

No first use: having it both ways

by Scott Plous

“THE ONE CLEARLY definable firebreak against the worldwide disaster of general nuclear war is the one that stands between all other kinds of conflict and any use whatsoever of nuclear weapons. To keep that firebreak wide and strong is in the deepest interest of all mankind.” So argued McGeorge Bundy, George F. Kennan, Robert S. McNamara, and Gerard Smith, in what is widely regarded as the most forceful case ever made for formal NATO acceptance of a no-first-use policy governing nuclear weapons.¹ The question, as set forth in a subsequent German rebuttal by Karl Kaiser, Georg Leber, Alois Mertes, and Franz-Josef Schulze, is how to increase the firebreak without simultaneously increasing the chance that a conflagration will begin in the first place.²

In my view, there is a way for NATO to adopt a no-first use policy that will be acceptable to many opponents as well as supporters of such a policy. But before making my proposal, I shall set forth the reasons for maintaining the option to initiate the use of nuclear weapons.

THE HISTORICAL purpose of preserving NATO's first-use option has been to deter conventional Soviet aggression, primarily in Western Europe. Were NATO to renounce such an option, according to Kaiser and his coauthors' argument, the Soviet Union “would no longer have to fear that nuclear weapons would inflict unacceptable damage to its own territory. . . . In the case of a large-scale conventional attack against the entire European NATO territory, the Soviet Union could be certain that its own land would remain a sanctuary as long as it did not itself resort to nuclear weapons.”

But why should the Soviet Union trust a NATO declaration of no-first-use any more than NATO presently trusts Leonid Brezhnev's 1982 pledge that the Soviet Union will never be the first to use nuclear weapons? Has NATO doctrine changed significantly as a result of formal Soviet assurances?

Not at all. In a world of deep mistrust and worst-case analyses, saying does not make it so. All that is required for effective deterrence is substantial uncertainty on the part of the aggressor. Regardless of public NATO declarations, the Soviet Union must weigh the possibility of nuclear escalation in any East-West conflict. And in no conflict is escalation more likely than a Soviet invasion of Western Europe.

Indeed, it is quite possible that the adoption of a no-first-

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use policy would have a far greater impact on NATO countries than on the Soviet Union. A second reason for preserving a first-use option, according to the Kaiser article, is that American adoption of no-first-use could be seen as “a withdrawal from present commitments of the United States,” namely, the defense of West European allies.

Thus the two reasons most often invoked in support of a first-use option are that it is necessary to deter conventional Soviet aggression, and that it signifies an American commitment to the defense of Western Europe. Any policy that unconditionally forswears the first use of nuclear weapons must successfully address these issues.

SEVERAL MAJOR arms control agreements, including SALT I, SALT II, the Threshold Test Ban Treaty, and the Limited Test Ban Treaty, include a little-noted clause which permits withdrawal from the treaty. As set forth in Article XIX of the SALT II Treaty, for example: “Each Party shall, in exercising its national sovereignty, have the right to withdraw from this Treaty if it decides that extraordinary events related to the subject matter of this Treaty have jeopardized its supreme interests.” What is important here is that the inclusion of an explicit escape hatch—the right of each country to decide for itself what constitutes an “extraordinary event”—has in no way diminished the efficacy of past arms control measures. Neither the United States nor the Soviet Union has ever made use of a withdrawal clause; in fact, few people are even aware that such clauses exist.

The same technique could be applied to the adoption of a “qualified no-first-use” policy. Whether no-first-use is set forth in a bilateral or multilateral treaty, or is unilaterally declared as NATO policy, it could be accompanied by the following provision: “The presence of Soviet or Warsaw Pact troops on the territory of any NATO member country will constitute immediate grounds for countermanding the declared no-first-use policy governing nuclear weapons.” Thus, the deterrence of conventional Soviet aggression would be preserved, as would the U.S. commitment to defend Western Europe.

Even qualified in this way, the adoption of a no-first-use policy would constitute a significant advance over the current situation. After all, there are many ways in which nuclear weapons may be employed, not all of which concern a Soviet invasion of Western Europe. Nuclear planning on both sides of the Atlantic encompasses, for example, the possibility of a preemptive first strike by the other side, or the use of tactical nuclear weapons in the Middle East.

By refusing to forego the possibility of a preemptive first strike, NATO has provided the Soviet Union with ample

justification for building immense redundancy into its ICBM forces. It has also given the Soviet Union good reason to interpret any accidental launching of NATO nuclear weapons, any mistaken alert of an impending NATO attack, or any otherwise ambiguous provocation as the initial phase of a NATO first strike. Finally, granting the uncertainties that attend the U.S. commitment to use nuclear weapons in defense of Western Europe, the threat to employ nuclear weapons in other regional conflicts can hardly be viewed as credible. To whatever degree Soviet leaders take seriously a NATO pledge of no-first-use, then, the credibility of NATO deterrence will be heightened and the concern over first-strike preparations lessened.

Another advantage of adopting a no-first-use policy lies in its popular support and symbolic importance. Depending upon how the question is phrased, American public support for no-first-use has recently been running between 74 and 77 percent.³ Despite governmental protestations, public opinion in NATO countries is also decisively in favor of the adoption of no-first-use, and similar sentiments are found among leaders and citizens in the nonaligned countries. In short, the world wants a no-first-use policy. A movement toward the renunciation of a first-use option would be received by the public as a movement toward a safer, more peaceful world, and would offset the Soviet advantage in world opinion accruing from its unilateral declaration of no-first-use.

The most profound effects of no-first-use, however, would not be felt by the Soviet Union or the international public, but by NATO itself. One of the burdens imposed by current NATO strategy is the development of "operational plans" for the first use of nuclear weapons.⁴ Another is the development of weapons to implement these plans.

As Bundy and his fellow authors point out: "Once we escape from the need to plan for a first use that is credible, we can escape also from many of the complex arguments that have led to assertions that all sorts of new nuclear capabilities are necessary to create or restore a capability for something called 'escalation dominance'—a capability to fight and 'win' a nuclear war at any level." The adoption of a qualified no-first-use policy would go a long way toward exorcising much of the illogic that bedevils NATO nuclear doctrine.

In their rejection of a no-first-use policy, Kaiser and his coauthors state that the first use of nuclear weapons by NATO "is only thinkable in a situation where a large-scale conventional attack by the Warsaw Pact could no longer be countered by conventional means alone, thus forcing NATO to a limited use of nuclear weapons." Aside from the question of whether NATO can successfully be defended with nuclear weapons, this position opens a vista of nuclear possibilities that beg for curtailment. At the very least, if NATO does not intend to launch a first strike against the Soviet Union, the time has come to let the Soviet Union know. □

1. McGeorge Bundy, George F. Kennan, Robert S. McNamara, and Gerard Smith, "Nuclear Weapons and the Atlantic Alliance," *Foreign Affairs* (Spring 1982), pp. 753–68.

2. Karl Kaiser, Georg Leber, Alois Mertes, and Franz-Josef Schulze, "Nuclear Weapons and the Preservation of Peace: A Response to an American Proposal for Renouncing the First Use of Nuclear Weapons," *Foreign Affairs* (Summer 1982), pp. 1157–70.

3. Public Agenda Foundation and the Center for Foreign Policy Development, Brown University, "Voter Options on Nuclear Arms Policy: A Briefing Book for the 1984 Elections" (1984).

4. Robert S. McNamara, "The Military Role of Nuclear Weapons: Perceptions and Misperceptions," *Foreign Affairs* (Fall 1983), pp. 59–80.

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