

# What Experts and Senior Officials Have Said About Adopting a No-First-Use or Sole-Purpose Nuclear Declaratory Policy

## THE ISSUE

The Biden Administration is reportedly considering changing the long-standing U.S. nuclear declaratory policy of calculated ambiguity to one of “no first use” (NFU) or “sole purpose.” Under an NFU or sole-purpose policy, the United States would pledge never to use nuclear weapons first in a conflict, including in response to chemical, biological, cyber, or massive conventional attacks. In a spring 2020 *Foreign Affairs* [article](#), then-presidential candidate Joe Biden expressed his support for sole purpose and said that he would “work to put that belief into practice, in consultation with the U.S. military and U.S. allies.”

Many believe this change would [carry real risk](#), including the erosion of deterrence against adversary aggression and reduction of allies’ confidence in extended U.S. deterrence commitments. Through the years, a large number of senior officials and allies have voiced their opposition to NFU or sole purpose. The Biden Administration should heed their advice.

## SENIOR MILITARY LEADERS ADVISE AGAINST NFU

- Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff **General Mark Milley** [testified](#) in 2021, “I would not recommend making a declaration of no first use. It is a topic [that] I think would take away an option for the president.”
- Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff **General John Hyten** [explained](#) in 2020, “[M]y advice is that a no first use policy is bad policy for the United States of America and it’s bad because we can’t predict the future.” In 2019 he [explained](#), “[It] would create an environment where an adversary could think that crossing the line would be okay and that the United States would not respond to whatever the situation was.”
- Commander of U.S. Strategic Command (STRATCOM) **Admiral Charles Richard** [testified](#) in October 2019, “My best military advice would be to not adopt a ‘no first use’ policy... [It] would have a significant negative effect on our commitments to our allies.” He [reiterated](#) his opposition in April 2021.
- Former STRATCOM Commander **General Robert Kehler** [testified](#) in April 2021, “[A] no-first-use policy incentivizes our adversaries to act aggressively, to include, perhaps, starting a major, conventional, regional war, without facing the consequences of the ultimate risk... [I]t removes a pillar of security from our allies and that is a fundamental pillar for them.”
- Former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff **General Joseph Dunford** [testified](#) in 2019, “I think the current policy is one that complicates an adversary’s decision making process and I wouldn’t recommend any change to simplify an adversary’s decision making calculus.”

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/fs219>

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## SENIOR BIDEN AND OBAMA OFFICIALS HAVE OPPOSED NFU

- **Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin**, while acknowledging that NFU is a matter of policy that the Administration will review, testified in June 2021 that he agreed with Chairman Milley that “our goal is to provide as many credible options to the president as possible.”
- **Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Colin Kahl** testified in March 2021, “I am not personally in support of a no-first-use policy.”
- **Assistant Secretary of Defense for Nuclear, Chemical, and Biological Defense Programs Deborah Rosenblum** testified in May 2021, “Give[n] the strategic environment that we face, one that is absolutely challenging U.S. interests and those of our allies, I do not support a no-first-use policy.”
- **Deputy Secretary of Defense Kathleen Hicks** testified in February 2021, “I do not believe no-first-use policy is necessarily in the best interest of the United States,” and in April 2018, she stated, “I am more comfortable having that ambiguity that you can provide to a policy maker...in the current environment we’re in...”
- President Barack Obama’s former Cabinet officials, **Secretary of Defense Ash Carter**, **Secretary of State John Kerry**, and **Secretary of Energy Ernie Moniz**, all opposed adopting an NFU policy, reportedly due to

expressed concerns from allies. Secretary of Defense Carter reportedly raised objection to NFU “on the grounds that it risked provoking insecurity about the U.S. deterrent among allies, some of which then could pursue their own nuclear programs in response.”

## U.S. ALLIES DO NOT SUPPORT NFU

- When asked about the United States adopting NFU or sole-purpose doctrine, **United Kingdom** Secretary of State Ben Wallace stated in July 2021, “We’re not in favor of that change of doctrine.” In support of the U.K.’s own doctrine of ambiguity, he stated, “It’s about a range of threats, and...we will reserve that right to deploy those weapons as we must.”
- When President Obama considered NFU in 2016, former National Security Council official Jon Wolfsthal reported that “we got a call from [**Japanese**] **Prime Minister Abe**’s office objecting to no-first-use adoption.” He further stated that “it had almost everything to do with China.” Since then, the Chinese threat to Japan has only worsened.
- **France, South Korea, and Germany** also raised concerns about an NFU policy when Obama considered its adoption in 2016.

If President Biden follows through on his commitment to consult with the military and our allies, then he clearly should reach the same conclusion that they and previous Presidents have reached: to oppose an NFU or sole-purpose policy.