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CHINA AND NO FIRST USE: DISTRACT, DENY, DELAY

Why China's No First Use Treaty Proposal is Cynical and Dangerous

BY
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary

William Alberque

China is advancing a proposal for a treaty on the "No First Use" of nuclear weapons. This proposal sounds reasonable at first glance – nuclear weapon states could pledge that they wouyld never be the first to use nuclear weapons, thus making the world safer from nuclear war and taking the moral "high ground". China is advocating for a politically binding agreement or legally-binding treaty to be negotiated among the five Nuclear Weapon States (NWS) as defined by the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty of 1970 (NPT).

However, China's proposal is not all that it seems. The proposal does not address all nuclear weapons states – that is, the nuclear-armed NPT non-parties. Nor does it address the core purpose of deterrence – to prevent an adversary from attacking for fear of consequences that would outweigh any potential benefits of such an attack. By forgoing the possibility of first nuclear use, conventionally stronger states may be tempted to attack, knowing they can prevail without fearing nuclear consequences.

In addition, China's proposal is founded on cynicism – seeking to distract from China's massive and rapid nuclear buildup, to deny any need for China to engage in nuclear arms control or transparency, and to delay any coordinated response to its buildup by claiming to be a responsible nuclear power. China has a long-established history of advancing its NFU proposal to distract from key moments in the evolution of its nuclear arsenal. China first announced its own national NFU policy in 1964 to deflect criticism of its sudden abandonment of the claim that it would not seek nuclear weapons. It then sought to advance an NFU agreement in 1994 to distract from its refusal to join the NWS in a nuclear testing moratorium, instead twice conducting tests that disrupted sensitive global arms control talks. And China's latest NFU initiative is meant to delay a reaction from the world to its massive nuclear buildup over the past five years.

If the US joins in any such NFU pledge, China may feel more emboldened to initiate a conflict that could involve the United States, such as a war over Taiwan. Russia would welcome an abandonment by the United States of its pledge to use any and all necessary force to defend its NATO Allies, and North Korea may become far more aggressive if it knows that it need not fear a nuclear resposne to restarting hostilities against South Korea. Deterrence between India and Pakistan also could be disrupted if Pakistan were to forgo the potential for first use in the face of Indian conventional superiority. Even Belarus might balk at a declaration of NFU by Russia considering their nuclear sharing arrangements. Thus, a wider adoption of NFU by states could increase instability and raise the risk of war.

In short, China's NFU proposal is quite rightly seen by the other four NWS as a non-starter, and states should instead insist that China undertake other measures that it has long avoided – such as decreasig threats against its neighbors, increasing the transparency of its nuclear arsenal and engaging in arms control in a meaningful way.

Introduction

On July 12, 2024, the Chinese government submitted a working paper to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Preparatory Committee, outlining its "No-first-use of Nuclear Weapons Initiative." The paper sets out China's No First Use (NFU) policy, and calls on the other treaty-defined Nuclear Weapon States (NWS: China, the US, UK, France, and Russia) to "negotiate and conclude a treaty on the mutual no-first-use of nuclear weapons or issue a political statement in this regard."[1]

On July 23, China's MFA reprinted the NFU Working Paper on its website.[2] Then, on Oct. 16 , 2024, Chinese spokesperson Mao Ning answered a question about the proposal at a press conference, repeating China's main messages: that NFU is an important part of nuclear disarmament and that China is ready to negotiate the proposal with the other NPT parties.[3]

The Chinese Working Paper includes a brief draft treaty text for consideration and the rationale for the other NWS to adopt such a measure. However, China's effort is highly unlikely to advance due to three main factors: 1) the disingenuous nature of the Chinese proposal; 2) the inherent contradictions within China's proposal; and 3) the flaws of NFU declaratory policies in maintaining security.

China's proposal builds on its initial declaration of NFU in 1964, which was made to distract from its first nuclear test. China turned its NFU declaration into a draft treaty in 1994 to distract from its ongoing nuclear testing. China made this most recent proposal to distract from its current nuclear buildup—a build-up that it denies is happening—while falsely claiming that recent shifts in the US posture in Asia have become more aggressive and dangerous since 1994.

