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Euro-Atlantic Concerns regarding a US »Sole Purpose« Policy

A Review of Twenty-One National Perspectives

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Introduction

The US administration is currently conducting a *Nuclear Posture Review* (NPR), to be finalized by early 2022. An NPR contains, among other things, the declaratory nuclear policy of the United States. It is how Washington communicates to allies and adversaries the politico-strategic goals of the US nuclear arsenal and what kinds of military capabilities are required to achieve these aims. Each administration must also explain under what conditions the United States might use its nuclear weapons.

President Joe Biden and several progressive Democrats have [called](#) for reducing the role of nuclear weapons in US national security strategy. In particular, there have been suggestions to change current declaratory policy and adopt a “[sole purpose](#)” (SP) declaration, stating that the sole purpose of US nuclear weapons is to deter – and, if necessary, to retaliate – against a nuclear attack, or even a “[no first use](#)” (NFU) pledge, committing the United States to never using nuclear weapons first.

While proponents believe that such a change in declaratory policy would reduce the risk of nuclear war, critics have warned it would undermine US commitments to allies and partners relying on extended US nuclear deterrence for their own security. Some have also voiced concerns that an SP or NFU pledge might divide NATO as it runs counter to the deterrence strategies of both the Alliance and of the European nuclear powers, France and the United Kingdom. But how do European and transatlantic capitals, both NATO and non-NATO members, view this debate? What do they make of it?

We asked leading experts from across the continent and beyond how their country perceives and might react to a potential US NFU or SP declaration. Specifically, the contributing authors were asked to offer their assessments on the following questions:

- How does your country's government view a potential US "no first use" or "sole purpose" declaration?
- What is the reason for your country's position?
- What would be its likely reaction to such a declaration?

We explicitly requested experts to assess the positions and gauge the reactions of their countries' governments – not to offer their own views on SP or other national policies. However, few governments took explicit public stands. Hence, the contributions included here offer well-informed assessments of likely positions, especially in those cases where governments' standpoints are not publicly available.

We would like to sincerely thank all contributors for participating in this project and for sharing their insights.

Overall, most of the countries analyzed here raise concerns regarding an SP declaration. Governments fear negative repercussions on both NATO's military deterrence and the political cohesion of the Alliance. More precisely, in our own attempt to strip down these twenty-one multi-faceted contributions to their barebones, we identified four broad trends.

First, opposition towards SP based on anxieties over weakening deterrence

Several governments worried about Russian coercion and reliant upon US security provision appear to be strongly opposed to a policy change in Washington. For instance, officials in **Estonia** would react negatively to an SP, worried that it would weaken deterrence and embolden Moscow. Concerned with potential Russian conventional superiority within local theaters, Tallin could potentially react to an SP by seeking enhanced conventional reassurance through NATO. **Lithuania** considers the current US policy of "calculated nuclear ambiguity" as ensuring credible deterrence and, hence, serving its security interests vis-à-vis Russia. **Latvia** might even see an SP as an additional bargaining chip for a wider and more permanent US conventional presence in the Baltic States. **Poland's** negative stance towards a US SP is no secret, and Warsaw would worry about weakened deterrence and question SP's benefits for arms control and non-proliferation. The **Czech Republic** would see an SP as harming NATO's nuclear deterrence, as Moscow would likely perceive such a step as weakness. **Slovakia** would also be worried about the message such a change would send to Moscow, but also concerned about the credibility of US commitments, and would, like others, probably request enhanced reassurance. In a deteriorating security environment, **Romania's** government assesses that the current US posture ensures credible extended deterrence, and seemingly concludes that changes should only be made in close consultations with allies.

Second, concerns regarding SP by European nuclear powers

The two European nuclear-weapon states seem also not enthralled with a sole purpose declaration. **France** would oppose a US SP, worried that it would weaken nuclear deterrence, send the wrong signals to both adversaries and friends, and create pressures to change French policy as well. The **United Kingdom** reportedly expressed its concerns in Washington, and UK officials appear to be worried that an SP might embolden Russia, challenge nuclear policy within NATO and put the spotlight on London's own nuclear policies.

Third, principled support for a potential SP, but reluctance due to a challenging security environment and fears of political fragmentation within NATO

Several European allies look concerned with an SP declaration's impact upon nuclear deterrence, but also anxious about its effect upon NATO unity. For instance, the government in **Belgium** appears divided, with some welcoming SP's reduction of emphasis on nuclear deterrence, and others raising concerns about the potential impact upon Alliance cohesion. In addition, some in Brussels seem preoccupied with the financial costs of a reduced reliance upon nuclear deterrence. The **Netherlands** also welcomes nuclear disarmament steps, but, given the current security environment, the Dutch government would favor maintaining calculated ambiguity. **Denmark** endorses steps towards nuclear disarmament, but its assessment of an SP would be impacted by such a declaration's implications for nuclear deterrence. **Finland** welcomes in principle raising the bar for using nuclear weapons, but would be worried about cohesion within the Alliance, especially within an

environment in which Russia is seen as more assertive. **Norway** publicly supports reducing the significance of nuclear weapons in defense policy, but even Oslo would worry that an SP could divide NATO allies. Its security concerns barely touched by US nuclear extended deterrence, **Greece** would nonetheless see an SP as weakening collective defense. Less worried about Russian immediate superiority at the theater level and more relaxed about relying upon NATO's overall conventional superiority, **Italy** would in principle support an SP, but Rome would still be worried about the effects of a policy change upon NATO. **Portugal**'s focus is on NATO cohesion, and Lisbon would only welcome a policy change if it was adequately negotiated to reflect the concerns of US allies. **Bulgaria**, although it does rely on nuclear deterrence to stop Russian aggression, might support de-emphasizing the role of nuclear weapons in order to avoid further escalation. Yet even **Canada** appears to be less ambitious vis-à-vis an SP than has been the case in the past, largely because of its more uncertain international security environment and more complex alliance relationships, primarily with the United States.

