

II: A Sceptical View of "No-First-Use"

by
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It would without doubt be highly desirable for NATO to acquire a "No-First-Use" or conventional option. Few would dissent from that proposition for, as I understand matters, it would mean that it would no longer be necessary for NATO to contemplate the use of nuclear weapons to redress a substantial deficiency in conventional forces. All logic and all political realities do indeed tend to point in the direction that it would, in practice, be extraordinarily difficult for NATO to decide to use nuclear weapons (if they have not first been used by the Warsaw Pact). It is difficult also to argue that, even if the decision could be made, NATO would be more likely to "win". In fact, precisely the opposite case can be made: NATO could not now expect to fight a nuclear war in Europe as well as could the Warsaw Pact. Whatever might happen to the territories of the superpowers, a general nuclear war in Europe would surely destroy that continent and the prosecution of war under such conditions almost certainly ceases to be a rational act of policy. Finally, it can at least be asserted (with no proof possible) that the introduction of nuclear weapons into a European war would actually accelerate rather than retard the collapse of NATO.

All of this suggests, even demands, that NATO should bind itself to strengthen its conventional capabilities to deny a conventional theatre option to the Warsaw Pact. That is hardly at issue, although the implementation of such a policy is. It is not at all easy to define what force levels in NATO or what kinds of forces would suffice to convince the Soviet Union that it could not "take" Western Europe nor is it easy to say how much it would cost. All that it is necessary to do here and for the purposes of this analysis is to state one's belief that NATO would now lose a conventional war in Europe sooner or later if the Soviet Union were to decide upon the full mobilization of its military potential. Nor, for the purposes of this analysis, does it greatly matter whether it would be later rather than sooner. The point is that there is likely to come a time in any war between NATO and the Warsaw Pact when the ratio of forces would become so adverse for the West that the choice would be between conventional defeat, surrender or the use of nuclear weapons. Limiting Soviet incursions into Western Europe for a month or two months or even six months would be of little avail if NATO were subsequently overwhelmed.

Thus, if there were to be a war, the question of the first use of nuclear weapons would, sooner or later, arise and, yet, there are few who now believe that NATO would then resort to nuclear weapons. Why not, therefore, make a declaration *now* that NATO would not use nuclear weapons first? Would that declaration not only give concrete expression to political reality but also serve as a spur to conven-

tional armament? Note that such a declaration does not constitute a licence to rid ourselves of all nuclear weapons, at least, not so long as they are retained by the potential opponent. Nuclear weapons, even under a no-first-use declaration, would still be needed to deter first use by a nuclear-armed opponent. The nuclear weapons required solely for nuclear *deterrent* purposes might have to be more unambiguously of the second-strike variety but the requirement that such systems should survive a prolonged period of conventional conflict as well as nuclear pre-emption will be extremely demanding.

There seem to be four main reasons why it would not, at present, appear to be helpful to make a No-First-Use declaration of intent with regard to nuclear weapons. Firstly, such a declaration would in practice make no difference to the policies pursued by the Soviet Union. Admittedly that reason is neutral in the argument and works for neither side but it at least diminishes the force of the argument that the Soviet Union would be reassured by such a declaration. My point is that so long as nuclear weapons remain in the arsenals of both sides in rather large numbers, neither the East, nor, for that matter the West, can afford to believe in simple declarations of intent when national survival is at stake. They must continue to assume that nuclear weapons *might* be used first, declarations notwithstanding, by the other side and to base their doctrine and weapons procurement, as they do currently, on that assumption. Unlike NATO, which seems to think that it knows how a war would progress, the Soviet Union admits that it does not know. In consequence, and with a good deal of prudent attention to detail, the Soviet Union is busily preparing itself for *every* sort of conflict progression — top down or bottom up or middle first, that is, theatre-nuclear exchanges before either conventional war or strategic nuclear war. This is not to say that the Soviet Union wants war; simply that for them war is not an impossible eventuality. Proof of this assertion would take more space than is available but there is no area of possible conflict that the Soviet Union has neglected. The cost of such insurance has been and is becoming progressively more devastating, but such is the perceived need to protect the Soviet state and its Revolution against all enemies real or imagined that *all* contingencies must be covered, the aim being to minimize damage to the Soviet Union should war occur. If the Soviets see any Western warlike option opening up, it must be foreclosed. In this context, I believe the Soviet military perspective on the matter will remain: "I am sure he is lying because if I were in his position, that is what I would do." So they will surely proceed as if NATO had not made a No-First-Use declaration.

