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# **The US “Sole Purpose” Debate: A Backgrounder**

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# The US “Sole Purpose” Debate: A Background

For its upcoming Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), the Biden Administration is currently considering whether to restrict the use of US nuclear weapons to the “sole purpose of deterring – and if necessary, retaliating against – a nuclear attack.” This “sole purpose” (SP) debate is the latest iteration of a long-standing dispute on whether and how to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in US security policy. Over the years, this deliberation has produced a number of statements, articles and, most recently, also Twitter discussions on the potential benefits and risks of a change in declaratory policy. This backgrounder reviews the different positions and arguments of the main actors involved, but is certainly far from exhaustive.

## “Sole purpose” vs. “no-first-use”?

In the debate, two similar, albeit somewhat different variants of declaratory policy are often conflated: “sole purpose” (SP) and the more established “no-first-use” (NFU) option. Both aim to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in security policy. Opinions differ, however, over the extent to which these variants have the same meaning and implications. While [some](#) analysts, like for instance **Jon Wolfsthal** and **Steve Fetter**, think NFU and SP are synonymous, others emphasize the more restrictive nature of NFU. **Vipin Narang** and **Ankit Panda**, for example, [argue](#) that NFU would preclude nuclear first use altogether, whereas SP would still permit it in extreme cases. The crux of the matter is whether such “extreme cases” would only include an imminent employment of nuclear weapons by an adversary or also non-nuclear attacks against the United States or its allies. These differentiations are further [spelled out](#) by **Adam Mount**, who suggests that SP would be a broader declaration of why the United States has nuclear weapons. Other analysts, like **Matthew Costlow**, however [question](#) whether these linguistic quibbles and theoretical differences could be implemented in practice.

## The reading list for busy people

For those keen to read only a handful of texts to grapple with the SP conundrum, the following pieces might be particularly useful. First, **Brad Roberts’** review [offers](#) a good starting point for current debates. Second, **Amy Woolf’s** constantly [updated](#) primer tells readers where we currently are. Third, **George Perkovich** and **Pranay Vaddi** [submit](#) a powerful case for SP. Fourth, **William Chambers** and his co-authors persuasively [argue](#) against SP. Finally, for short policy pieces, readers can choose among **Robert Einhorn’s** [view](#) from Washington, **Artur Kacprzyk’s** [perspective](#) from Warsaw, or **our own team’s** [take](#) from Berlin.

## A long-standing debate

NFU was subject to debate throughout the Cold War. For example, the **first effort** to find common NFU language appears to have occurred in **1957**, when US negotiators proposed to their Soviet counterparts that nuclear weapons should not be used unless a conventional attack reached such a magnitude that it could not be halted by conventional forces. Unsurprisingly, the Soviets rejected the formula. A few years later, the **1964 Chinese** nuclear test was followed by a statement that Beijing would not be the first to use nuclear weapons. Nonetheless, subsequent US-Soviet discussions on potentially limiting the use of nuclear weapons went nowhere. **Lawrence Weiler's** 1983 review [offers](#) an excellent primer on these early diplomatic exchanges.

During the 1970s and 1980s, analysts debated the merits of a US NFU. In 1972, scholar **Richard Ullman** analysed the NFU pledge adopted by China and [argued](#) that the superpowers would soon be “under more pressure to declare that they, also, will not use nuclear weapons first.” Given increased US-Soviet tensions after the demise of détente, former US government official **Fred Iklé** [wrote](#) in 1980 that the first use option was turning into a “dangerous trap” with the “potential of ripping [NATO] apart in times of crisis.” Two years later, top American security officials **McGeorge Bundy, George Kennan, Robert McNamara, and Gerard Smith** [proposed](#) that NATO decrease its reliance on nuclear weapons and declare an NFU policy. In response, four prominent West Germans – **Karl Kaiser, Georg Leber, Alois Mertes, and Franz-Josef Schulze** – [argued](#) this was too risky an option. In contrast, in 1984, physicist **Kurt Gottfried** and his co-authors [noted](#) that an NFU would enhance the security of “all nations.” Nevertheless, analyst **Josef Joffe** [challenged](#) this view a year later, suggesting that a reduction in the US nuclear guarantee would have “great political consequences” for the transatlantic alliance and the European balance of power. A few years later, scholars **Peter J. Liberman and Neil R. Thomason** [sought](#) to add more nuance to the debate by discussing the differences between NFU and a no-early-first-use.

The topic continued to attract academic and political attention after the end of the Cold War. In the early 1990s, academic researchers **George Quester and Victor Utgoff** [asked](#) whether the time for policy change had not finally come. Similarly, in 1995, former US government official **David Gompert** and two co-authors [made the case](#) for NFU; in 1997, the **US National Academy of Science** [recommended](#) the adoption of an NFU pledge after consultations with allies; and in 1999, scholar **Jack Mendelsohn** [noted](#) that the stage had “at least” been set for a “new debate,” even if change remained improbable. In the early 2000s, researchers **Harold Feiveson and Ernst Jan Hogendoorn** [proposed](#) that the United States should adopt a “stark” and “unambiguous” NFU.