Fourth, support for SP to advance disarmament, but no full-blown excitement

Governments more keen to advance nuclear disarmament initiatives would welcome a change of policy in Washington, but even they seem to question an SP's impact. For example, **Sweden**'s government would welcome an SP declaration and consider it a major disarmament breakthrough, but officials in Stockholm would understand the Russia-related concerns other European states raise with respect to a US policy change. In turn, **Austria** would support an SP declaration, but probably criticize the fact that such a step would not be legally binding and could, therefore, be reverted by the next US President. Ultimately, even Austria would not expect that other nuclear-weapon states would follow suit.

Country Perspectives

Austria

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Austria wants to ensure that Europe never becomes embroiled in a renewed nuclear arms race. It is its official position that the catastrophic effects of the use of nuclear weapons and their inherent risks underline the precariousness of the security architecture based on nuclear deterrence. The Austrian Federal Government is committed to nuclear disarmament and played a key role in the negotiations of the *Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons* (TPNW) in 2017. The ban under international law is perceived as the prerequisite for a world free of nuclear weapons. Generally, Austria is worried about the growing nuclear risks and welcomes every step towards reducing these, including a US “no first use” or “sole purpose” declaration.

There is, however, a second level to Austria’s stance, one that takes a broader perspective. Austrian officials perceive as problematic the fact that such political declarations are not legally binding and could be withdrawn by the next US administration. Also, it is questionable whether such a measure would precipitate positive actions from other nuclear-weapon states which may not trust the credibility of such statements. Thus, it is neither a long-term solution, nor a substitute for progress on nuclear disarmament. Some critics even describe such alterations of declaratory nuclear policy as “sand in the eyes” of the global community because they do not change the fundamental issue: reliance on nuclear deterrence. Ultimately, one could argue that a “no first use” declaration reduces the role of nuclear weapons, while it still upholds the principle of nuclear deterrence. From an Austrian perspective, this would help reduce risks, but real progress requires concrete steps to move away from a security architecture based on nuclear deterrence.

For many decades, Austria has pursued a traditional pro-nuclear disarmament position, focusing on initiatives related to the TPNW and the multilateral system of treaties. The focus here lies on human security and the humanitarian impact associated with the potential use of nuclear weapons. Contrary to the nuclear-weapon states, Austria does not consider a security architecture based on nuclear deterrence to be sustainable. This is true independent of party-political affiliation and reflects a consensus across the entire political spectrum. All treaties in this field have been adopted on the basis of a broad national as well as political consensus. In Austrian coalition agreements, new coalitions traditionally commit to nuclear disarmament and strengthening the international treaty system. This goes back to the Cold War era, when coalition agreements strongly linked disarmament to détente, an issue that has played a central role in Austrian foreign policy ever since. In conclusion, Austria sees a clear nexus between nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation, which it seeks to further promote.

Belgium

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The Belgian position on nuclear policy questions is generally framed as a dual track approach combining credible deterrence with the pursuit of détente. This harks back to the Harmel report named after Belgian Foreign Minister Pierre Harmel, which accompanied the “flexible response” strategy enshrined in NATO’s 1968 Strategic Concept MC 14/3. Belgium’s approach relies on its contribution to NATO’s nuclear deterrence as a nation fielding Dual Capable Aircraft as well as its strong support for arms control.

The 2020 Belgian coalition agreement, underpinning the seven-party government led by Prime Minister Alexander De Croo, articulates this classical approach, stating that “NATO remains the cornerstone of collective defense” whilst “the NPT remains the cornerstone of the global nuclear non-proliferation regime.” Interestingly, it adds that the government will “explore how the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons [TPNW] can provide a new impulse for multilateral nuclear disarmament.” Earlier in 2020 – when coalition talks were still ongoing – a parliamentary resolution proposing Belgian accession to the TPNW was defeated in a plenary vote, pitting the green and socialist parties against the liberals, most of the Christian-democrats and the Flemish nationalists (the latter being in the opposition now). Once in government, Minister of Defense Ludivine Dedonder reaffirmed the well-known Belgian position: the use of “nuclear weapons should be limited as much as possible, (...) but as long as other nations possess them we should also be able to use them.”

This suggests that the Belgian government is internally divided about “sole purpose” proposals, probably along similar lines as in the TPNW vote. Some may welcome a reduced emphasis on nuclear deterrence, whilst others raise concern about the potential impact on Alliance cohesion – especially if the views of the most vulnerable allies are not taken into account. In addition, questions are being asked about the financial consequences of a reduced emphasis on nuclear ambiguity, which cannot help but highlight the shortfalls in conventional defense capabilities that allies like Belgium and Germany struggle to fill. Finally, the key question is whether any change in US posture remains limited to the declaratory realm, or also affects the nuclear-sharing arrangements in a practical sense (which would be considered a destabilizing game-changer). Arguably, the Belgian position could therefore be summarized as welcoming a reduced emphasis on nuclear weapons as long as this does not materially change NATO’s nuclear acquis.

Should the Biden Administration pursue declaratory changes, the Belgian government would probably accept the *Nuclear Posture Review* language as the new strategic reality. Whilst avoiding public criticism or support, it would likely seek to identify ways to nurture cohesion among European allies. Changes that weaken US nuclear posture might help cement the notion that it is unwise to rely on extended deterrence commitments. Yet given the lack of credible deterrence alternatives, one could also expect Belgium to reinvest itself in the debate within NATO’s Nuclear Planning Group.

