

DO UNTO OTHERS: TOWARD A DEFENSIBLE NUCLEAR DOCTRINE

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The debate surrounding U.S. nuclear policy focuses too narrowly on reducing the number of nuclear weapons in the American arsenal toward zero. More important is preventing use of nuclear weapons in whatever numbers they exist. President Barack Obama should articulate a narrowed framework for the legitimate use of nuclear weapons that the United States believes would be defensible for others to follow as long as nuclear weapons remain.

A More Defensible Nuclear Doctrine

Threat assessment: The first use of nuclear weapons is unnecessary or irrelevant to defeat threats to the territory of the United States today. However, some U.S. allies face potential threats that they rely on the United States to deter, including via possible first use of nuclear weapons. The United States and other states tend to exaggerate the threats that justify their reliance on first-use nuclear deterrence, but all nuclear-armed states can do more to clarify that they will not seek or employ capabilities that could cause others legitimately to use nuclear weapons in self-defense.

The proposed policy in a nutshell: The United States should declare that it possesses nuclear weapons only to respond to, and thereby deter or defeat, threats to its survival or that of its allies, particularly stemming from any use of nuclear weapons.

Differences from existing policy: This policy would raise the threshold of nuclear use to “threats to survival” instead of “extreme circumstances.” The first use of nuclear weapons would be allowed only in response to existential threats to the United States or its allies, eschewing attempts to conduct disarming first strikes against Russia or China. The policy would be more consistent with U.S. interests in strategic stability and more consonant with just war doctrine and international law.

Objectives of Nuclear Policy

- Contribute to overall deterrence of threats to survival of the United States and its allies
- Minimize probability of any nuclear use and escalation
- Reduce incentives for other states to acquire or expand nuclear arsenals
- Enhance credibility of the deterrence policy by making it a model that the United States would recognize as morally and legally defensible if other nuclear-armed states copied it

Guidelines for Implementation

- If non-nuclear means fail, nuclear weapons could be used to defeat, through direct destruction of military forces and demonstration of escalatory risks, any existence-threatening incursion into the territory of the United States or that of an ally, and eliminate the adversary’s will to continue the war.

- Disarming first strikes against Russian or Chinese nuclear forces would be eschewed because they are not feasible and if they were feasible, or were perceived to be feasible, they would drive Moscow and Beijing to seek countervailing capabilities and policies that would make the United States less secure.
- U.S. retaliation to an adversary's nuclear first use would be directed to destroy the military and security apparatus and leadership of the attacking state.

Concrete Steps Forward

- This policy could be conveyed in the Pentagon's Quadrennial Posture Review, which is due in 2014.
- The policy could be central to the debate on reducing the role of nuclear weapons at the 2015 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference.

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