The topic of NFU and SP has also created a stir in other Western capitals, among them Berlin. In 1998, after years of conservative rule, a new **German centre-left coalition government** was formed by the Social Democrats (SPD) and the Green Party (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen), and declared in its [coalition agreement](#) the intention to “advocate for... the lowering of the alert status of nuclear weapons, as well as a pledge never to be the first to use nuclear weapons.” Green Foreign Minister **Joschka Fischer** immediately tried to implement this goal, [stating](#) in a 1998 magazine interview that NATO should reconsider adopting an NFU policy due to the changed political climate, and that he had already [informed](#)

NATO Secretary General Javier Solana of Germany's desire to revise NATO's nuclear policy. Fischer's move led to prompt and sharp rejection from the NATO nuclear weapon states. US Defense Secretary **William Cohen** directly signalled his scepticism, [stating](#) that the option of first use was "an integral part of [the US] strategic concept" and that Washington thought "it should remain exactly as it is." US Secretary of State **Madeleine Albright** reacted in a similar way, sharing her criticism with German Defense Minister Rudolf Scharping. Opposition also [came](#) from **France** and the **United Kingdom**, which pointed to the essential deterrent effect of the existing first-use policy.

Despite the vehement opposition of the NATO nuclear powers, demands for NFU did not abate. In December 1998, the **Dutch parliament** passed a [resolution](#) calling on NATO to consider such a policy change. At the [NATO foreign ministers meeting](#) in Brussels a few days later **Joschka Fischer** again advocated for NFU, and Canadian Foreign Minister **Lloyd Axworthy** called for a general review of NATO's nuclear strategy. However, Fischer's proposal received [no support](#) from other NATO allies. In particular, the nuclear weapon states remained highly sceptical. In the end, NFU was not further discussed during the preparations for NATO's next Strategic Concept for the Washington Summit in April 1999. Nonetheless, the Canadian demand for a general review of NATO's nuclear strategy [found](#) its way to some extent into the **Summit Communiqué**.

Following up on a 2007 [call](#) by elder statesmen **Henry Kissinger**, **George Schultz**, **William Perry** and **Sam Nunn** for a nuclear-weapon-free world, a bipartisan **Strategic Posture Commission** was established by Congress late in the George W. Bush Administration. Its 2009 report underscored the importance of bipartisan nuclear policymaking, but unequivocally [rejected](#) an NFU, arguing that such a policy change would hurt extended deterrence.

With the **Obama Administration's** attempts to advance nuclear disarmament, the topic returned to the forefront once again, both in the United States and in Germany. As a response to the article by the four US elderly statesmen, former German Chancellor **Helmut Schmidt**, former German President **Richard von Weizsäcker** and former ministers **Hans-Dietrich Genscher** and **Egon Bahr** [published](#) in January 2009 a call for nuclear abolition in the German press. They called on the newly elected Obama Administration to change nuclear policy, arguing that "relics from the era of confrontation" no longer fitted "into our new century," and advocating for an NFU treaty among nuclear-armed states. A call for the withdrawal of US nuclear weapons from Germany also made it into the [coalition agreement](#) of the newly established **coalition government** between Conservatives (CDU/CSU) and Liberals (FDP) and was strongly supported by then Foreign Minister **Guido Westerwelle**, but [also](#) by a later cross-party parliamentary **motion** from 2010. Nonetheless, Westerwelle – as Fischer before him – ran into strong [opposition](#) within NATO as well as from the Liberal's conservative coalition partner.

The academic debate was also influenced by the Obama Administration's efforts. In 2009, scholar **Scott Sagan** [argued](#) that earlier studies had "exaggerated the potential military and diplomatic costs" of an NFU and "seriously underestimated its potential benefits." Experts **Morton Halperin**, **Bruno Tertrais**, **Keith Payne**, and **K. Subrahmanyam**, all [weighed in](#), arguing that there were in fact negative implications to changing the policy, and Sagan replied, challenging his critics. In China, scholars **Peng Guangqian** and **Rong Yu** [asked](#) why "a simple pledge" was "hard to realize even when the whole world wishes it." A year later, **Michael Gerson's** academic article [argued](#) in great detail that the threat of

nuclear first use was both unnecessary for deterrence and escalation-prone. Yet scholars **Alexander Lanoszka** and **Thomas Leo Scherer** [emphasized](#) in 2017 that the alleged benefits of NFU may be overstated and that nuclear ambiguity might not be as dangerous as some claimed.