Bulgaria

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Bulgaria views the *Non-Proliferation Treaty* (NPT) as the basis of the global system for nuclear disarmament, non-proliferation and peaceful use of nuclear energy and supports efforts to universalize it. Nevertheless, Sofia recognizes the value of nuclear deterrence as a tool for strategic stability and is wary of some NATO allied countries' ideas of unilateral disarmament. Bulgaria has consistently taken the position that disarmament should be achieved step by step, depending on the ongoing development of NATO and EU strategic relations with Russia and other nuclear states.

Bulgaria's strategic documents neither rank the nuclear threat as existential, nor directly refer to nuclear deterrence, both in order to avoid "unnecessary complications" with Russia. Any attempt to include a text reflecting Russia's aggressive actions in Eastern Europe or Bulgaria's internal affairs could precipitate a political scandal and a confusing exchange of diplomatic demarches. Various factors determine such behavior, but first and foremost it is due to a feeling of strategic vulnerability.

Bulgaria considers the United States strategically more important for its security than NATO or the EU, as reflected by the *Bulgaria-US Defense Cooperation Agreement* (2006). On US nuclear deterrence, Bulgaria has a somewhat realist position. It considers nuclear (alongside conventional) deterrence in its national interest in order to stop Russian aggression. At the same time, it is careful to avoid further escalation, especially in the Black Sea region. Bulgaria has no interest in the Black Sea becoming a strategic border with the associated military, political, economic and psychological consequences.

In practice, "no first use" and "sole purpose" refer to the same strategy – deterrence and if necessary response to a nuclear attack. However, "no first use" is an explicit beforehand constraint on US employment of nuclear weapons. The "sole purpose" concept does not necessarily impose restrictions on the use of nuclear weapons and due to its greater ambiguity would raise more questions for the Bulgarian government than answers. Without concrete evidence, Bulgaria might support a "no first use" declaration.

Canada

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In the past, Canada has joined other NATO allies in raising the idea of a “no first use” or “sole purpose” policy, but over time, its voice has become more subdued. This rather passive stance is largely because Canada has not clarified its strategic orientation in the face of a more uncertain international security environment and more complex alliance relationships, primarily with the United States. Fundamentally, Canada is not prepared to push for change on nuclear issues outside of the NATO framework, or indeed, in a way that would be in tension with its foremost partner on continental defense, the United States.

With the 2022 Strategic Concept, and the United States' updated nuclear posture review, there is a new opportunity for NATO to raise the nuclear question and for Canada to express support for an updated Allied statement on nuclear deterrence. While NATO recognizes the importance of a world free of nuclear weapons, its 2012 *Deterrence and Defense Posture Review* did not significantly reduce the political and military salience of nuclear weapons. In addition, the annexation of Crimea in 2014 has increased the Alliance's reliance on deterrence as a cornerstone of transatlantic security. At these critical junctures, Canada has fallen in line and privileged allied cohesion, which remains a central element of a credible NATO deterrence posture.

Canada's reluctance to chart its own course is also quite clear in the context of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. While turning its back on the treaty sits uneasily with elements of its political and strategic culture, Canada has opted for the status quo on non-proliferation and disarmament, along with its NATO allies. The status quo delivers greater certainty from the perspective of a country that is actively taking part in deterrence and defense initiatives, from Latvia to Ukraine. This engagement in support of conventional deterrence further constrains Canada's ability to rock the boat on nuclear issues, given that nuclear weapons are part of the overall NATO deterrence and defense architecture.

Canada is even more limited in its ability to influence developments over the US nuclear posture, especially when compared to NATO's two other nuclear states, France and the United Kingdom. In the past, Canada may have leveraged its position as a principal partner to the United States on North American continental defense, a partnership that has been institutionalized with the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD). However, the state of the bilateral relationship has suffered during the Trump Administration and has not recovered much under President Biden. To be fair, Canada's own shortcomings in shoring up additional capabilities and defense spending to contribute to both NATO and NORAD have further diminished its voice. Canada thus has a continued interest in pushing for close allied consultation and coordination on nuclear issues, especially in an era of increased great power competition and the United States' mercurial tendencies.

Czech Republic

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Nuclear doctrine and policy are not major issues of public debate in Czechia. Former Czechoslovakia hosted Soviet nuclear weapons, but this was of course during a very different historical era. The public only became aware of the fact much later and even then the debate remained superficial.

As most issues pertaining to the Czech position on US nuclear policy are classified, not much can be said publicly and there is very little open debate. What can be said safely, however, is that both the current and the incoming Czech government would see a “no first use” or “sole purpose” declaration as threatening transatlantic security. Any perceived limitation on nuclear use is considered harmful to NATO’s deterrence posture. The issue of credibility with respect to the existing nuclear first use policy is more or less a taboo. Furthermore, Czechia would be concerned that Russia might perceive a “no first use” or “sole purpose” declaration as a weakness. Moscow would certainly not reciprocate the policy change and would likely pursue more assertive policies on NATO’s Eastern flank.

Should the United States adopt a “sole purpose” or “no first use” declaration, the Czech government would likely react with modest complaints, and Czech statements warning against “idealism” and “appeasement” could be expected. These statements could possibly even be made public – akin to those reactions related to the 2009 missile defense review and the US decision pertaining to a potential site in Czechia. Such public utterances could be coupled with a private push for more US conventional options for balancing Russia’s capabilities in Central and Eastern Europe.

Denmark

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In case the United States adopt a “no first use” or “sole purpose” declaratory policy, it is likely that Denmark will embrace the NATO narrative. Given the consensus-based decision making procedure, any change in NATO policy would require support from all NATO members’ capitals. In 1998, Germany sought to overcome NATO’s traditional rejection of “no first use.” However, Germany’s proposal at that time did not receive support from other NATO capitals. If there was consensus among NATO states on a shift towards a “no first use” policy, Denmark would likely embrace that standpoint, although some caveats might apply.

