Taking Forward the Dialogue on Nuclear Risk Reduction

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ABSTRACT
Building on the existing political momentum, this article seeks to deepen the international discussion on nuclear risk reduction through track 1.5 and track 2.0 dialogues. Various initiatives have recently acknowledged the need for reducing the risk of nuclear weapon use, such as the P5 process, the Stockholm Initiative for Nuclear Disarmament, and the US initiative on Creating the Environment for Nuclear Disarmament. There are diverging perceptions on the most significant sources of nuclear risks and how to address them best. The text compares different perspectives on nuclear risks, focusing particularly on scenarios involving the potential first use of nuclear weapons. On that basis, the project suggests feasible measures, promoting the adoption of no-first-use (NFU) policies.

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Reducing the role of nuclear weapons in international relations and military doctrines will enhance the prospects of security cooperation among the nuclear-weapons states (NWS) and the possibilities of strengthening the regime of nuclear non-proliferation. There are weighty reasons to address the most dangerous concept of nuclear deterrence – the first strike or first use of nuclear weapons. Dealing with the issue implies matching it to strategies and operational plans.

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Overview of the First-use Concept in the Nuclear Doctrines

The states’ readiness to the first use of nuclear weapons makes it an instrument of warfighting rather than a mere nuclear deterrence tool. An intention of using nuclear weapons first extends the nuclear deterrence goal of preventing the adversary’s first strike. The first nuclear use is associated with strategies of decapitating or disarming attacks.

Putting the nuclear-armed states on the line from the most offensive nuclear posture to the least one, Pakistan would probably go the first, and the United Kingdom would go the last. Pakistan’s nuclear arsenal has an offensive nature with their exceptional reliance on the first use due to strategic necessity and technical characteristics.

Russia probably occupies second place based on this criterion. Its inferiority in conventional forces, added by its regional vulnerability, encourage concepts and planning of the first use of nuclear weapons.

The third position likely belongs to the United States due to their objective situation and military capability; they have no serious incentives for the first nuclear use. However, its doctrine and obligations to its allies determine continuous reliance on the first nuclear use concept.

The US case is followed by India, with its obligation of no-first-use. It may likely continue to maintain the capability of disarming strike against Pakistan and remain vulnerable to a counterforce strike against China. India has taken the obligation of no-first-use to avoid provoking a pre-emptive strike on the part of China or Pakistan.

The fifth position goes to China. It assumed a non-conditioned obligation of nuclear no-first-use. Still, China’s retaliation strike capability is insufficient compared to Russia and the US forces. Over time, China will accumulate such potential against Russia and the United States and improve its nuclear forces’ counterforce capabilities.

The sixth one is France, with the doctrine relying on nuclear deterrence for various goals, including the first use of nuclear weapons. Yet neither its actual nuclear forces nor its geostrategic situation, being a NATO member-state, implies either feasibility or necessity for first nuclear use.

The United Kingdom occupies the last position. The country gave serious consideration to completely renouncing the first-use concept and its nuclear weapons in general. The United Kingdom defines the concept of first use in a vague manner. Still, its decision to increase nuclear warhead stockpile indicates the process of decalibrating its nuclear posture and arsenal architecture.

There are Israel and North Korea, which could not fit in this ranking for various reasons. As a nuclear doctrine has a dual meaning as a political document and operational plans, Israel keeps silent concerning its nuclear arsenal; it cannot have a public document on its nuclear weapons policy. It is the main reason why the discussion on the nuclear doctrine of Israel has to remain speculative and non-substantive.

North Korea requires a particular focus:

- Despite several official statements on nuclear weapons purposes, this state lacks the official nuclear doctrine.
- Having accepted denuclearisation as a long-term goal, the North Korean leadership agreed with a possibility of removing its nuclear arsenal from its strategic calculations, though in the distant future.
• North Korea continues building regional nuclear warfighting and nuclear intercontinental deterrence capabilities.

According to the Japanese official assessment of 2019, North Korea has miniaturised nuclear weapons to fit ballistic missile warheads. How do these efforts reflect the military doctrine of North Korea, and how do they comply with the long-term denuclearisation goal? The answer to these questions remain unclear so far.

To sum up, the military strategies of most nuclear-weapon states lowered the threshold for the use of nuclear weapons instead of raising it.

**Decreasing the Role of First-use Concept**

The most important initial question is as follows: why can’t the other four nuclear powers of the NPT follow China’s example and make a no-first-use pledge to all non-nuclear members of the Treaty without the exemptions as mentioned earlier and reservations?

The first answer to this question is that the other nuclear powers’ non-nuclear allies may participate in nuclear or conventional aggression against a given nation. Some of these non-nuclear-weapon states have foreign nuclear weapons or foreign troops, military bases and sites on their territory. These may be engaged in a massive conventional attack, which would create a prospect of imminent catastrophic defeat of a victim nation, its allies or forces abroad. Hence, these countries cannot be exempt from a threat of nuclear response, including a nuclear first strike by a victim nation. This proposition should be scrutinised in more detail.

Concerning massive conventional aggression – after the Warsaw Pact and the USSR’s dissolution, the United States, France and Britain are no longer endangered by this contingency. Other NATO allies are not threatened by Russian conventional forces either. The only serious problem is Russia’s concern about the growing NATO capability of intensive non-nuclear air attacks. Repelling such aggression has become an essential element of Russian official military doctrine.

Russia’s eastern borders with the growing Chinese capability are a matter of grave concern as well. But, due to the close political and economic relations, such circumstances are unlikely to emerge. To make NFU more acceptable for Russia, it is necessary to dispel its worries about NATO expansion.