In the end, the **Obama Administration** twice considered, but abandoned initiatives to restrict the role of nuclear weapons through an SP declaration. In its [2010 Nuclear Posture Review \(NPR\)](#), the Administration concluded that the US government was “not prepared at the present time to adopt a universal policy that deterring nuclear attack is the sole purpose of nuclear weapons,” arguing that there was still a “narrow range of contingencies” in which nuclear weapons deterred conventional, chemical, or biological attacks as well. In 2016, the Obama Administration reportedly again contemplated a policy change, but discarded it due to opposition from [allied governments](#), [military leaders](#), and various [principals](#) within the Administration.

Calls for some kind of SP or NFU pledge persisted as the **Trump Administration** sought to expand the role of nuclear weapons in its [2018 NPR](#), to include the “deterrence of nuclear and non-nuclear attack,” the “assurance of allies and partners,” and the “achievement of US objectives if deterrence fails.” In January 2019, a number of progressive Democrats [introduced](#) legislation proposing a NFU pledge. Notably, **Brad Roberts**, the Director of the Center for Global Security Research at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory and DASD for Nuclear and Missile Defense Policy from 2009 to 2013 in the Obama Administration, [wrote](#) a review of these debates. Nevertheless, **Military leaders** were particularly critical of potential changes to declaratory policy. Throughout 2019, then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General **Joseph Dunford**, Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General **John Hyten**, and United States Strategic Command Commander Admiral **Charles Richard** all [explicitly stated](#) their [opposition](#) to NFU, and primarily emphasized credibility and deterrence concerns.

## The ongoing dispute

Both as Vice President and as a candidate, **Joe Biden** supported an SP declaration. In a January 2017 speech, he [argued](#) that “deterring – and if necessary, retaliating against – a nuclear attack should be the sole purpose of the US nuclear arsenal.” This position was [re-affirmed](#) by his campaign website during the 2020 Presidential election cycle. “[T]he sole purpose of the U.S. nuclear arsenal should be deterring – and if necessary, retaliating against – a nuclear attack,” it read. “As president, [Biden] will work to put that belief into practice, in consultation with [...] allies and military.”

Despite President Biden’s apparent preference for an SP policy, there is notable disagreement within his Administration. On the one hand, several key political appointees overseeing the nuclear portfolio are [seen as sympathetic](#) of such a change in US declaratory policy. For instance, Biden’s Undersecretary of State for Arms Control and International Security, **Bonnie Jenkins**, [argued](#) in a podcast in January 2021 that the US government should adopt NFU. **Sasha Baker**, currently the senior director of strategic planning at the National Security Council (NSC) and nominated as Deputy Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, previously was an adviser for national security affairs to the vocal NFU [proponent](#) Senator **Elisabeth Warren**. Also, **Kingston Reif**, currently the Deputy Assistant Secretary

of Defense (DASD) for Threat Reduction and Arms Control, [co-authored](#) a letter to President Biden in September 2021, “strongly” urging the Administration to “translate” SP campaign pledges “into practice.” Other Biden appointees [have held positions](#) at the Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, an NGO advocating a reduced role for nuclear weapons in US strategy. Among these appointees are **Mallory Stewart**, now the NSC Senior Director for Arms Control, Disarmament, and Nonproliferation and the President’s pick for Assistant Secretary of State for Arms Control, Verification, and Compliance; **Leonor Tomero**, Biden’s former DASD for Nuclear and Missile Defense Policy; and **Alexandra Bell**, who serves as a Senior Bureau Official in the Bureau of Arms Control, Verification and Compliance at the Department of State. Bell had expressed her support for NFU in an October 2019 podcast, [stating](#) that the US “are not the kind of country that wants to start a nuclear war.”

On the other hand, several senior figures within the Administration have taken a more critical stance on potential changes to US declaratory policy. In her February 2021 nomination hearing, **Kathleen Hicks**, Biden’s Deputy Secretary of Defense, [declared](#) that she did “not believe [a] no-first-use policy is necessarily in the best interest of the United States.” She had further [elaborated](#) during a panel discussion in April 2018, stressing that any such pledge would need to be preceded by “dialogue and progress with the Russians in order to get to a point of trust.” **Frank Rose**, Principal Deputy Administrator of the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA), expressed similar scepticism towards NFU. In a co-authored piece from April 2019, he [suggested](#) that “[while] the United States should work to create the security conditions to be able to adopt such a policy in the future, those conditions do not exist today.” Hence, “adopting such a policy has the potential to seriously disrupt the existing network of U.S. alliances,” he added. Also, **Colin Kahl**, Biden’s Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, although connected to the Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation like Stewart, Tomero and Bell, [stated](#) in his March 2021 nomination hearing that he was “not personally in support of a no-first-use policy.”

