

Obama Flinches at Renouncing Nuke First Strike

Exclusive: The U.S. threat to launch a first-strike nuclear attack has little real strategic value – though it poses a real risk to human survival – but President Obama fears political criticism if he changes the policy, as Jonathan Marshall explains.

By Jonathan Marshall

Time is running short for President Obama to make good on his 2009 promise “to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons,” for which he won the Nobel Peace Prize. Yet as both the Wall Street Journal and New York Times recently reported, Obama’s advisers may have just nixed the single most important reform advocated by arms control advocates: a formal pledge that the United States will never again be the first country to use nuclear weapons in a conflict.

Ever since President Truman ordered two atomic bombs dropped on Japan in 1945, the United States has reserved the right to initiate nuclear war against an overwhelming conventional, chemical or biological attack on us or our allies. But peace advocates – and more than a few senior military officers – have long warned that resorting to nuclear weapons would ignite a global holocaust, killing hundreds of millions of people.

In a talk to the annual meeting of the Arms Control Association on June 6, Deputy National Security Advisor Benjamin Rhodes promised that President Obama would continue to review ways to achieve his grand vision of a nuclear-free world during his last months in office. Obama was reportedly considering a “series of executive actions” to that end, including a landmark shift to a “no first use” policy.

Two-thirds of adult Americans surveyed support such a policy. So do 10 U.S. senators who wrote President Obama in July, proposing a no-first-use declaration to “reduce the risk of accidental nuclear conflict” and seeking cut-backs in his trillion dollar plan for nuclear modernization over the next 30 years.

But Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter, Secretary of Energy Ernest Moniz (who oversees the nuclear stockpile), and Secretary of State John Kerry all warned during a National Security Council meeting in July that declaring a policy of “no first use” would alarm America’s allies, undercut U.S. credibility, and send a message of weakness to the Kremlin at a time of tense relations with Russia.

Yet until they took charge of giant bureaucracies whose funding depends on

keeping the threat of nuclear war alive, both Carter and Moniz were on record *supporting* “a new strategy for reducing nuclear threats” and achieving security “at significantly lower levels of nuclear forces and with less reliance on nuclear weapons in our national security strategy.”

In a 2007 manifesto, Carter, Moniz, and other centrist Democratic foreign policy experts rejected the old claim that nuclear weapons are still needed to deter non-nuclear attacks.

“Nuclear weapons are much less credible in deterring conventional, biological, or chemical weapon attacks,” they wrote. “A more effective way of deterring and defending against such non-nuclear attacks – and giving the President a wider range of credible response options – would be to rely on a robust array of conventional strike capabilities and strong declaratory policies.”

They also gave strong implicit support to a no-first-use doctrine, stating that “nuclear weapons must be seen as a last resort, when no other options can ensure the security of the U.S. and its allies.”

Risk of Overreaction

Why does a no-first-use policy matter? In a *New York Times* column last month, Gen. James Cartwright, former vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and head of the United States Strategic Command, emphasized the folly of introducing nuclear weapons into any conflict.

“Using nuclear weapons first against Russia and China would endanger our and our allies’ very survival by encouraging full-scale retaliation,” he and a colleague wrote. “Such use against North Korea would be likely to result in the blanketing of Japan and possibly South Korea with deadly radioactive fallout.”

A policy of no first use, backed up by a reconfiguration of U.S. nuclear forces to reduce their offensive capabilities, would lower the chance of a rival nuclear power rushing to launch early in a crisis and unleashing World War III. Today some nuclear powers like Russia have their forces on hair-trigger alert for fear of being wiped out by a U.S. surprise attack; as a result, the world is just one false alarm away from all-out nuclear war.

As two senior officials at the Arms Control Association observed recently in the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, “Among other advantages, a clear US no-first-use policy would reduce the risk of Russian or Chinese nuclear miscalculation during a crisis by alleviating concerns about a devastating US nuclear first-strike.

“Such risks could grow in the future as Washington develops cyber offensive

capabilities that can confuse nuclear command and control systems, as well as new strike capabilities and strategic ballistic missile interceptors that Russia and China believe may degrade their nuclear retaliatory potential.”

They also discounted the claim that U.S. allies such as Japan or Korea would rebel against such a change of policy: “They are highly likely to accept such a decision, since no first use will in no way weaken US military preparedness to confront non-nuclear threats to their security. . . Many US allies, including NATO members Germany and the Netherlands, support the adoption of no-first-use policies by all nuclear-armed states.”

Warnings by nuclear hawks that a common-sense doctrine of no-first-use would undercut U.S. “credibility” or project “weakness” are simply business-as-usual attempts by national security bureaucrats to inflate threats and keep the war machine in high gear. If they succeed in blocking reform, America and the rest of the world will remain at real risk of annihilation through accidental nuclear escalation.

The question now is whether President Obama will listen to the fear-mongers in his cabinet, or remember what he said in May at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial: “Among those nations like my own that hold nuclear stockpiles, we must have the courage to escape the logic of fear and pursue a world without them.”

Jonathan Marshall is author or co-author of five books on international affairs, including *The Lebanese Connection: Corruption, Civil War and the International Drug Traffic* (Stanford University Press, 2012). Some of his previous articles for Consortiumnews were “Risky Blowback from Russian Sanctions”; “Neocons Want Regime Change in Iran”; “Saudi Cash Wins France’s Favor”; “The Saudis’ Hurt Feelings”; “Saudi Arabia’s Nuclear Bluster”; “The US Hand in the Syrian Mess”; and “Hidden Origins of Syria’s Civil War.”]