Addressing the problem of tactical nuclear weapons, primarily associated with a first use concept, dealing with the ballistic missile-defence problem, and going for deeper strategic forces’ reductions will be linked to managing the RRussia–NATOension. Meanwhile, the crisis in Eastern Ukraine and the status of the Crimean peninsula remain the most significant obstacle towards a political dialogue normalisation between Russia and the West.

Suppose the five nuclear weapons states being parts of the NPT (P5) address the NFU pledge to non-nuclear NPT states. Such a pledge will discourage those countries from withdrawing from the Treaty.

Non-nuclear states with foreign nuclear weapons on their territory is another issue. This is part of a more general problem of the relationship among nuclear powers, including the issue of the US tactical nuclear weapons on foreign soil.
It is usually taken for granted that the NWS cannot make a no-first-use pledge to each other, except for China. This implies that the nuclear powers seriously contemplate pre-emptive nuclear strike options against each other. However, this seems partially incorrect in political terms and destabilising in the military sense.

After the Cold War, despite tensions, none of the P5 faced a real threat of nuclear attack from each other. A mutual NFU commitment would remove this theoretical possibility, leaving the P5 with a legitimate nuclear retaliation capability.

The removal of tactical nuclear weapons from combat-ready troops would enhance the prospect of no-first-use pledges by the P5. Tactical nuclear weapons do not have such robust command and control systems as strategic forces do. They are closely intertwined with conventional forces. Besides, they are less safe and more vulnerable to the threat of unauthorised access. Before the problems of the physical elimination of tactical nuclear weapons are resolved, the United States and Russia might agree on a verifiable withdrawal of all of them to centralised storages on their national territories.

The credibility of such a pledge is a controversial issue. It is virtually impossible to verify it technically since any strategic and tactical nuclear weapon used in a retaliation may also be used in a first strike.

Among the P5, the concept of first strike is commonly associated with an idea of counterforce nuclear attack. Otherwise, a first strike would be a national suicide by provoking a devastating retaliation. Russia and the United States do not have a disarming strategic strike capability against each other at present and for the foreseeable future. Hence, nuclear no-first-use between them would be credible not only on political but also on military-technical grounds. France and Britain, on the one hand, and Russia, on the other, are in a similar situation. NATO nuclear security guarantees fully counterbalance Russia’s diminishing nuclear superiority over these two states to its member states.

The United States would probably retain a disarming nuclear strike capability against China for at least a decade to come. Hence, its potential NFU pledge to China would have primarily a political, not a military sense. Still, from the military point of view, China would have some guarantee of the credibility of such a US pledge by holding US troops, military bases and significant allies in the region hostages to a devastating retaliation. China would not have a first-strike capability against the United States for the foreseeable future, so its pledge towards the United States would be strategically credible.

Finally, such a pledge in China–France/Britain setting would be credible since they are mostly out of range of their respective nuclear forces.

Further strategic forces reductions and limitations and de-alerting, beyond the limits of the extended New START of 2010, should enhance stable strategic relationships between the United States and Russia, and eventually among the P5, thus supporting the NFU commitment at the strategic level technically. Reaching a new agreement on vital ballistic missile defence systems and potential space weapons to prevent their possible destabilising effects would further enhance no-first-strike obligations.

Going beyond NFU in reducing the role of nuclear arms would imply downgrading nuclear deterrence. This effort might positively affect nuclear non-proliferation but would undoubtedly be harder for nuclear powers to accept. It would be necessary to get rid of the so-called launch-on-warning (LOW) concepts and plans.
Although nuclear deterrence does not require sustaining the concept of launch-on-warning attacks that has been adopted by both the United States and USSR/Russia, this concept certainly implies deterrence in its most dangerous and politically least controlled form. To decide the launch of missiles based on information from early-warning systems, national leaders would have only a few minutes at their disposal. Therefore, there is always a risk of a miscalculation or technical faults leading to accidental or inadvertent nuclear war.

Only Russia and the United States practice this concept, since they are the only two powers with their missile early-warning systems and missiles capable of being launched on warning. These US and Russian concepts have nothing to do with China’s nuclear forces. However, China is reportedly developing its early-warning system, indicating the possibility of embracing the launch-on-warning concept.

There is always the problem of the vulnerability of US and Russian command, control, communications and intelligence (C3I) systems to even a limited surprise nuclear strike. Still, it is generally believed that a sizeable and survivable part of strategic force command and control could be reconstituted sooner or later, and devastating retaliation would be inflicted on the aggressor. For their part, China, France or Britain have neither missiles nor C3I systems to sustain their LOW concept so far.

While the abandonment of LOW concepts may be verified in a highly reliable way by technical and operational de-alerting of strategic nuclear forces (SNF), before this happens, specific steps to substantiate such as a political obligation are possible. Another step would be to agree to place permanent liaison officers at nuclear command centres.

There are several detailed proposals on alternative technical and organisational procedures for reducing the missile and aircraft launch alert status, and on the systems of inspection and notification on a changed level of combat readiness that could reduce the number of alert warheads. Such radical measures would undoubtedly go a long way beyond mutual removal of launch-on-warning concepts and capabilities towards operational nuclear disarmament and the minimal actual role of nuclear arms in states’ policies and defence strategies. It would have to involve all nuclear powers.

**Conclusion**

Going still further in reducing the role of nuclear weapons would entail massive and long-term efforts by nuclear-armed states to reduce and limit nuclear arms, programs and weapon-grade materials. Moreover, since the removal of nuclear weapons from the forefront of international security must not necessarily open the way to more efficient employment of conventional forces and arms, those would have to be dealt with in due course. The growing capabilities of long-range conventional precision-guided systems may be presented in the United States and NATO states as a potential substitute for nuclear weapons in performing the expanding range of NATO’s missions. It might raise the possibility of further nuclear disarmament.

**Disclosure Statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).
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