Denmark has been an important strategic member within NATO, committed to the Alliance’s foreign policy outlook and burden sharing arrangements and excelling in reliability. The Nordic country is not part of the NATO nuclear sharing mechanisms, as since the 1950s, the stationing of nuclear weapons on its territory is prohibited during peacetime. This notwithstanding, the small country has demonstrated solidarity with the NATO position by voting against a UN General Assembly resolution on the *Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons*, although a majority of Danes were, according to an opinion poll, in favor of the treaty.

Although a commitment to both a “sole purpose” or “no first use” policy would be beneficial for advancing progress on the implementation of Article VI of the *Non-Proliferation Treaty*, Denmark is likely to see the strategic importance of the nuclear component in NATO’s overall deterrence policy for as long as nuclear weapons exist. Deterrence of an armed aggression and commitments to a ‘never again a 9th of April’ – alluding to the day Denmark was invaded by Nazi Germany in 1940 – was a major justification for the small country to drop neutrality and join NATO in 1949. Since then, NATO has been a cornerstone for Denmark’s defense policy. Thus, while Denmark is likely to continue to endorse NATO disarmament processes, any Danish reaction to a possible “no first use” or “sole purpose” declaration would likely depend on its implications for the quality of a credible deterrent.

Estonia

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Neighboring Russia, which has repeatedly demonstrated a willingness to use force in the pursuit of national goals, Estonia relies on the credibility of NATO's deterrence and defense. Since most European NATO allies have allowed their military capabilities to become atrophied over the last decades, the nations in the Baltic Sea region in general and Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland in particular consider US conventional and nuclear capabilities vital to their security. Anything that would weaken or might be perceived by Moscow as diluting the deterrence of the West vis-à-vis Russia would automatically harm the security of the aforementioned states.

Estonian authorities are obviously aware of the ongoing discussions in the United States regarding the potential introduction of a "sole purpose" or "no first use" policy. The reaction to this among Estonian officials has been very negative in light of the current geo-strategic situation in the Baltic Sea region, where Russia has conventional and nuclear superiority over NATO and non-NATO EU members. In a potential military conflict with the West, Russia would not need to employ nuclear weapons to gain an advantage. Both the quantity and quality of Russian land forces exceed Western forces, many of which are not suitable for high-intensity operations due to a lack of defense investment. An explicit "sole purpose" or "no first use" policy would remove the currently existing ambiguity regarding the employment of US nuclear weapons, clarifying that the United States would not use nuclear weapons as long as Russia refrains from doing so.

Estonian authorities believe that now is not the right time to embolden Russia through a declaratory change that would be perceived by Russia as US weakness and hesitation. Estonian officials have already expressed concerns vis-à-vis their US counterparts. Estonia's public reaction to US changes in nuclear policy would probably be carefully calibrated but still negative. In case of a US "sole purpose" or "no first use" declaration, Tallinn likely would not consider European strategic autonomy an obvious answer to perceived weaker US commitments. Instead, it might seek "compensation" in the form of a more persistent US military presence in Estonia, bolster national capability development and strive to strengthen bilateral cooperation with the United Kingdom.

Finland

Charly Saloniemi-Pasternak, Lead Researcher, Finnish Institute of International Affairs (FIIA)

Helsinki's key concern regarding nuclear weapons is stability and predictability. It has no qualms with a US "sole purpose" or "no first use" declaration as such and welcomes the general idea of raising the bar on nuclear weapons' use. However, the most important consideration for Finland is that any changes to US declaratory nuclear policy result from consultations and agreement with US allies in general, and in particular with NATO members. Otherwise, Finland worries that Alliance cohesion will suffer, which would weaken NATO and its broader integrated deterrence. This would undermine European and Finnish security. Finland recognizes that NATO's deterrence is tied to the nuclear weapons of three of its member states as well as broader nuclear sharing arrangements. Efforts to weaken this component of NATO's deterrence, Helsinki believes, would have negative repercussions on regional security. From this regional security perspective, any divergence between US and NATO nuclear posture is undesirable and any changes made by the United States should have the support of NATO members. Logically, this would mean that France and the United Kingdom also revise their declaratory nuclear policies – an unlikely proposition in the near term.

Were the United States to unilaterally change its declaratory nuclear policy, Finland would be nonplussed given the predictably negative impact on Alliance unity and regional security. Publicly, Helsinki would likely only state that it is a matter for the United States and potentially its allies to deal with. In private international fora, however, Finland has apparently made its rather critical position clear. This underlines the change that has occurred in the Finnish approach to nuclear weapons issues. Whereas traditionally Helsinki has avoided taking a position on nuclear weapons matters, except to support practical international arms control and disarmament processes, changes in global security and nuclear weapons dynamics have pushed it to become more outspoken. The Finnish Government's recently published *Defence Report (2021)* is an example of this, as it includes multiple statements regarding nuclear weapons, most notably it asserts that "there is a threat that the threshold for using low-yield tactical nuclear weapons will decrease" and that Russia has "strengthened its strategic nuclear deterrent and hardened its nuclear rhetoric."

France

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France has been consistently and openly opposed to the adoption of a “no first use” or “sole purpose” doctrine by the United States, just as it is with regard to its own nuclear forces. The French nuclear deterrent was initially developed to deter an aggression from the Soviet Union, a much stronger adversary in terms of conventional weapons. Consequently, the idea that nuclear deterrence might play a role in dissuading conventional aggression has been an obvious component of the French doctrine as a strategy for the “weak deterring the strong.” After the end of the Cold War, France has refused to change this approach, noting that a “no first use” or “sole purpose” doctrine would open the way to aggression with conventional, biological or chemical weapons. This position has been reflected at the higher level in presidential speeches, but also for instance in parliamentary documents.