These apparent disagreements within the Biden Administration notwithstanding, the White House **Interim National Security Strategic Guidance** released in March 2021 [reiterated](#) the goal to “take steps to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in [the US] national security strategy, while ensuring [the US] strategic deterrent remains safe, secure, and effective and that [its] extended deterrence commitments to [its] allies remain strong and credible.” Later that month, US Secretary of State **Antony Blinken** [confirmed](#) to an interviewer that the US government would undertake a Nuclear Posture Review to assess “what [it] need[s] to sustain deterrence and defense but also look at how [it] can continue to reduce reliance in the role of nuclear weapons in [its] strategy.” In April 2021, **Leonor Tomero** went further, [asserting](#) in an interview that she “fully expect[s] [...] declaratory policy will be reviewed and looked at as part of our reviews,” while **Victoria Nuland**, Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs, also [confirmed](#) in her nomination hearing that “President Biden is committed to taking steps to reduce the role of nuclear weapons [...] [including by] undertaking a review of nuclear policy that will certainly include declaratory policy.” In parallel, Democratic lawmakers Senator **Elizabeth Warren** and Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee **Adam Smith** [reintroduced](#) legislation “to establish in law that the United States policy was to not use nuclear weapons as a means of warfare first.”

This apparent NFU momentum precipitated some pushback. Shortly after Tomero's interview, her direct boss, Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for Strategy, Plans, and Capabilities **Melissa Dalton**, qualified Tomero's statements in a hearing before the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Strategic Forces. "Tomero's position [...] was not well reflected in the article," Dalton [suggested](#). "The question of our declaratory policy is a presidential level decision," she added, and will require "assessing the security environment, consulting with our allies to inform these reviews and to make a determination to inform presidential decision-making on what changes, if any, should be made to our current declaratory policy." During the same hearing, United States Strategic Command Commander **Admiral Charles Richard** [described](#) "a no first use policy as degrading the nation's deterrence [...] [since it] will remove a level of ambiguity that has deterrence value."

The debate took up speed over summer 2021. On 10 June, **Dalton** [told](#) the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Strategic Forces that the Administration had just started its Nuclear Posture Review, which would not be finished before January 2022. On the same day, the US government's U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission held a [hearing](#) on China's nuclear capabilities and policy. Within this framework, **Brad Roberts** argued that NFU would be welcomed by China but would not be believed or result "in significant changes to China's nuclear policy or posture." A few days later, on 16 June, **Joe Biden** met with Russian President **Vladimir Putin**, a meeting that yielded a [joint statement](#) reaffirming "the principle that a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought" – a statement that could be seen as suggesting support for SP within the White House. The US-Russian statement was met with scepticism from British and French diplomats, who [argued](#) that it "wasn't the right time for leaders to state that a nuclear war is unwinnable."

More warnings of the risks of a reduced role for nuclear weapons in US strategy followed. In a June 2021 House Armed Services Committee hearing, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff **General Mark Milley** [cautioned](#) against NFU, arguing that the US should "maintain all options [...] available to the president of the United States at all times." Secretary of Defense **General Lloyd Austin** supported this statement, [explaining](#) that "our goal is to provide as many credible options to the President as possible." At the end of July 2021, **23 Republican members of the House Armed Services Committee** sent a letter to the White House, [warning](#) that an NFU or SP declaration would increase the risk of nuclear use and hamper allied trust in US extended deterrence. In October 2021, Senate Foreign Relations ranking member Senator **James Risch** reiterated this stance, [insisting](#) that SP, which he equated with NFU, "scares our friends, encourages our adversaries and damages the very nonproliferation goals it claims to advance." Illustrating the cross-partisan divisions on NFU, Democrat Congressman **Seth Moulton** agreed with this warning in a piece published a month later, [suggesting](#) that such a change in declaratory policy "would embolden our adversaries in their efforts to expand their spheres of influence, undermine our commitments to our allies and partners, and even risk new proliferation of nuclear weapons around the world."

In what has been [read](#) as a win for the "Pentagon hawks" critical of changes to declaratory policy, **Leonor Tomero** was [ousted](#) from her position in September 2021. Tomero's nuclear deterrence portfolio, including notably the Nuclear Posture Review, has since been [taken over](#) by the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction **Richard Johnson**. Not a nuclear deterrence expert himself, Johnson was [reported](#) to rely on advice from many of the same career experts who were involved in the

Trump administration's 2018 Nuclear Posture Review. Towards the end of September, Democrat Senator **Ed Markey** [wrote](#) to the White House that Tomero's departure could potentially result in an NPR that reflected "the Cold War era's overreliance on nuclear weapons, rather than your lifetime of work championing policies that reduce nuclear weapons risks." Working for the US Congress, **Amy Woolf** has covered the broad contours of this debate as it unfolded in her continuously updated [primer](#).