China and NFU: A disingenuous offer to cover its nuclear ambitions

China joined the nuclear "club" by testing its first nuclear device on Oct. 16, 1964, immediately seeking to deflect by releasing a statement that said, in part:

"The Chinese Government hereby solemnly declares that China will never at any time and under any circumstances be the first to use nuclear weapons," and calling for nuclear states to agree to negotiate a treaty "to use nuclear weapons, neither to use them against non-nuclear countries and nuclear-free zones, nor against each other."[4]

This statement makes up the core of China's NFU policy. Thirty years later, China circulated a draft treaty in 1994 to the other four NWS (China did not make the draft available to the public) and has intermittently raised the topic in the NPT subsequently in the UN General Assembly starting in 2022, culminating in the 2024 draft treaty that it shared with all NPT parties and the public.

China's initial declaration of NFU was a response in part to distract from the outrage that met China's first nuclear test. China was a leading voice against nuclear weapons acquisition and use, raising complaints about the initial US monopoly on nuclear weapons from the dawn of the atomic age. It further claimed that US nuclear weapons were a source of threats against China and against all of "the free people of the world,"[5] contrasting its own claim to be a source of peace and reflective of its own strategic advantage in geographic location, size, and population.

In 1946, China's leader, Mao Zedong had claimed that nuclear weapons are "a paper tiger which the US reactionaries use to scare people,"[6] prior to a series of crises where China increasingly feared the US might

[1] "No-first-use of Nuclear Weapons Initiative," Working Paper, submitted by China, Preparatory Committee for the 2026 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, NPT/CONF.2026/PC.II/WP.33, July 12, 2024, https://docs-library.unoda.org/Treaty_on_the_Non-Proliferation_of_Nuclear_Weapons_-Preparatory_Committee_for_the_Eleventh_Review_ConferenceSecond_session_(2024)/NPT_CONF.2026_PC.II_WP.33_-_33._ADVANCE_UNEDITED_VERSION_-_China_-_No-first-use_of_Nuclear_Weapons_Initiative-_ENG.pdf

[2] "No-first-use of Nuclear Weapons," MFA News, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the People's Republic of China, July 23, 2024, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/wjbxw/202407/t20240723_11458632.html

[3] "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Mao Ning's Regular Press Conference on Oct. 16, 2024," Spokesperson of the Foreign Ministry, Embassy of the Chinese People's Republic to Germany, Oct. 16, 2024, http://de.china-embassy.gov.cn/det/fyrth/202410/t20241016_11508473.htm

[4] "Statement of the Government of the People's Republic of China," Oct. 16, 1964, Wilson Center Digital Archive, PRC FMA 105-01262-01, 22-26, https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/statement-government-peoples-republic-china

[5] "Statement of the Government of the People's Republic of China," ibid.

[6] Mao Zedong, August 1946, as quoted in John Lewis and Xue Litai, *China Builds the Bomb*, Standford University Press, Standford, California, 1988, p. 6.

contemplate nuclear use, including the Korean War, the First Taiwan Strait Crisis, and Quemoy and Matsu.[7] On Jan. 15, 1955, China made the formal decision to acquire nuclear weapons, but kept this decision secret until its first nuclear test.[8] A mere two weeks after the decision to build nuclear weapons, Mao told the incoming Finnish ambassador to Beijing that the US "cannot annihilate the Chinese nation with its small stack of atomic bombs," going on to claim that, even without nuclear weapons China is still "sure to emerge the victor"[9] in a war with the US.

Once China acquired nuclear weapons, it claimed that it would be better able to lead the "oppressed nations" of the world against the threat from the US nuclear arsenal. This claim, combined with its initial NFU declaration, reflected China's attempt to deflect the inevitable criticism of its crossing of the nuclear threshold. China's NFU policy was combined with a "minimum credible deterrent" posture (MCD), claiming to be a responsible nuclear power that would not engage in nuclear arms racing. It also has consistently refused to provide any transparency over its number of nuclear warheads or any other aspect of its nuclear weapons program. China's NFU policy and MCD stance—absent any transparency—is intended to maximize ambiguity over its exact nuclear posture, and enhance deterrence with the US and USSR, despite the disparity between their larger nuclear arsenals and China's relatively small stockpile.[10] The US and USSR, by contrast, built transparency over their nuclear arsenals in types and systems to build strategic stability. The UK and France also built relatively small nuclear arsenals but have increased transparency as part of their own contributions to deterrence and strategic stability.