French officials believe that maintaining a deterrent against any kind of aggression is necessary to ensure national security – with the exception of the negative security guarantees provided to NPT non-nuclear member states in good standing with respect to their non-proliferation obligations, against which France would not use nuclear weapons. French officials also argue that this policy should be preserved by its key nuclear partners. Concerning the United States in particular, Paris’ position is motivated by several considerations.

First, France believes that the adoption of a “no first use” or “sole purpose” doctrine would potentially weaken NATO’s deterrence, which could embolden aggression at the conventional level. To prevent this, NATO would need to invest massively in conventional assets, a difficult and costly decision to make.

Second, at the political level, France points out that such a change in US declaratory policy would send two negative signals: first to Russia, showing receptiveness to the arguments of the disarmament community and a lack of faith in the current role of nuclear weapons to defend the Alliance; and second to European allies, but also the allies in Asia, who are feeling especially vulnerable to conventional aggression. In France’s eyes, a “sole purpose” or “no first use” policy would be interpreted as reduced commitment to defend the security of these frontline allies.

Finally, France is concerned that a change of nuclear policy and posture in Washington might isolate Paris on the international stage, decoupling the strategic approaches of the three nuclear NATO allies, and might create pressure to change French policy as well.

For these reasons, French officials have been clear in their opposition to such a move. They actively conveyed their concerns to their US colleagues when the same question was raised at the end of the Obama Administration as well as in the initial months of the Biden Administration. Should the *Nuclear Posture Review* nonetheless mark a major turn of the US position on this matter, the French government would likely resume its advocacy work at NATO to prevent the introduction of any language supporting “no first use” or “sole purpose.”

Greece

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There is hardly a debate or official statement on nuclear weapons in Greece, let alone a discussion on a potential ‘no first use’ or ‘sole purpose’ US nuclear posture. Weapons of mass destruction remain a sensitive issue in the country, despite the fact that the Hellenic Airforce Araxos Air Base was home to the NATO 345 Air Munitions Company, hosting several American B61 nuclear bombs under NATO nuclear sharing arrangements.

The lack of public discussion is due to Greece’s geography and perceived conventional security threats. Unlike the Baltic States, Japan or South Korea, Greece does not count on US nuclear use to stave off a large-scale conventional attack. Contrary to other allies and partners, whose very existence may depend on the US pledge to use nuclear weapons in their defense against Russia and China, Athens knows that Washington would never use its nuclear arsenal against its main conventional concern: Turkey, another NATO ally. In that sense, US nuclear weapons are of limited use to Greece when deterring or retaliating against conventional aggression and the US nuclear arsenal does not feature as a crucial pillar in its security strategy.

Nevertheless, a “no first use” or “sole purpose” declaration most likely would not be welcomed by Athens. Greece would probably perceive such a change in the US nuclear posture as weakening the robustness of collective defense, especially at a time when the Eastern Mediterranean is becoming more volatile. However, it is highly unlikely that Greece would adopt a vocal stance vis-à-vis the United States following such a change in US declaratory policy. Athens would most certainly follow NATO’s line and keep a low profile, as the country is presently experiencing exceptional high-level military cooperation with Washington.

A potential US decision to limit the use of nuclear weapons to retaliating against a nuclear attack would not drive Athens to develop its own nuclear weapons either. In contrast to what detractors often argue, Athens would probably be more receptive to President Macron’s proposition of a more coordinated EU defense strategy, in which France and its nuclear arsenal would play a central role. In this scenario, the “Europeanisation” of the nuclear “escalation ladder” would essentially substitute the burden of a “tripwire” mechanism, and replace the US nuclear umbrella with a French one, benefiting the European continent and Greece.

Italy

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One of Rome's major security interests is to maintain effective NATO deterrence against Russia, and thereby ensure Europe's strategic stability. Italy recognizes that such deterrence requires both conventional and nuclear components, and hosts US tactical nuclear weapons under NATO nuclear sharing agreements. However, from an Italian perspective, in contrast to the Cold War era, current NATO conventional capabilities can match Russian conventional forces without a nuclear first use – provided that the United States and its major European allies remain committed to NATO's Article 5. Hence, Rome advocates a NATO dual track policy towards Russia based on deterrence and dialogue, with the ultimate goal of mutual *détente*. In addition, while Italy remains a staunch supporter of arms control and non-proliferation treaties and regimes, it also evaluates the strategic implications of such steps. Accordingly, Rome did not participate, for instance, in the TPNW negotiations.

Against this backdrop, an Italian government would probably abstain from taking a public position on a US “no first use” / “sole purpose” declaration, pointing to existing NATO nuclear sharing agreements and international regimes. This sort of benign abstention would aim to avoid raising the issue in the domestic debate and continue the Italian government's traditional “do not confirm, do not deny” policy on nuclear strategy; to leave Italian diplomacy in Washington and Brussels sufficient room to work on bilateral and multilateral arrangements; finally, as far as possible, to frame a potential “sole purpose” declaration as an argument to convince Moscow to renew strategic dialogue with Western interlocutors.

This “silent position” notwithstanding, Italy would probably articulate a number of points. First, the concept that “a nuclear war cannot be won and should never be fought” should be continuously restated by the West and proposed to Russia to achieve re-commitment. Second, from an Italian point of view a “sole purpose” policy is better than a “no first use” policy, as the former could potentially leave open the possibility of using nuclear weapons to deter conventional wars. This is a vital interest for Europeans, including Italy, because a conventional conflict would destroy the continent. Therefore, Italy would prefer the more limited “sole purpose,” and be deeply skeptical of a “no first use” policy. Third, as Russia seems to be willing and able to pursue a strategy of “escalate to deescalate,” it is absolutely necessary for the United States and NATO to maintain multiple options for Western escalation, including flexibility and gradualism in the possible use – or threat of use – of nuclear weapons. Therefore, an eventual renewal of US nuclear posture should not reduce strategic options.

