

## No, Aspi, A no-first-use US nuclear posture would be good for Australia and the region

Written by John Hallam

Monday, 26 October 2020 12:48 -

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Â A no-first-use US nuclear posture would beÂ **good**Â for Australia and the region

(and a first - use policy would be catastrophically dangerous)

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**On 23 Oct, ASPI's Malcolm Davis wrote that a US No First Use policy would be 'bad' for Australia and the region. The opposite is true**

Â Malcolm Davis's argument in ASPI's The Strategist on 23 Oct,Â that a no-first-use policy from the US would be 'bad' for Australia and the region is the very opposite of the truth. The truth is that a no first use policy would be good for the region by making the likelihood of a nuclear conflagration that much lower, while 'First Use' policies (or ambiguity that 'leaves something to chance' while admitting the possibility of first use) could be catastrophic.

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What Malcolm Davis fails to understand is that No First Use policies are NOT woolly-minded 'feel-good' but unthought-thruÂ policies, implemented because they look and feel 'virtuous'.

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NFU policies are carefully considered responses to nuclear postures, and in particular to likely nuclear escalation scenarios between 'great' powers with substantial nuclear (and conventional) arsenals, that lead inexorably to catastrophic outcomes in which nobody wins and in which a substantial portion of the worlds population dies in a nuclear exchange lasting less than two hours.

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A willingness to 'shoot first' (and even to countenance a pre-emptive strike to ensure the other fellow doesn't shoot first) is profoundly de-stabilising in a situation in which the maintainance of 'strategic stability' (ie no DF -5s or 26's or minutemen being launched at anyone) is a matter of life and death.

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Malcolm argues that a NFU policy is somehow all very well in times in which threats are not to be taken seriously and in which the main threats consist of terrorism and other threats that can't readily be dealt with via nuclear weapons or large conventional weapons. However the argument goes that in times in which real great-power conflict seems to be possible then NFU

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would have to be jettisoned as woolly-minded nonsense.

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The opposite is true. NFU is intended to decrease the likelihood of catastrophe in precisely times in which great power nuclear conflict is ON the agenda - as it is now. It is precisely the likelihood of mutual escalation in a situation in which, for example, a couple of aircraft carriers have been sunk (is sending large vulnerable sinkable capital ships into situations in which Chinese cruise missiles might sink them such a great idea in the first place? Are aircraft carriers themselves even such a great idea?) - that makes NFU a GOOD idea. In that situation we do not want, SHOULD not want, first use to be an option.

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Malcolm Davis has it precisely upside-down..

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Because a US First Use would in all likelihood mean that the Chinese NFU doctrine would likewise be set aside for prompt retaliation. (which would be second use)

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And in all likelihood they'd want to degrade US nuclear command and control, which they would do with a strike on US command and control facilities. The second- largest US command and control facility in the region and outside the US itself is Pine Gap, accompanied by North West Cape. Both perform critical relay functions.

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A strike at STRATCOM itself might or might not yet be a bridge too far (though half an hour later it certainly wouldn't be). An EMP strike, both on mainland US and possibly on Australia, would likewise be a distinct possibility. We may be a little unsure if China has 'super-EMP' weapons, but we'd prefer not to find out this way.

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A variant of this scenario is that ambiguity prevails, and an aircraft carrier is sunk in the strait of Taiwan or the Senkakus, perhaps without the explicit intent of Chinese higher command. As Biden contemplates the possibility of first use versus a conventional response, China decides he's likely to go for first use and decides to strike first again at command and control facilities, with the aim of making first use noÂ longer possible. (ie its a pre-pre-emptive strike).

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Numerous variations are possible. Its not clear Malcolm has considered any of them.

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These considerations surely must give pause to first use (or ambiguity) advocates.

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NFU has the virtue that it gets us out of the kinds of mutual escalation traps that unstable situations of great power conflict or potential great power conflict, confront us with. NFU isn't the harebrained child of dopey hippie idealists who haven't given it proper consideration. It is a tool intended precisely for times of trouble and instability.

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Such as now.

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First use confronts Australia and the region with a real possibility of utter catastrophe, and ambiguity is almost as bad.

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Really, we must base our policies on the truism that a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought.

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Malcolm says that:

"The risk is that Biden may still view nuclear weapons through the lens of Prague 2009, rather than the strategic reality of 2020. In 2009, the main threat to the US came from international terrorism and

nuclear weapons were largely seen as peripheral. But that was then and this is now, and the primary threat is from peer adversaries such as China and Russia."

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The risk on the contrary is precisely that Biden may NOT view nuclear policy through eyes that correctly see the existential necessity, (way more pressing now than in 2009), to decrease reliance on nuclear weapons, and hence, in a time of instability, may court the apocalypse. The risk is precisely that Biden may listen to the likes of Malcolm or his US equivalents.

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No First Use was a good idea in 2009. Now it's a pressing existential necessity.Â Â Â Â Â Â

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23 Oct 2020|Malcolm Davis

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<https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/a-no-first-use-us-nuclear-posture-would-be-bad-for-australia-and-the-region/>

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With the presidential election only 10 days away, what US nuclear strategy might be under a Joe Biden administration and what that might imply for US extended nuclear deterrence should be key issues of concern for the region, and for Australia.