Thus, for China, MCD was in fact a practical decision—as the US was approaching the peak of its nuclear arsenal, with more than 30,000 warheads in 1964 (peaking at 31,255 in 1967),[11] and the USSR had approximately 5,000 on its way to a peak of 40,159 in 1986.[12] In addition, China throughout the Cold War maintained the simplest survivable nuclear force posture for its time, building a land-based liquid-fueled intercontinental missile arsenal. It did not pursue an air or sea-launched leg for its strategic arsenal, nor did it build a diverse set of non-strategic nuclear weapons like the US and USSR. China instead emphasized that its nuclear stockpile consisted of "a certain quantity, quality, and variety."[13] The lack of specifics and transparency over their stockpile was meant to maximize uncertainty in the minds of its adversaries and thus contribute to deterrence.

NFU and MCD were parts of a viable Chinese nuclear strategy in part due to the size, geographic location, and strategic depth provided by such a large and populous country. China's acceptance of casualties in wartime is remarkable, including the unspeakable levels of loss it incurred during its intervention in the Korean War. China received direct assistance from the USSR beginning in 1955 in acquiring its nuclear weapons arsenal and long-range missiles. This was before the Sino-Soviet split, which began in the early 1960s, culminating in a brief border war in 1969. The early onset of the Sino-Soviet split helped to sour the USSR leadership from aiding other countries in acquiring nuclear weapons and led them to consider a pre-emptive strike to destroy the Chinese nuclear arsenal. However, the USSR decided instead to work with the United States to negotiate an effective NPT Treaty.[14] Russia itself formally abandoned the 1982 Soviet NFU policy (which itself was deeply cynical) in 1993.[15]

The Chinese NFU pledge resurfaced in 1994 for political reasons. China had refused to sign the NPT from 1970 until March 1992, only agreeing to sign under sustained global pressure. China also refused to join the moratorium on nuclear testing announced

[7] "China's Fight for Tiny Islands—The Taiwan Straits Crises, 1954-58," Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, August 2016, https://adst.org/2016/08/chinas-fight-for-tiny-islands-quemoy-matsu-taiwan-straits-crises-1954-58

[8] *China Builds the Bomb*, ibid, p. 38.

[9] Mao Zedong, "The Chinese People Cannot Be Cowed by the Atom Bomb," from *Selected Works of Mao-Tse-tung*, Maoist Documentation Project, Jan. 28, 1955, https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-5/mswv5_40.htm

[10] Zhou Enlai, Oct. 1970, as quoted in Pan Zhenqiang, "China's No First Use of Nuclear Weapons," *Understanding: Chinese Nuclear Thinking*, Li Bin and Tong Zhao (eds.), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2016, pp. 51-78, https://www.jstor.org/stable/f5c2b5cf-8e92-3b7c-b210-881e4c6f1a04

[11] "Transparency in the US Nuclear Weapons Stockpile," Factsheet, US Department of Energy, July 22, 2024, https://www.energy.gov/sites/default/files/2024-08/U.S.%20Nuclear%20Weapons%20Stockpile%20Transparency%207_22_24.pdf

[12] Hans Kristensen, et al, "Estimated Global Nuclear Warhead Stockpiles 1945-2024," Federation of American Scientists, updated July 13, 2024, https://fas.org/initiative/status-world-nuclear-forces/

[13] "China's No First Use of Nuclear Weapons," ibid.

[14] William Alberque, "The NPT Treaty and the origins of NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements," Proliferation Paper 57, Paris: ifri Security Studies Centre, February 2017, https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/migrated_files/documents/atoms/files/alberque_npt_origins_nato_nuclear_2017.pdf

[15] Serge Schmemann, "Russia Drops Pledge of No First Use of Atom Arms," *New York Times*, Nov. 4, 1993, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1993/11/04/672893.html

by the USSR in 1991, later joined by the US, the UK, and France, and maintained by the Russian Federation.[16] Instead, China conducted 10 nuclear tests after the end of the Cold War, including a test just one day after the end of the 1995 NPT Review Conference, and another in the middle of negotiations on the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty.[17] Therefore, China's initial NFU declaration in 1964 and subsequent 1994 effort to promote an NFU Treaty can be seen as exercises in public relations, aimed at countering the criticism—especially in Asia—of China's behavior.

