

U.S. Nuclear Policy: “Negative Security Assurances”

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The United States maintains nuclear weapons to “deter, dissuade, and defeat” a range of “immediate” and potential conventional, nuclear, chemical and biological weapons threats. However, since 1978, the United States has pledged not to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear-weapon states that are members of the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), except if attacked by such a state that is allied with a state possessing nuclear weapons. At the same time, successive administrations have maintained a policy of “strategic ambiguity” by refusing to rule out nuclear weapons use in response to attacks involving biological or chemical weapons.

Negative Security Assurances and Nonproliferation

The United States first formally made nuclear non-use pledges, also termed “negative security assurances, in 1978. On April 5, 1995, Secretary of State Warren Christopher announced a slightly revised policy, which was most recently repeated on February 22 by State Department spokesman Richard Boucher:

The United States reaffirms that it will not use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapon state-parties to the Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons, except in the case of an invasion or any other attack on the United States, its territories, its armed forces or other troops, its allies, or on a state toward which it has a security commitment carried out, or sustained by such a non-nuclear-weapon state in association or alliance with a nuclear-weapon state.

Under the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, the five recognized nuclear weapon states are the United States, Russia, Britain, France, and China. Three other states—India, Pakistan, and Israel—also possess nuclear weapons but are not members of the NPT. Iraq and North Korea are members of the NPT, but both have violated its terms by pursuing nuclear weapons and are not considered to be in good standing with the treaty. North Korea is currently subject to the 1994 Agreed Framework, under which it could become compliant with the NPT. Iraq has refused access by UN-authorized inspectors to determine whether it is has eliminated its nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons capabilities.

In 1995, UN Security Council 984 acknowledged the United States’ negative security pledge made by Secretary Christopher and similar pledges made by the other four NPT nuclear-weapon states. At the 1995 NPT review and extension conference, these negative security assurances were incorporated in the final document’s “Principles and Objectives for Non-Proliferation and Disarmament,” which was vital to securing indefinite extension of the treaty.

Strategic Ambiguity

Despite the “negative security assurances” pledge, senior U.S. officials in several administrations have refused to rule out the use of nuclear weapons in response to attacks with chemical or biological weapons. In his February 22 statement, Boucher addressed this issue, saying:

Furthermore, the policy says that we will do whatever is necessary to deter the use of weapons of mass destruction against the United States, its allies, and its interests. If a weapon of mass destruction is used against the United States or its allies, we will not rule out any specific type of military response.

Boucher noted that similar statements had been made repeatedly since the 1970s, specifically citing statements during the Persian Gulf War in 1991 and an April 1996 statement by Secretary of Defense William Perry. Speaking about a suspected Libyan chemical weapons facility at Tarhunah, Perry said that “[if] some nation were to attack the United States with chemical weapons, then they would have to fear the consequences of a response from any weapon in our inventory.” Perry added that “we could make a devastating response without the use of nuclear weapons, but we would not forswear that possibility.” But Perry also noted, “In every situation that I have seen so far, nuclear weapons would not be required for response.”

U.S. diplomats have tended to emphasize the negative security assurances policy in international forums, such as arms control negotiations, while other U.S. officials have enunciated purposefully ambiguous qualifications of the pledge in response to specific perceived threats from chemical and biological weapons.

Pros and Cons

Proponents of a clear negative security assurance policy have argued that failure to enunciate such policies leaves open and potentially even encourages nuclear weapons use in a broader range of situations. By stating or implying that the United States, despite its overwhelming conventional military superiority, needs nuclear weapons to respond to a non-nuclear attack or to carry out a pre-emptive strike against a potential nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons threat, the United States may undermine global nuclear nonproliferation efforts by persuading other states that nuclear weapons are necessary for their protection.

Furthermore, proponents of clear negative security assurances caution that to enhance the credibility of the possible use of nuclear weapons by the United States, military planners and leaders will seek to develop and deploy new types of nuclear warheads or modifications of existing nuclear warheads. These new or modified nuclear weapons could provide capabilities considered better suited for use against specific targets, namely deeply buried and hardened underground targets that may contain leadership command centers or weapons of mass destruction. However, new types of nuclear weapons might necessitate the resumption of nuclear weapon test explosions and could prompt other nuclear-weapon states to follow suit.

On the other hand, supporters of a “strategic ambiguity” policy counter that it serves U.S. interests to keep potential ad-

versaries uncertain of expected U.S. responses, thereby extending deterrence considerably beyond limits that would likely apply were the policy articulated in a more clear-cut manner. As Secretary of State Colin Powell said to the Senate Armed Services Committee on March 12, 2002:

... for those nations that are developing these kinds of weapons of mass destruction, it does not seem to us to be a bad thing for them to look out from their little countries and their little capitals and see a United States that has a full range of options and an American president that has a full range of options available to him to deter, in the first instance, and to defend the United States of America, the American people, our way of life, and our friends and allies.

For more information, please see the Arms Control Association’s Web site, www.armscontrol.org