The second reason has to do with uncertainty. I have to admit the tension between this argument and the immediately preceding one, but it has always appeared that nuclear deterrence rests ultimately on fear of the dark. I would rather that an opponent did not know what might happen in war than that he could predict with some certainty the course of events. We might indeed believe that we would

not use nuclear weapons first. The Soviet Union, their current rhetoric notwithstanding, might also believe that we would not use nuclear weapons first and act accordingly. But I see no reason to tell them so categorically until we are in a position to be confident that NATO can impose a conventional stalemate on the battlefield. It is precisely the "fear of the dark" (in this case a nuclear attack on the Soviet Union precipitated by some kind of war in Europe) that is likely to weigh heavily in Soviet calculations for war or peace. While I could perhaps reconsider the position *after* NATO attained a conventional denial option, I would not advocate making a declaration of No-First-Use before attaining that option. Let uncertainty work for the overall deterrence of *all* war. Making Western Europe safe for conventional war may have some appeal for both superpowers; it should have none for Europeans as things stand at present.

My third reason, again in some conflict with my first, is that, if the Soviet Union *did* believe NATO declarations, they could simply and safely switch substantial resources from the theatre nuclear weaponry to the conventional area, thus making it even more difficult for NATO to redress its current conventional weakness. At the least the Soviet Union is conscious of deriving political benefit in its policy with respect to Western Europe from the sense of military vulnerability which now pervades Western Europe. I see no reason to suppose that they would willingly forego that benefit and so I see no reason to suppose that the Soviet Union would accede without a struggle to the equalization of conventional options in Europe. The record of the Mutual and Balanced Force Reductions talks in Vienna would seem to bear out this thesis.

My final reason is that I remain extremely sceptical about the political will of the NATO countries to do whatever it is necessary to do in the conventional field. The economic prognosis is poor; political leadership is generally weak; the perception of imminent threat is not widely shared; demographic trends are adverse. My fear is that a declaration of No-First-Use would *not* be followed by a serious attempt to provide the forces necessary to deny a Warsaw Pact conventional option. We would then have tended to remove nuclear risk from the equation without replacing it by conventional uncertainty. I have not much difficulty with the notion of No-First-Use as both a desirable end and as a stimulus to investment in conventional forces. I too would like not to have to invoke the nuclear risk with its distressing overtones of mutual suicide. I would like to be able to point out to the Soviet Union that we effectively have denied them all warlike options. I am simply full of doubt that NATO can do it and, because I am full of doubt, would not grant the prize before the effort is made. Progressively, of course, if NATO was to become somewhat more confident in its ability at least to delay a Soviet conventional victory, the point at which the agonizing choice posed itself would be notionally pushed back in time — but that only means "no-early-first-use" of nuclear weapons, a most unsatisfactory formulation. Certainly there would be

more time before nuclear release and any time that could be used for war termination prior to nuclear use would be valuable, but this is to do no more than express NATO's doctrine of flexible response in different words. There are really no interim positions which are valid between "first-use" (whenever) and "No-First-Use". "No-early-first-use" will hardly sell in the market place of ideas. The point is not just to delay nuclear use; it must be to avoid *all* nuclear use.