China and NFU–Inherent contradictions

China claims that NFU is a practical step to implement Article VI of the NPT and will promote nuclear disarmament.[18] It will not, because such a doctrine only has meaning if the country declaring it reflects that doctrine in its nuclear posture, deployments, exercises, and statements. While China's claims to an NFU policy were at least plausible in the past, it has lately pursued a nuclear posture that is inconsistent with NFU. Any continued faith in China's NFU policy is dependent on both its behavior towards other states and the direction of growth in its nuclear capabilities: on both accounts, it has long left its credibility behind.[19]

China has consistently refused any transparency over its nuclear arsenal—especially in the NPT processes[20]—and is weaponizing the lack of clarity to obscure the size and deployment locations of its nuclear arsenal to amplify its deterrent effect. China refuses to engage in nuclear arms control with the US or Russia,[21] claiming its arsenal is too small to necessitate engagement. China claims that the US and Russia "should further drastically reduce their nuclear arsenals," and even then, that China will only engage in multilateral nuclear arms control "when conditions are appropriate."[22] At the same time as it refuses transparency and arms control, it also refuses to engage in risk reduction talks, instead using risk to intimidate other countries. Examples are myriad, including breaking its Sept. 25, 2015, promise not to militarize disputed islands in the South China Sea,[23] stalling on agreement on a code of conduct for the South China Sea which has been in talks since 1990,[24] and using its "ghost fleet" and Coast Guard ships to attack vessels of neighboring states.[25]

China is the only NPT nuclear weapon state that has not declared a halt to its production of fissile material for weapons. The US, France, UK, and Russia all stopped such production and have eliminated some excess fissile material, while China has refused to disclose its fissile material production for weapons purposes or any information about its stocks.[26] Instead, China is currently engaged in a massive nuclear expansion, including increasing its fissile material production capacity with plutonium production reactors, building hundreds of missile silos, and building more than a thousand intercontinental ballistic and submarine launched missiles, and dual-capable intermediate range missiles, including anti-ship cruise missiles. China's Sept. 3, 2025, parade highlights the role of nuclear weapons in a more aggressive foreign policy and the ambition of its massive buildup.[27]

While China claims these changes are due to an increasingly hostile United States and dangerous East

[16] Robert Sherman, "Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty Chronology," Federation of American Scientists, 2001, https://nuke.fas.org/control/ctbt/chron.htm

[17] "Nuclear Testing and Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty Timeline," Fact Sheets and Briefs, Arms Control Association, April 2025, https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/nuclear-testing-and-comprehensive-test-ban-treaty-ctbt-timeline

[18] "No-first-use of Nuclear Weapons Initiative," ibid.

[19] Caitlin Talmadge, Lisa Michelini, and Vipin, Narang, "When Actions Speak Louder than Words: Adversary Perceptions of Nuclear No-First-Use Pledges," International Security, Vol. 48, No. 4, Spring 2024, https://direct.mit.edu/isec/article/48/4/7/121305/When-Actions-Speak-Louder-Than-Words-Adversary

[20] Paul Meyer, et al, "Why the NPT needs more transparency by the nuclear weapon states," Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, April 8, 2015, https://thebulletin.org/2015/04/why-the-npt-needs-more-transparency-by-the-nuclear-weapon-states/

[21] David Santoro, "Getting Past No: Developing a Nuclear Arms Control Relationship with China," *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament*, Vol. 6, Issue 1, June 13, 2023, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/25751654.2023.2221830

[22] "China's National Defense in 2010," White Paper on Defense, Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, March 31, 2011, http://www.china.org.cn/government/whitepaper/node_7114675.htm

[23] Morgan Ortagus, "China's Empty Promises in the South China Sea," Press Statement by the Spokesperson, US Department of State, Sept. 27, 2020, https://2017-2021.state.gov/chinas-empty-promises-in-the-south-china-sea/

[24] Jaime Naval, "ASEAN's elusive code of conduct for the South China Sea," East Asia Forum, Nov. 21, 2024, https://eastasiaforum.org/2024/11/21/aseans-elusive-code-of-conduct-for-the-south-china-sea/

[25] Sukjoon Yoon and Kim Wonhee, "The Import of Hybrid Activities in the South China Sea, Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs, Air University of Australia, Sept. 21, 2023, https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/Display/Article/3532882/the-import-of-hybrid-activities-in-the-south-china-sea/