Last but not least, for a supporter of multilateral arms control and non-proliferation like Italy, the continuous decline of politico-strategic attention to nuclear non-proliferation is particularly worrying. On the one hand, such decline opens the door for radical positions, such as the proposed TPNW. On the other hand, this decline does not enhance the current non-proliferation regime. We risk a rapid increase in the number of nuclear states, and therefore of potential nuclear conflicts. In conclusion, renewed attention by Germany, Europe and NATO to nuclear non-proliferation would probably be supported by Italy.

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Latvia

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Nuclear weapons are not a constant subject in Latvia's public space. Latvia's primary security concern is beyond any doubt Russia and it will remain so for the foreseeable future. Given Russia's military might, including its nuclear capabilities, and its readiness to act militarily in Europe and beyond, the role of NATO at large and the United States in particular is seen as of utmost importance to Latvia's national security and defense. This also applies to the nuclear policy of NATO and the United States. As the current *State Defense Concept* (2020) underlines, the Alliance's credibility rests, among other factors, on an "unambiguous nuclear deterrence policy." The document also notes that "Russia has demonstrated its readiness to use or threaten the use of nuclear weapons if necessary."

While Latvia's institutions have not been publicly vocal on nuclear weapons' issues, it can be safely argued that a possible "sole purpose" declaration by the United States would be received with concern and disappointment. While the Latvian authorities would understand the reasoning behind such a decision and would not consider it a deliberate weakening of US extended deterrence, they would still see it as a naïve move in light of Russia's conventional and nuclear posture in Europe and beyond.

Notwithstanding the possible disappointment in Riga, it is unlikely that Latvia would express its concerns publicly. Rather, it would resort to discreet channels to solidify its engagement with the United States. A "sole purpose" declaration might even serve as an additional bargaining chip for Latvia when arguing for a wider and more permanent presence of conventional US military force in the Baltic States.

Lithuania

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The existing US nuclear declaratory policy based on “calculated ambiguity” significantly contributes to international stability. The deliberate ambiguity and uncertainty about a possible US response in case of an aggression contributes to deterrence – not only with respect to nuclear attacks, but also regarding strategic non-nuclear threats such as chemical, biological and conventional aggressions, which are all becoming increasingly interconnected. This kind of policy is especially important in the contemporary security environment that is rapidly deteriorating – the world becomes more unstable and less predictable because of the military build-ups and adversarial policies of several states.

According to the Lithuanian *National Threat Assessment 2021*, “Russia poses the major threat to Lithuania.” It modernizes its conventional and nuclear capabilities, develops novel weapons systems, such as hypersonic weapons, and strengthens its anti-access/area denial capabilities that preclude other actors like NATO, from operating, for example, in the Baltic region and defending allies. Furthermore, Russia relies heavily on nuclear weapons and regards non-strategic nuclear weapons as crucial capabilities, filling the gap between strategic nuclear capabilities and conventional weaponry and training them during the major military exercises. Russia’s nuclear and conventional weapons are closely integrated. Beyond that, Russia is attempting to destabilize NATO by dividing the alliance and undermining NATO cohesion. It seeks to attain military advantage in Europe by deterring and decoupling the United States from defending its NATO allies and by gaining escalation dominance in case of conflict.

Against this background, in Lithuania’s perspective, the US declaratory policy of “calculated ambiguity” significantly contributes to transatlantic security and stability. Regional security depends on a strong transatlantic bond, US assurances to allies, and a credible NATO deterrence and defense architecture. Thus, in Lithuania’s view, the time is not ripe to change the existing declaratory policy. In the current strategic environment, the policy of calculated ambiguity is the best option to sustain global stability and to ensure credible deterrence in particular vis-à-vis Russia.

Netherlands

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As a NATO ally, the Netherlands subscribes to the Alliance's nuclear policy and contributes dual-capable aircraft to NATO's nuclear deterrence mission. At the same time, it has at times maintained an uneasy relationship with nuclear weapons, for instance during the Euromissile crisis in the 1980s, and public opinion remains critical. The Netherlands therefore continues to attach great importance to disarmament, non-proliferation, nuclear risk reduction and to other confidence-building measures, a stance reflected in its active involvement in different disarmament and non-proliferation processes and initiatives.

Hence, if President Biden wants to de-emphasize the role of nuclear weapons in US security strategy, that should be music to Dutch ears. Or should it? Details matter, and the Dutch will probably be less excited were formulations like "no first use" or "sole purpose" to find their way into the administration's upcoming *Nuclear Posture Review* (NPR) – a key declaratory policy document that will inform discussions on NATO's new Strategic Concept that will be adopted next year.

It has been observed that adversaries may react with skepticism to changes in public nuclear policy, but that allies, who count on US extended nuclear deterrence for their protection, care a lot. Under the current geopolitical circumstances, the Dutch government would thus be in favor of maintaining an allied policy of "calculated ambiguity." Increasing transparency may be welcomed, but only insofar as deterrence ambiguity is retained. This explains the concerns about "no first use." Conversely, if "sole purpose" is adopted, much will depend on the specific formulation that is used. Unilateral signaling by the United States may jeopardize unity within NATO and may embolden adversaries to test the US resolve to fulfil its security guarantees.

If the Biden Administration would introduce new declaratory concepts in its NPR, it will be up to the incoming Dutch government – the same four party coalition as before – to react. Nuclear policy does not seem to have featured prominently in the formation talks. Therefore, a likely reaction might emphasize that changing US declaratory policy is the sovereign right of the United States, but that the Netherlands remains convinced of US commitments to European security and of the centrality of US nuclear forces, through NATO, to maintain deterrence. The government might also underline that it welcomes the NPR's provisions on renewed US non-proliferation leadership and the ambition to pursue new arms control arrangements.