The ongoing debate within the Administration once again became visible in November and December 2021. In mid-November, a number of **Republican Senators** [sent](#) a letter to President Biden to express concern over reports that the White House had blocked Department of Defense officials from making recommendations about changes to US nuclear declaratory policy. In early December 2021, Senator **James Risch** also once again [stressed](#) his strong opposition to SP at a think tank event. On 9 December, **Gro Harlem Brundtland**, a former prime minister of Norway, [wrote](#) in an opinion piece that a US SP would signal "progressive leadership," but also "reinforce support" for the NPT and have a "transformative potential." On the same day, media reports confirmed that **US officials** had reassured allies in Europe and Asia that the Administration would not adopt an NFU. However, one option upon which Biden was expected to decide was whether to declare that the sole purpose of US nuclear weapons was to deter nuclear and non-nuclear **existential threats**. **George Perkovich** welcomed the idea, noting that it would clarify the threshold. An **unnamed allied official** noted that many allies were "not reassured" by this option. Another leaked option was to state that the **fundamental purpose** of nuclear weapons would be to deter nuclear attacks. This was a "way to square the circle," **Robert Soofer**, a nuclear expert in Washington, commented. A White House meeting [was](#) expected for 10 December 2021.

This 2001 US debate was echoed in Berlin. For instance, Green parliamentarian **Katja Keul** [argued](#) in February 2021 in the Bundestag's plenary that it was the "height of hypocrisy" for the German government to oppose Biden's SP intentions. In April 2021, **Annalena Baerbock**, at the time the Green's candidate for the chancellorship, [told](#) an interviewer that a disarmament initiative should consider NATO relinquishing a nuclear first use option. However, she noted in the same interview that all disarmament efforts had to be congruent with the security of Germany's Eastern European neighbours. In September 2021, **Baerbock** [restated](#) her commitment to an SP policy change. In December 2021, **Baerbock** became the new Foreign Minister and **Keul** the Minister of State in the Foreign Ministry in the new "Traffic Light" German government.

## **Bipartisan agreement on the need to reassure allies**

The ongoing debate on the merits of a potential NFU or SP declaration contrasts with a high degree of bipartisan agreement on the need to reassure allies and partners of a continued US commitment to their security and to extended nuclear deterrence. **Joe Biden** has put an emphasis on reassurance from the beginning of his presidency, [promising](#) in his inaugural address on 20 January 2021 to "repair our alliances." In his first major foreign policy speech at the State Department Headquarters on 4 February 2021, he famously [stated](#) that "America is back" and promised to "engage with the world once again" to meet present and future challenges. In a speech at NATO Headquarters on 24 March

2021, Secretary of State **Antony Blinken** delivered this message directly to European allies, [reaffirming](#) the need to “ensure that our strategic nuclear deterrent remains safe, secure, and effective [...] keeping our commitments to our allies strong and credible.”

Following rifts with France as a result of the announcement of an Australia-UK-US alliance in September 2021, the White House made efforts to patch up the relationship, [announcing](#) “a process of in-depth consultations, aimed at creating the conditions for ensuring confidence [with France].” This culminated in a joint statement [issued](#) by Presidents **Biden** and **Macron** on 29 October 2021, reaffirming the importance of “NATO’s nuclear capability” and of “a credible and united nuclear Alliance,” while promising “close consultations on nuclear and arms control matters.” The Defense Department’s **Global Posture Review** released at the end of November 2021 [confirmed](#) these intentions, committing to “strengthen[] the U.S. combat-credible deterrent against Russian aggression and enable[] NATO forces to operate more effectively.” Ahead of the NATO Foreign Minister meeting in Riga at the beginning of December 2021, Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs **Karen Donfried** [reiterated](#) this message of US commitment to NATO and European allies, stating that the meeting would be an opportunity to “discuss our commitment to European and Baltic security” and “reiterate the United States’ steadfast commitment to NATO and to our solemn Article 5 [collective defense] commitment.”

This stance was echoed in the nomination hearings of key political appointees, irrespective of their positions on potential changes in US nuclear declaratory policy. In February 2021, **Kathleen Hicks** [stressed](#) the importance of the US alliance system and US extended nuclear deterrence for allies. In March 2021, **Colin Kahl** [noted](#) that “we must ensure that our nuclear deterrent remains safe, reliable, and effective, one that is credible, not only in the eyes of our adversaries but in the eyes of our allies.” In mid-April 2021, **Victoria Nuland** [pledged](#) to “work to [...] ensure that our extended deterrence commitment to our allies remains strong and credible.” At the end of April 2021, **Bonnie Jenkins** [repeated](#) this message almost verbatim, confirming she “would work to ensure [...] that U.S. extended deterrence commitments to U.S. allies remain strong and credible.” In her confirmation hearing in October 2021, **Mallory Stewart** sought to strike a balance, [arguing](#) that “[w]e have to really consider how we can take steps to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in our deterrence” all the while ensuring “our extended deterrence commitments to our allies and partners remain strong and credible.” Along the same lines, **Nicholas Burns**, Biden’s nominee as US Ambassador to the People’s Republic of China, [confirmed](#) that the US “must stand with [its] allies and partners to uphold a free and open Indo-Pacific,” while **Rahm I. Emanuel**, nominated as US Ambassador to Japan, [pledged](#) to “deepen [US] ties [with Japan] while we confront our common challenges.”