[26] "Fissile Material Cutoff Treaty," Fact Sheet, Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, May 19, 2023, https://armscontrolcenter.org/fact-sheet-fissile-material-cutoff-treaty-fmct/

[27] Guangyi Pan, "Understanding China's Victory Day Military Parade: Politics, Strength, Narrative," Analysis, Australian Institute of International Affairs, Sept. 9, 2025, https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/understanding-chinas-victory-day-military-parade-politics-strength-narrative/

Asian security environment, the security conditions are more stable now than during the Cold War, with the end of the super-power proxy wars in the region. In stark contrast with China, the US and Russia have reduced their nuclear stockpiles radically from their Cold War peaks. The US withdrew thousands of US nuclear weapons formerly based in Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan and the UK withdrew its nuclear weapons from Singapore,[28] and both the US and USSR stopped traversing the region with nuclear weapons on surface vessels in 1991.[29]

The modernization of China's intercontinental ballistic missile arsenal is reasonable given the age and antiquated technology of its previous generation of liquid-fueled ICBMs.[30] However, the scale of the current expansion of China's nuclear arsenal now contradicts China's NFU and MCD posture and negates much of the reasoning previously used to excuse its lack of transparency. While submarine-launched nuclear-armed ballistic and cruise missiles are useful in providing a survivable second-strike capability. However, deploying them should require a reversal of China's long-held policy of keeping missiles de-mated from nuclear warheads—submarine-launched mating must occur in dock before the submarine leaves port. Such missiles also are useful for conducting first strikes[31]—for instance, by stealthily approaching and launching their missiles from just a few miles off the coast of their target.[32]

China also is building nuclear-capable missiles to be delivered by heavy bombers, tested a fractional orbital bombardment system (FOBS) in 2021,[33] and is developing a launch-on-warning capability for its nuclear forces, all of which are consistent with providing strike options and pursuing nuclear warfighting capabilities that go far beyond NFU.[34] China's anti-ship cruise missiles also are likely intended for a first nuclear strike on US aircraft carrier groups in a conventional war scenario with Taiwan.[35] These developments, combined with increased co-mingled dual-capable missiles and ballistic missile defence systems demonstrate the development of a credible Chinese limited nuclear warfighting posture.[36]

China and NFU: On deterrence and security

Adoption of NFU policies by nuclear weapon possessor states (which includes states possessing nuclear weapons that are not parties to the NPT, such as Pakistan) would undermine peace and security for three main reasons. First, no NFU declaration can ever be entirely credible or verifiable. If President Xi is faced with a conventional conflict that threatens the survival of the Chinese state (or his leadership), the viability of China's nuclear arsenal, or its ability to prevail in a Taiwan war scenario, an NFU declaration is unlikely to impede his consideration of nuclear first-strike scenarios.[37] India, the only other nuclear weapon possessor state with a declared NFU policy, openly discussed removing their NFU restriction in 2016 and 2019 in its ongoing conflict with Pakistan, further demonstrating the weakness of NFU as a security guarantee.[38] Even Soviet claim to adopting NFU did not preclude the idea of pre-emptive nuclear strikes that were, in effect, a first strike on the United States.[39]

[28] Richard Moore, "Where Her Majesty's Weapons Were,"' Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, Volume 57, No. 1, July-February 2001, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.2968/057001019

[29] Susan Koch, "The Presidential Nuclear Initiatives of 1991-1992," Case Study 5, Center for the Study of Weapons of Mass Destruction, National Defense University, September 2012, https://ndupress.ndu.edu/portals/68/documents/casestudies/cswmd_casestudy-5.pdf

[30] The explanation of China's policy in "China's No First Use of Nuclear Weapons," for instance, includes the argument that China does not need "capability necessary for precision strikes," nor does it need "its nuclear forces on hair-trigger alert status," as they would be incompatible with NFU, while also arguing that China may develop these capabilities in the future without contradicting NFU.

[31] James Johnson, "China's Evolving approach to Nuclear War-Fighting," *The Diplomat*, Nov. 22, 2017, https://thediplomat.com/2017/11/chinas-evolving-approach-to-nuclear-war-fighting/

[32] Hongjung Shin and Seong-ho Sheen, "The Evolution of China's Assured Retaliation: An Analysis Focusing on the Development of China's Strategic Nuclear Submarines," *The Korean Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 1, April 2025, pp., 61-98.