Norway

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At the moment, questions regarding NATO's (and their allies') nuclear policy, are particularly difficult for Norway. After Norway got a new government this fall – a Labour Party-led coalition – Norway made headlines in NATO as the first ally planning to participate as an observer at the meetings of the States Parties to the *Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons* (TPNW). The reactions came immediately after the government released its coalition agreement. "This is not the way," NATO's General Secretary (and former Prime Minister of Norway) Jens Stoltenberg said.

On the one hand, a change in US declaratory policy to either a "sole purpose" or a "no first use" policy may be seen as in line with Norway's nuclear policy. With a view to Norway's position on US declaratory policy Anniken Huitfeldt, the Norwegian Minister of Foreign Affairs, recently stated that "Norway will support measures that reduce the significance of nuclear weapons in defense policy and those that reduce the risk of using nuclear weapons and that can contribute to a reduction in the number of nuclear weapons." Given this statement and the recent decision to participate as an observer in the TPNW, it seems unlikely that Norway would actively oppose a change in US declaratory policy to a "sole purpose" or "no first use" pledge. If the government did object, it would certainly be difficult for officials to explain the rationale behind such a nuclear policy.

On the other hand, while the above may be interpreted as support for a change in US declaratory policy, Norway's reaction to a change might not be actively supportive. Norway is unlikely to applaud any change in US declaratory policy that risks further dividing allies on nuclear questions. Despite its flirtation with the TPNW, it is in Norway's interest that allies remain united on nuclear policy. If anything, the recent TPNW-decision made (or forced) Norway to confirm its commitment to NATO's nuclear policy. Moreover, there is a difference between a "sole purpose" and "no first use" policy. A "no first use" pledge is not consistent with NATO's current nuclear policy. Considering that, it would be more difficult for Norway to actively support a "no first use" pledge. The reactions to a "sole purpose" policy would likely depend on other allies' reactions, in order not to further stir the nuclear pot. Therefore, Norway's reaction to a change in US declaratory policy will likely be a tacit consent.

Poland

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The formal Polish position on the US *Nuclear Posture Review*, including declaratory policy, has been communicated directly to US officials. While the details remain confidential, Poland's negative stance regarding the potential adoption of a "no first use" or "sole purpose" declaration is no secret. Polish officials would probably argue against the United States adopting doctrinal restraints, pointing at the overall deterioration of relations with Russia, Moscow's investments in nuclear weapons and its apparent readiness to use nuclear weapon potential as a tool of intimidation. To maintain the credibility of a "deterrence dialogue" with Russia during any future crisis or conflict, the United States should not take options off the table. Furthermore, a doctrinal turn might also be considered problematic given concerns about Russian conventional superiority vis-à-vis Poland and the ability of the United States to promptly utilize non-nuclear measures to counter most severe non-nuclear attacks by Russia.

Another issue is the impact of potential changes in US declaratory policy on NATO. There would be no automatic modification of the circumstances in which the Alliance could decide to use nuclear weapons and the changed US position would not affect British and French nuclear postures. Still, given the dominant role of the United States in shaping NATO's nuclear deterrence policy, "sole purpose" would *de facto* mean raising the threshold of nuclear use, which Poland would consider detrimental to the overall credibility of deterrence. It might also strengthen the position of those who criticize the deployment of B-61 nuclear bombs to Europe, which might be presented as redundant in case of a US "sole purpose" doctrine.

Finally, there is considerable skepticism in Poland regarding "sole purpose" proponent's claim that such a change in declaratory policy would have a positive impact on the *Non-Proliferation Treaty* (NPT) regime. While a potential US declaration may be regarded as a step towards reducing the salience of nuclear weapons (in line with past NPT commitments), it would hardly be seen as a breakthrough by proponents of nuclear disarmament.

In Poland, US reflections on nuclear declaratory policy are evaluated in parallel with the German nuclear sharing debate and the perceived advances of the disarmament narrative in NATO countries (exemplified by Norway's and Germany's decision to participate as observers in meetings of the parties to the *Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons*). For many Polish observers, these developments point to a potentially dangerous refusal to acknowledge the worsened strategic situation in Europe, which, from the viewpoint of Warsaw, calls for strengthened, not weakened, nuclear deterrence.

In case of an adoption of a "sole purpose" formulation by the United States, Poland would have no choice but to live with it – even if some commentators would criticize the new NPR as a sign of reduced US commitment to the defense of Europe. While much depends on the final wording of US declaratory policy, Poland would most likely primarily look for clarifications on the impact on NATO, as well as for reassurances with respect to non-nuclear elements of US extended deterrence commitments and US determination to deter nuclear attacks against NATO. But it could also be argued that security developments might sooner rather than later force the United States to re-adjust its doctrine once again.

Portugal

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Portugal has no clearly stated public position on a potential “sole purpose” or “no first use” declaration by the United States. Generally speaking, Portugal is a non-nuclear state, a signatory of the *Non-Proliferation Treaty* (NPT) and does not permanently host nuclear weapons as some other NATO members do. Nevertheless, Portugal refused to sign the 2017 *Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons* due to concerns about a growing number of new nuclear powers in flagrant violation of the NPT – North Korea in particular – and Portugal’s role as a NATO founding member that takes its commitments seriously.

For Portugal therefore the central element of its position regarding nuclear weapons is membership of NATO, solidarity within the Alliance and credibility of the deterrence provided by NATO in a world of increased geostrategic competition, reflected by the proliferation of nuclear armed states and ongoing programs of nuclear weapons modernization. Additionally, Portugal values effective coordination within the Alliance. Therefore, it showed some dissatisfaction with the lack of more substantive consultations regarding NATO’s retreat from Afghanistan and with the way the interests of a European ally, France, were apparently ignored in the AUKUS deal.