Similar messages of reassurance have been voiced across partisan lines in Congress. At the end of March 2021, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee passed a [resolution](#) introduced by Democratic **Senator Bob Menendez**, Chairman of the Committee, and Republican **Senator James Risch**, the Committee’s Ranking Member, which “[reaffirms] the importance of United States alliances and partnerships” and “calls on the Biden Administration to ensure United States policy and posture reflects the requirements of extended deterrence to [...] assure allies, and to deter, and if necessary, respond, across the spectrum of nuclear and nonnuclear scenarios in defense of allies and partners.” Similarly, in mid-May 2021, Democratic Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee **Senator Jack Reed** [stated](#) that “[o]ur allies and partners depend on the U.S. nuclear umbrella, and

modernization of our strategic forces is needed to reassure them of our dependability;” and Republican **Senator Jim Inhofe**, Ranking Member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, [noted](#) that the “United States maintains a safe and effective nuclear arsenal [...] also to protect our partners and allies [...] giving those countries the security of relying on our deterrence rather than feeling like they have to develop their own nuclear weapons.”

Allied concerns about a potential US declaratory policy change appear to persist nonetheless. At the end of October 2021, the Financial Times [reported](#) **allies** had expressed strong opposition to a SP or NFU declaration in a survey the Biden administration had circulated that month. Accordingly, NATO allies like the UK, France and Germany, but also Japan and Australia lobbied the Biden administration not to adopt such a policy change. While most of this lobbying seems to be taking place behind the scenes, UK Secretary of State for Defence **Ben Wallace** [confirmed](#) at a public event back in July 2021 that Britain was “not in favour of that change of doctrine.” Estonian permanent representative to NATO **Jüri Luik** [agreed](#) with the British position when asked about US NFU considerations in an interview in autumn 2021, stating that Estonia “believe[s] that the present posture, which is similar to NATO posture, should be maintained.”

## Scholars and analysts’ view on SP

Deliberations in the policy-making sphere have been accompanied by an ongoing discussion in academic and analyst circles. During the Trump Presidency, several former officials and experts made the case for SP. **Jon Wolfsthal**, a former US official in the Obama Administration, [argued](#) that since the greatest military risk facing the US was the use of nuclear weapons, its current posture was “dangerous and unnecessary.” **Steven Pifer**, a former US diplomat, [agreed](#) that SP was a “sensible step that would foreclose an option that no president has ever chosen.” Political scientist **Nina Tannenwald** and **John P. Holdren**, President Obama’s science advisor and a professor at Harvard, also [found](#) that it was [time](#) for a US NFU policy. However, **John R. Harvey**, a former US official, [replied](#) that the purported benefits of SP were “insufficient” to offset its “inherent risks;” and **James N. Miller**, also a former official in the Obama Administration, [suggested](#) that the conditions were not yet ripe for SP, but working towards them was a valuable goal. By early 2021, the debate was increasingly influenced by concerns that outgoing President Trump could unilaterally order a nuclear strike. In this context, former Defense Secretary **William Perry** as well as nuclear policy experts **Rachel Bronson** and **Sharon Squassoni**, for example, [called for NFU](#) in combination with other safeguards to restrict the President’s ability to use nuclear weapons.

In the early months of the Biden Presidency, the focus shifted to the merits and possible implementation of Biden’s campaign promise to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in US strategy. Defense analyst **Matthew R. Costlow** from the National Institute for Public Policy [cautioned](#) against misguided “nuclear virtue signaling,” arguing that NFU would disconcert allies and weaken US deterrence against non-nuclear threats. Analyst **Patty-Jane Geller** from the Heritage Foundation also [suggested](#) NFU was a “dangerous policy idea” because it could “erod[e] deterrence against adversary aggression” and diminish allied confidence in US commitments. Think-tanker **William Chambers** and his co-authors [concluded](#) that there was “significant potential” for NFU to “impart more harm than good.”