[33] Mark Zastrow, "How does China's hypersonic glide vehicle work?" *Astronomy*, Nov. 4, 2021, https://www.astronomy.com/space-exploration/how-does-chinas-hypersonic-glide-vehicle-work/

[34] "Engaging China and Russia on Arms Control: An Interview with Assistant Secretary of State Mallory Stewart'" Arms Control Today, May 2024, https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2024-05/interviews/engaging-china-and-russia-arms-control-interview-us-assistant-secretary

[35] Zuzanna Gwadera, "Intelligence leak reveals China's successful test of a new hypersonic missile," Online Analysis, IISS, May 18, 2023, https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2023/05/intelligence-leak-reveals-chinas-successful-test-of-a-new-hypersonic-missile/

[36] James Johnson, "Chinese Evolving Approaches to Nuclear 'War-Fighting': An Emerging Intense US–China Security Dilemma and Threats to Crisis Stability in the Asia Pacific," *Asian Security*, Volume 15, Issue 3, 2018, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14799855.2018.1443915

[37] "Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2024," Annual Report to Congress, US Department of Defense, Washington, Dec. 18, 2024, p. 102, https://media.defense.gov/2024/Dec/18/2003615520/-1/-1/0/MILITARY-AND-SECURITY-DEVELOPMENTS-INVOLVING-THE-PEOPLES-REPUBLIC-OF-CHINA-2024.PDF

[38] Hans Kirstensen, et al, "Indian nuclear weapons, 2024," Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, Vol. 80, No.5, 2024, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/00963402.2024.2388470?needAccess=true

[39] "Soviet Nuclear Doctrine: Concepts of Intercontinental and Theater War," Research Paper, Central Intelligence Agency, June 1973, https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000268107.pdf

Second, NFU advantages a nuclear possessor state in conventional conflicts where they believe they can prevail at the conventional level without resorting to nuclear weapons. In other words, there are cases where a stronger state is only deterred from starting a war because of the fear of nuclear use by the weaker state and therefore is able to act more aggressively because it does not fear the smaller state's conventional arsenal. In such a case, the declaration of NFU by the weaker state would encourage the stronger state to initiate a conventional surprise attack, knowing it was safe from any threat of nuclear retaliation.

For instance, in the Cold War, the Soviets had a huge advantage in numbers of conventional weapons over NATO in Europe and therefore sought to convince NATO to forgo nuclear weapons or to sow doubt about US nuclear security guarantees so that the USSR could prevail in a conflict without NATO being able to defend itself with nuclear weapons. NATO, in turn, relied on the potential for nuclear weapons in a first strike precisely to deter the Soviets from attacking and believing it could prevail over NATO without massive nuclear strikes. Thus, the threat of first use prevented the Soviets from initiating general war against NATO. This strategy is still in play today, where Russian aggression against NATO continues to be deterred by a mixture of nuclear, conventional, and missile defence capabilities, complemented by space and cyber capabilities, allowing the Alliance to go nuclear first if it decides to do so, especially in a case where Russia seeks to seize and hold NATO territory.

Forgoing the potential first use of nuclear weapons would have encouraged Soviet risk-taking and a potential surprise attack to defeat NATO, plunging the world into war. South Korea previously relied on the potential for US first nuclear use to deter North Korea, which had a conventional advantage over South Korea and could destroy Seoul with conventional artillery from the border. Thus, South Korea relied upon the threat of US nuclear first use to deter North Korea. Today, these threats are offset in part by South Korea's robust conventional counterforce capabilities, but the US nuclear guarantee remains an important part of South Korean security.

French doctrine includes the use of a single demonstration strike–a final warning–prior to a nuclear exchange to dissuade a larger state such as Russia or China from launching strategic attacks.[40] Pakistan also relies on the possible first use of nuclear weapons in a potential conflict with India due to India's overwhelming preponderance in conventional weapons, manpower, and geographic advantage—namely, the proximity of Islamabad to a potential front line with India. Finally, in a war with Taiwan, China likely believes that it can prevail at the conventional level—that it can bring tremendous resources with very short logistic lines and win in a relatively short period of time. In that case, the potential for US engagement, including potentially with nuclear weapons, is a strong deterrent against China initiating a conflict.

