "nuclear weapons make a unique contribution in rendering the risks of aggression against the alliance incalculable and unacceptable. Thus, they remain essential to preserve peace." Russia has now been removed as the bogeyman and indeed NATO and Russia are getting more comfortable with each other of late. That said, one might have thought that it was high time for NATO to eliminate the two hundred tactical nuclear weapons that it has remaining on European soil. Russia, which has many more, should of course be doing likewise. These tactical nukes serve no credible military strategy and, ironically, it was the French with their own 'Force de Frappe' put up the loudest refusal to NATO eliminating this class of nuclear weapons. It must be noted here that the shoe is now on the other foot and NATO's superiority in conventional weapons occasioned Russia in 1993 to drop its no nuclear first use pledge. NATO's adopting no first use is not seriously dependent on Russia doing likewise but the importance of Russia also doing so cannot be overstated. The same goes for England, France, etc.

I can do no better than begin this section of my paper than by quoting Joseph Rotblat from his 1995 Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech:

Achieving this goal [nuclear weapons abolition] will take time, but it will never happen unless we make a start. Some essential steps toward it can be taken now. Several studies, and a number of public statements by senior military and political personalities, testify that -- except for disputes between the present nuclear states -- all military conflicts, as well as threats to peace, can be dealt with by conventional weapons. That means that the only function of nuclear weapons, while they exist, is to deter a nuclear attack. All nuclear weapons states should recognize that this is so, and declare ... that they will never be the first to use nuclear weapons. This would open the way to the gradual and mutual reduction of nuclear arsenals, down to zero.

Everyone here is no doubt quite aware of the arguments -- and their weaknesses -- most often used against declaring no nuclear first use or, as some cynics in the United States State Department have labelled it with the acronym 'NOFUN' (No First Use Nuclear). For those wanting to refresh your memory I can strongly recommend articles by Scott Sagan, Stephen Miller, Michael Gerson, Ken Berry, etc and, of course, the ongoing work of Pugwash, who have always been in the lead on this issue.

It is no surprise that many in the military have fallen in love with the bomb and are holding on for dear life. Why does the old saying that "when you have a hammer, all problems start to look like nails" come to mind? Another group of four -- four senior retired German officers -- recently made a pitch to NATO not to agree to no first use. All of which brings to mind a framed cartoon from the New Yorker magazine that I display at home. Three Pentagon generals are sitting at a boardroom table; two of whom looking very glum while the third pipes up "Well, I'm an optimist -- I still think peace can be avoided." Suffice to say that the opposition to no first use is on even weaker ground today than back in the day when it was based on the superiority of Soviet conventional forces in Europe.

The perspective I offer today is that getting nuclear weapons states to sign a no first use declaration is both highly significant in its own right and a major step along the road to nuclear abolition. Confining nuclear weapons to the sole purpose of pure deterrence goes a long way to challenging the utility of nuclear weapons and

delegitimizing them. It would further bolster an already powerful taboo against the actual use of nuclear weapons. All of this should contribute significantly in dampening proliferation pressures but, as I have already mentioned, some of these pressures arise from particular circumstances that have a certain life of their own. One cannot but worry about North Korea's recent communiqué to Colonel Gaddafi pointing out that Libya likely wouldn't be the target of NATO bombing today if it had continued to develop nuclear weapons capability. Others may unfortunately draw such a lesson and this should in no way be seen as a criticism of the ongoing no-fly zone. It is just that the world is complicated and that there can be unanticipated consequences that prove to be most uncomfortable.

Some of you may be thinking that all of this is well and good but at the end of the day a no first use declaration is just a pledge and that such a commitment is inherently uncertain. Yes and yes. But it is a powerful pledge – a game changer I would argue and one that would entail big changes to nuclear weapons deployments as a survivable second strike deterrent needs a much reduced nuclear weapons force structure. In this regard I highly recommend James Acton's new monograph *Low Numbers: A Practical Path to Deep Nuclear Reductions* in which he demonstrates the possibility (and complexity) of reducing U.S. and Russian stockpiles to five hundred nuclear warheads each and those of other nuclear arms states to no more than half that number.

A nuclear weapons free world – unlike let us say a landmines convention – is not going to be digested whole. It will be digested – if at all – bite by bite. With the vision of zero always in our sight, the first step is the imperative of measures intended to reduce the salience of nuclear weapons in international affairs. Success on the no first use front is within our reach. While the U.S. Nuclear Posture Review said it was not prepared to endorse no first use at the present time it went on to say that it was necessary to “work to establish conditions” for a no first use. Opposition to no first use is the soft underbelly of the nuclear weapons establishment. They have a devil of a time justifying their unwillingness to agree to no first use. We need to win the battle for public

opinion and by that I don't just mean passive support in an opinion poll but active and vocal support, i.e. politically salient vote determining support. No first use offers that opportunity as it is pretty clear-cut and the moral imperative is obvious.

I began with golf and I will end there as well. Nuclear weapons offer no mulligans. They must never again be used. A no first use declaration is an important step in de-legitimizing nuclear weapons and enhancing prospects for a nuclear weapons-free world.