Conversely, Carnegie's **George Perkovich** and **Pranay Vaddi** [argued](#) in favour of SP, noting that "because deterrence could fail, it would be folly to make threats that would be self-defeating to carry out." **Gareth Evans**, a former Foreign Minister of Australia, further [described](#) NFU as an essential step toward nuclear disarmament and "an extremely important contributor to immediate nuclear risk reduction, to the [...] ongoing process of delegitimizing nuclear weapons [...] and to maintaining a global commitment to non-proliferation." **Adam Mount**, Senior Fellow at the Federation of American Scientists, took a more cautious stance. While the President should clarify the purpose of nuclear weapons, he [argued](#), changes in declaratory policy would need to be accompanied by posture adjustments and an integrated strategy review to achieve results.

The debate intensified during summer and autumn 2021. SP proponents like **Ramesh Thakur** [argued](#) that a change in policy would bolster US security. **William Perry** and **Tom Collina**, the Director of Policy at the Ploughshares Fund, [stated](#) that there was "no plausible situation in which it would make sense to start nuclear war;" China's nuclear build-up was likely a response "to the much larger nuclear arsenals of Moscow and Washington," they argued, and therefore suggested a need "for more diplomacy and arms control, not less." Nuclear policy expert **William D. Hartung** also [pointed](#) at the risk reduction potential of NFU, arguing that such a pledge could "prevent a first strike or accidental launch and diminish the likelihood that an adversary would strike in fear of first use by the United States." **Francesca Giovanni** from the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard University [added](#) that SP had political benefits beyond nuclear policy, noting that a declaratory policy change could bring together different factions within Biden's Democratic Party and help the US "reclaim moral leadership for democratic governments around the world." **Van Jackson**, a former US official turned academic, [concluded](#) that nuclear weapons were only good at deterring other nuclear weapons; while **Thomas Graham Jr**, a former US arms control official, [found](#) that SP "may be doable." Arms-control expert **Nikolai Sokov** [argued](#) in favour of SP as well, but concluded that a policy change was rather unlikely.

Yet numerous analysts disagreed with respect to the benefits of a SP declaration. Extrapolating from past cases, analyst **Matthew Costlow** [concluded](#) that the United States was unlikely to benefit from a purely declaratory NFU, as its capabilities would render its statements unpersuasive. From Berlin, think-tankers **Sophia Becker** and **Elisabeth Suh** [added](#) that an SP policy change "could raise doubts among allies and undermine NATO cohesion." From Warsaw, analyst **Artur Kacprzyk** [suggested](#) an SP would be disadvantageous to NATO. Retired senior national security policy officials **Eric Edelman** and **Franklin Miller** also [warned](#) Biden "[not to] help our adversaries break NATO," suggesting that SP "would be interpreted as a huge step toward decoupling the United States from Europe's defense." **George Robertson**, a former UK Defense Secretary and Secretary-General of NATO, agreed, [stressing](#) that SP would "undermine deterrence, divide NATO and increase the risk of conflict." [Responding](#) to Robertson, **Harlan Ullman**, Senior Adviser at the Atlantic Council, went further stating that SP was out of the question if recent reports of China's nuclear build-up were true—"neither the US nor Russia would see it in their interests to build 'down' as China builds 'up'." Similar points were made by other nuclear policy experts, including **Rick Fisher**, who [suggested](#) that NFU would make the US and its allies vulnerable to nuclear blackmail from adversaries; and **Andrew Latham**, who [described](#) NFU as a "folly" in light of growing Russian and Chinese capabilities as it "would weaken deterrence against a conventional attack." Former Deputy Undersecretary of Defense in

the George H.W. Bush administration **Jed Babbin**, agreed [suggesting](#) that NFU “would dismantle nuclear deterrence.” Similarly, the **Bloomberg opinion editorial board** [warned](#) of limiting US nuclear options declaration with a declaration of dubious credibility but the potential to “wreck America’s alliances.”

Furthermore, nuclear policy expert **Brad Robert** [concluded](#) that the time was not “ripe” to “further reduce the role of nuclear weapons in US defense strategy.” **Robert Einhorn**, a former US government official dealing with nuclear policy, [agreed](#) that SP was “still a bridge too far,” but the Biden Administration could make progress towards that goal. **Michael Krepon**, a long-time supporter of arms control measures, [suggested](#) that the NFU debate should be reframed to No Use, as such a change could further stability without harming deterrence. Likewise, long-time nuclear policy journalist **Fred Kaplan** [determined](#) that US nuclear policy was unlikely to change under Biden. Nuclear weapons “have always been central to U.S. policy, and, despite Biden’s personal scepticism, this is not likely to change under his watch,” Kaplan predicted. Quincy Institute expert **Joe Cirincione** went a step further, [claiming](#) that the “nuclear game” was “rigged to maintain the status quo” as the Nuclear Posture Review was run by traditionally conservative Pentagon officials, dissent was “squashed” and “key decisions” were “made in secret.” **Guo Xiaobing**, an analyst at the Arms Control Studies Center of the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations also [concluded](#) that it would be difficult for Washington to agree upon such a policy change.