In each of these cases, an NFU declaration by the US, NATO, or Pakistan could lead to overconfidence by China, Russia, North Korea, or India that it could initiate and prevail in a conventional war without paying the penalty of nuclear retaliation and thus risking the outbreak of war with horrifying global consequences. In each case, the possibility of first use has maintained peace for decades.[41]

Third, the other four NPT NWS (US, UK, France, and Russia) each reserve the right to nuclear retaliation in the case of responding to a large-scale attack using other weapons of mass destruction, such as chemical or biological weapons. Within customary international law, there is a concept known as belligerent reprisal, which allows a state that has been attacked with mass loss of life to respond against the perpetrator in a way that is militarily necessary, distinguishes between civilian and military targets, is proportionate, and avoids unnecessary suffering—the basic tenant so the law of armed combat.[42] Such response is not restricted to "tit-for-tat" retaliation, and does not require a response in the same way as attacked.[43]

[40] "Speech of the President of the Republic on Defense and Deterrence Strategy," Speech at the Ecole de Guerre, Website of the President of France, Feb. 7, 2020, https://www.elysee.fr/front/pdf/elysee-module-15162-en.pdf

[41] William Chambers, Caroline Milne, et al, "No-First Use of Nuclear Weapons: A Policy Assessment," IDA Paper 20513, Institute for Defense Studies, January 2021, https://www.ida.org/-/media/feature/publications/n/no/no-first-use-of-nuclear-weapons-a-policy-assessment/p-20513.ashx

[42] "Law of Armed Conflict Standard Training Package," The Judge Advocate General's Legal Center and School, US Army, Oct. 21, 2024, https://tjaglcs.army.mil/Portals/0/Resources/STPs/ADN/Law%20of%20Armed%20Conflict%20(LOAC)%20(OCT%2024).pptx

[43] David Gompert, Kenneth Watman, and Dean Wilkening, "US Nuclear Declaratory Policy: The Question of First Nuclear Use," RAND, 1995, https://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR596.html

For instance, if Russia attacked France with a large-scale chemical weapon attack that killed thousands (and if repeated, continued, or ongoing chemical weapon attacks were anticipated), France could assert the right to respond with a limited nuclear strike, if such an attack was calibrated regarding proportionality, fallout, and other effects. Thus, No First Use policies could encourage states to seek weapons of mass destruction other than nuclear weapons, knowing they would be free of any nuclear retaliation for using or threatening to use them.[44]

Conclusion: China's NFU Pledge is a Distraction

China's NFU pledge lacks credibility. Just like deterrence policy, faith in China's pledge rests upon the perception of China's intent and capabilities, and in both cases, China has long ceased behaving like a state that has an NFU policy. As this paper has shown, China's 2024 proposal for an NFU treaty or pledge from the other NPT NWS (or non-NPT nuclear weapon states) is unworkable, unsound, and unsafe.

China is making this call for a renewed effort for broader adoption of NFU at a time when global attention is increasing on both China's massive expansion of its nuclear arsenal, far beyond NFU and MCD, and its refusal to engage in nuclear transparency, arms control, or restraint on the production of fissile material. China seeks to deny that it is racing to build up its nuclear arsenal, to distract from its refusal to engage diplomatically, and to delay other countries' responses to China's nuclear sprint. This also was the case in 1964 when China initially declared NFU to diffuse global anger at the hypocrisy of the first Chinese nuclear test, and in 1994 at China's resumption of post-Cold War nuclear testing. China continues to use its NFU policy as a shield against engaging with the other NWS, and a sword to attack them in front of the Global South.

If China truly wanted to advance nuclear disarmament, as it states in its NFU proposal, it should take the following steps:

1) Declare its nuclear warhead totals or planned ceiling for its current buildup.
2) Declare how many strategic weapons and the mixture of related air, land, and sea-launched systems it intends to build in its current massive expansion.
3) Join the other NPT NWS in forswearing the further production of fissile material.
4) Accept the US offer for nuclear arms control talks, preferably including Russia.
5) Stop acting aggressively towards its neighbors to the West, South, and East, including halting harassment operations against freedom of navigation missions and respecting international law in the Taiwan Strait and in the South China Sea.

Instead, China's NFU proposal seeks to disadvantage other NWS while allowing it to increase pressure and increase the risk it puts on its neighbors—even risking war—without the risk of massive retaliation. It further seeks to undermine the extended nuclear security guarantees that have reduced nuclear proliferation and prevented general war for 80 years.

[44] "US Nuclear Declaratory Policy," ibid.

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