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The US is facing a more adverse strategic environment than it has for a long time. It is confronted by two nuclear-capable peer adversaries: China, which is seen as the main threat, and Russia, whose nuclear force is being upgraded rapidly. The modernisation of China's nuclear forces could cause Beijing to shift away from its traditional no-first-use policy.

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The combination of Russian and Chinese nuclear capability development – not to mention an unpredictable and nuclear-armed North Korea, and the prospect of an Iranian nuclear breakout as a consequence of President Donald Trump’s scrapping of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action – means that Biden would have to think carefully before succumbing to calls to adhere to a “no first use” doctrine or to make a “sole purpose” declaration. Both of these options will be advocated by proponents in the US arms-control and disarmament community.

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As President Barack Obama’s deputy, Biden supported the idea of a no-first-use posture for nuclear weapons, stating in 2017 that, “Given our non-nuclear capacities and the nature of today’s threats, it’s hard to envision a plausible scenario in which the first use of nuclear weapons by the United States would be necessary or would make sense.” The Democratic Party’s 2020 platform suggests that “the sole purpose of our nuclear arsenal should be to deter and, if necessary, retaliate against a nuclear attack, and we will work to put that belief into practice, in consultation with our allies and military.”

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The platform also commits to “work to maintain a strong, credible deterrent while reducing our overreliance and excessive expenditure on nuclear weapons”, but would apparently cancel both the nuclear

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sea-launched cruise missile and low-yield warhead for the Trident – both initiatives of the Trump administration’s 2018 nuclear posture review.

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So it seems probable that a Biden administration would seek to move back to nuclear policy that is similar to, if perhaps a bit more ambitious than, that suggested in Obama’s 2009 Prague speech, which emphasised nuclear disarmament that was consistent with maintaining a “safe, secure and effective arsenal to deter any adversary, and guarantee that defense to our allies”.

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The risk is that Biden may still view nuclear weapons through the lens of Prague 2009, rather than the strategic reality of 2020. In 2009, the main threat to the US came from international terrorism and nuclear weapons were largely seen as peripheral. But that was then and this is now, and the primary threat is from peer adversaries such as China and Russia.

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Of course, Biden isn’t blind to the challenges from China and Russia, but the military capabilities – including nuclear ones – of America’s peer adversaries have improved considerably during the past 11 years.

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Today, the US and its allies face a far more potent military challenge in technological terms and traditional advantages are being eroded in

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key areas. For example, the US Navy is being openly challenged by a rapidly expanding and modernising People's Liberation Army Navy, and the PLA Air Force has undertaken a broad modernisation of its air combat capabilities that involves replacing obsolete third-generation platforms with advanced "fourth-plus" and fifth-generation systems, including for strategic strike.

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The establishment of the PLA Strategic Support Force and the growth of advanced Chinese counter-space, cyber and electronic "network warfare" capabilities is placing the US lead in C4ISR (command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance) at risk, and with it the US ability to rapidly gain and sustain a knowledge edge in warfare. The PLA Rocket Force has grown dramatically and now has far more potent anti-access/area-denial capabilities that are increasingly putting the US ability to project power into the western Pacific at risk.

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Russia's military continues to engage in large-scale modernisation. Moscow faces greater challenges in economic terms to sustain such an effort, but investment in long-range hypersonic missiles, the blurring of boundaries between strategic non-nuclear and tactical nuclear weapons, and new counter-space and cyber systems are making Russia a more dangerous foe in 2020 than it was in 2009.

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With these developments in mind, now is not the time for well-intentioned efforts towards denuclearisation or adoption of a no-first-use posture. Any decision by Biden to embrace a "sole purpose" declaration would end US strategic ambiguity. With the military balance much less skewed in the US's favour, China and Russia could use conventional military force to impose their will, without having to worry about a nuclear riposte from the US, so long as they themselves remained below the nuclear threshold. With enhanced conventional capabilities, they now have a much greater ability to inflict heavy losses on US forces. If they sink an aircraft carrier or two or use overwhelming force against US allies, for example, what would a Biden administration committed to a no-first-use policy do?

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Such a state of affairs would not engender confidence in US extended nuclear deterrence among America's allies. For Tokyo, Seoul and Canberra, or Warsaw for that matter, knowing that the US would no longer deter major conventional attacks by maintaining the possibility of a nuclear response would increase the prospects of military coercion or threats from China and Russia.

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That prospect is certain to have some decision-makers— notably in Tokyo and Seoul— re-examining their options for acquiring an independent



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nuclear deterrent, simply because they could no longer count on the US.

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It would also leave Australia in a difficult position. The 2009 defence white paperâs comment on the importance of extended nuclear deterrence still resonates today:

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Australian defence policy under successive governments has acknowledged the value to Australia of the protection afforded by extended nuclear deterrence under the US alliance. That protection provides a stable and reliable sense of assurance and has over the years removed the need for Australia to consider more significant and expensive defence options.

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AUTHOR

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Malcolm Davis is a senior analyst at ASPI. Image: Olivier Douliery/AFP/Getty Images.

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