## On Twitter

These debates at times spilled over into extended Twitter discussions. For example, numerous stakeholders positioned themselves on the often repeated argument that SP would cause concern among allies about the reliability of US security commitments. Nuclear policy experts, including **Heather Williams** from King’s College London, **Alexander Mattelaer** from Vrije Universiteit Brussel, and **Bruno Tertrais** from the Fondation pour la recherche stratégique in Paris, [expressed little surprise](#) over reports of allied lobbying against SP. **Ian Bond** from the Centre for European Reform [highlighted](#) Central European and Baltic states’ concerns over such a change in declaratory policy “delinking US [and] European security.” **Elbridge Colby**, a former official in the Trump Administration, [warned](#) of the impact on US allies in the Asia-Pacific. Given that the US “conventional advantage is under severe stress in Asia” an SP change “would telegraph that we would accept [a] Chinese conventional victory in Asia,” he noted. Thus, while it “would be wonderful if we could reduce the role of nuclear weapons in our strategy [...] the enemy gets a vote” too, [warned](#) **Barry Pavel** from the Atlantic Council; and currently, US adversaries were rapidly building up and leveraging their nuclear capabilities, which should caution against SP, he explained. Challenging the argument that SP would increase certainty and thus reduce the risk of nuclear war, **Matt Costlow** from the National Institute for Public Policy (NIPP) further [pointed out](#) that SP would in fact increase ambiguity as it did not clarify when the US would employ nuclear weapons.

Other experts have attributed allied concerns to a misunderstanding of the differences between NFU and SP. Whereas NFU would weaken extended deterrence commitments, [argued](#) **Ivo Daalder** from the Chicago Council, “a nuclear force sized consistent with sole

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purpose would remain a powerful deterrent,” including against non-nuclear threats; the Biden administration “should explain this crucial distinction to allies,” he noted. Similarly, **Joshua H. Pollack** from the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies [suspected](#) SP critics of conflating these two policy options. **Hans Kristensen** from the Federation of American Scientists (FAS) went further, [claiming](#) that there had been “a concerted [...] campaign [...] by hardliners to encourage allied ‘concerns’ over what Biden might do [...] to block him.”

Meanwhile, **Joe Cirincione** [saw criticism](#) as coming mainly from allied defence officials, not publics, and considered fears over China’s nuclear build-up as unfounded given US nuclear and conventional superiority. Similarly, **John Carl Baker** from the Ploughshares Fund [doubted](#) the impact SP would have on NATO, claiming that SP critics “are opposed to [] any [] change in nuclear weapons policy” – a claim reiterated by **Stephen Schwartz** from the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, who [suggested](#) that the “nuclear theocracy [...] only wants more – more delivery systems, more warheads, more options, and more money.” In contrast, **Evan Montgomery** from the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments [questioned](#) the merits of the debate in its entirety, noting that a lot of time was spent on what was probably going to be a small change moving US declaratory policy “slightly closer to sole purpose without hinting at no first use.”

This debate boiled up again in November 2021, when 34 current and former **parliamentarians from NATO countries** sent a joint letter [calling](#) on President Biden to prioritise adopting an NFU or SP. This was quickly [picked up](#) by NFU proponent Senator **Jeff Merkley** as an indication of NATO allies’ support for NFU. However, **Adam Mount** [criticized](#) this a “kind of bootstrapping” that was “misrepresenting the views of certain group as indicative of the country’s perspective” in support of one’s own position.

Finally, in December 2021, with the Administration pondering over “existential threats” and “fundamental purpose,” Carnegie’s **James Acton** [noted](#) that “fundamental purpose” made clear that the United States could use nuclear weapons to defend against non-nuclear existential threats, including conventional invasions. William Alberque, a former US and NATO official, [commented](#) that this formulation was similar to the French and Russian “supreme interests” clause. **Adam Mount** [agreed](#) that this option would permit “widely divergent interpretations.” **Tom Collina** [deplored](#) that Biden’s NPR “may turn out no better than Trump’s.” **Joe Cirincione** [complained](#) that this was “another retreat,” with the Administration “unwilling to buck the nuclear industrial complex.” Nonetheless, **Artur Kacprzyk** [welcomed](#) what seemed to be a desire for a less restrictive policy.

## In lieu of a conclusion

As this backgrounder illustrated, the question of reducing the role of nuclear weapons through an NFU or SP declaration has over the years produced a number of analyses, statements and articles that included different opinions in favour or against these options. For as long as allies feel threatened and Washington relies on extended nuclear deterrence to assuage such allied concerns, the topic will likely continue to attract attention in both political and academic circles.