However there is no reason to be complacent even if it were possible to do things the right way round, that is, first to acquire the forces to defend the West conventionally and then to declare that NATO would not be the first to use nuclear weapons. If the Soviet Union really believed that it could not "win" at the conventional level and if war still appeared to be inevitable, they would turn their attention again to nuclear pre-emption. This is not an option they have discarded even if it seems not to have been the *preferred* option for some fifteen years — since about 1970. The preferred option during this period appears to have been to break down NATO with conventional forces, relying on their new-found strategic and theatre nuclear strength to deter NATO from escalation while, at the same time, putting a great deal of effort into the destruction of NATO's nuclear forces in Europe by conventional means. This was a task made easier by NATO's excessive dependence on aircraft at fixed airbases for nuclear delivery, at least over longer ranges. If NATO decided to use nuclear weapons to bolster a failing defence, such weapons might have been substantially reduced by Soviet counter-action and so, under a strategy of limiting damage to the Soviet Union, it is a policy that made sense to the Soviets.

However, if the conventional option were to be removed by NATO action, there would be much again to favour a Soviet pre-emptive nuclear attack at the theatre level to be *followed*, as in an earlier period, by the advance of ground forces into Western Europe. From a Soviet perspective, it might well prove possible now and in the future to deter the United States from making a strategic nuclear response against the Soviet homeland. It might even be possible to dissuade an American President from releasing long-range American theatre nuclear weapons based in Europe. That, after all, is already the substance of Soviet rhetoric when they insist that the *origin* of American weapons striking the USSR is irrelevant.

Such a Soviet pre-emptive nuclear strike would, presumably, exclude Britain and France but it would certainly aim to reduce, if not to eliminate, NATO's retaliatory nuclear capability based in the rest of Western Europe and to disrupt NATO's conventional infrastructure and command, control and communications (C3) to the point where resistance would be seriously weakened. Air bases would be destroyed, reinforcement ports disabled, logistic support facilities shattered and serious losses inflicted on NATO's conventional forces. It is hard to see NATO being in a position to defeat the subsequent advance of Soviet forces and harder still to see NATO, at least as

currently configured, making an effective nuclear reply. A nuclear reply could even make things ultimately worse for Western Europe.

With Pershing II and ground-launched cruise missiles deployed in Europe, at least some of NATO's current nuclear system vulnerability will be reduced, but an honest assessment must express doubts both about even their ability to survive (dispersal of Pershing and cruise could, in the event, prove very difficult) and about communicating a decision to fire them after a pre-emptive nuclear attack. In short, in the admittedly very dire circumstances in which the USSR might decide that war was becoming inevitable, theatre nuclear pre-emption of a rather selective kind may make a good deal of military and political sense. It is not a long step from the proposition to the assertion that a full conventional denial capability on the part of NATO might actually hasten the Soviet decision to use nuclear weapons, with or without a NATO "No-First-Use" declaration.

I do not say that NATO should not seek to acquire conventional forces in which it could have confidence, for I would always advocate that NATO should seek to deny the Soviet preferred option. yet the paradox is that such a policy will make it essential that NATO pay more, rather than less, attention to the deterrence of a Soviet theatre nuclear attack. Only if the putative costs to the Soviet Union of a theatre nuclear strike are made unacceptably high will that option too be foreclosed. That, in turn, means substantial NATO investment in survivable second-strike nuclear delivery systems, in survivable C3, in dispersed and hardened stocks and in forces capable of fighting in a nuclear environment. Above all, it means strengthening the political linkages between the United States and Western Europe. Sadly, the proponents of No-First-Use seem reluctant to admit that No-First Use is not a way of escaping from NATO's nuclear dilemma. Nor does conventional confidence by itself solve the complex security questions in an age of nuclear abundance. It may help, but it is not enough.

In conclusion, then, I stand somewhere between agnosticism and downright rejection of No-First-Use. Agnosticism would say that No-First-Use is simply unhelpful, irrelevant, and unattainable if it were to follow a full conventional denial capability because that itself is unattainable. Rejection would see the dangers and looming over all would be the danger that the populations of NATO's member countries would be led into believing that, somehow, the adoption of No-First-Use would drive away the nuclear shadows. In my view it would not. That can come only if there are marked reductions in nuclear weapons and if *both* sides cease to think of nuclear weapons as being useful in war. As I have indicated here, I doubt whether the Soviet appreciation of nuclear weapons is as negative as it has become in the West.