Given all this, Portugal would *a priori* probably not be opposed to some change in US declaratory nuclear policy if it was adequately negotiated to reflect the concerns of allies. This would be all the more so if it was linked to an effort to negotiate measures with other nuclear powers that would increase the security and safety of nuclear arsenals and make any accidental launch or inadvertent escalation less likely. However, Portugal might voice concerns if again there was a perception on its part that the United States made a major policy change, having important implications for allies, without effective consultations.

After the Afghanistan and AUKUS debacles, this could reinforce the impression that the new Biden Administration acts without proper consultation and could be perceived as an expression of an American inward turn, and a turning away from European allies. This would raise deeper questions about the reliability of the Atlantic Alliance that Portugal continues to see as its best option in terms of defending its national interests and core values.

Romania

George Visan, Advisor, Romanian Diplomatic Institute (IDR)

The Romanian government is committed to a nuclear weapons-free world under the provisions of the *Non-Proliferation Treaty*. WMD non-proliferation is a cornerstone of Romania's foreign and security policy. At the same time, in Romania's view, the US nuclear posture, as part of the US military posture, plays an essential role in strengthening international peace and security, as well as the rules-based international order. NATO's nuclear deterrence posture relies heavily on US nuclear weapons. Therefore, the US extended deterrence commitments need to remain strong and credible. The current US posture meets the general requirements of the prevailing security environment and ensures a credible US extended deterrence.

The United States provide strengthened negative assurances to non-nuclear weapon states. Such assurances have the practical implications of a "no first use" policy for the vast majority of states around the globe. Therefore, a "no first use" or "sole purpose" policy will not affect their security perception. At the same time, the international security environment has been deteriorating in recent years and states like China, Russia and North Korea are relying more on nuclear weapons in their strategies and are modernizing and expanding their nuclear arsenals. A change in the US declaratory policy is highly unlikely to act as an impetus for these states to pursue a more moderate behavior in the international arena. A thorough assessment, in close consultations with the Allies, should be made in order to better understand the implications of any potential change in US declaratory policy.

Slovakia

Dr Michal Onderco, Associate Professor, Erasmus University Rotterdam

The *Defense Strategy of the Slovak Republic* adopted in 2021 states that the “allies’ nuclear forces play a key role” in NATO’s collective deterrence posture. The *Security Strategy* adopted the same year indicates the breakdown in arms control and the nuclear arms race as a threat to international peace and security, and commits Slovakia to contribute to the international arms control architecture. However, the same strategy also commits the country to the promotion of “fully operational, politically coherent, and militarily powerful NATO [...] with effective conventional and nuclear deterrent potential.” These recently adopted documents therefore demonstrate that Slovakia is fully committed to the current NATO nuclear deterrence policy.

However, nuclear weapons are not the central topic which the Slovak officials think of when considering the challenges of contemporary deterrence. While nuclear weapons are paid a lip service in the principal policy documents, there is only limited attention given to broader policy, strategic or doctrinal questions. Responsible officials cover broad portfolios which include other issues. Thinking about nuclear deterrence is reactive - addressed when it appears on the alliance or bilateral agenda. Given that Slovakia joined NATO as a nuclear alliance, nuclear deterrence is seen as “part of the package.”

As in many other countries of similar size and location, they often think about nuclear deterrence questions through two prisms: first, the relations with the United States, and, second, the positioning vis-à-vis Russia. For this reason, Slovakia’s government would probably perceive any change in the US nuclear declaratory policy through two lenses. On the one hand, it would be taken into account whether such change was negotiated and discussed with allies and whether allies’ views were taken on board – after the years of stress on the transatlantic relations, there is eagerness to return to the “good old” days. On the other hand, officials would probably be concerned about the message that such change would send towards Russia. This also means that there would be a concern that “no first use” or “sole purpose” could be seen as a limit on the US’ willingness to defend allies and could open Europe’s Eastern flank to Russia’s adventurism.

Slovak officials appear comfortable with NATO's "calculated ambiguity" policy, are not under the domestic pressures as witnessed in Western European countries, and would see any change in declaratory policy as weakening NATO's deterrent vis-a-vis Russia. However, should such changes in declaratory policy be made, Slovakia would most likely seek additional declaratory assurances and/or conventional commitments on the Eastern Flank.

Sweden

Anna Wieslander, Director for Northern Europe, Atlantic Council

A US “sole purpose” or “no first use” declaration would be welcomed by the Swedish government and considered as a major breakthrough for non-proliferation and disarmament, which is a core foreign policy area for the Social Democrat-Green government, in power since 2014.

Sweden is working intensely ahead of the *Non-Proliferation Treaty* (NPT) Review in January 2022 with the *Stockholm Initiative for Nuclear Disarmament* launched in June 2019 by 16 non-nuclear weapon states, among them Germany. The aim is to promote an ambitious, yet realistic agenda for nuclear disarmament that would reaffirm the role of the NPT as the cornerstone of the global disarmament and non-proliferation regime. This includes the *Berlin Declaration* from 2020, which sets out a set of concrete proposals – known as “stepping stones” – for nuclear disarmament. Part of these stepping stones is a call on all nuclear-weapon states to “discuss and take practical measures to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in their security and defense policies.”

Sweden is not a member of NATO, and hence not formally part of US extended deterrence to Europe. Nonetheless, given the extensive nuclear build-up by both Russia and China, Sweden understands the worries of allies in Europe regarding a potential US “sole purpose” declaration.

United Kingdom

Dr Matthew Harries, Senior Research Fellow, Royal United Services Institute (RUSI)

The United Kingdom recently updated its nuclear declaratory policy as part of the March 2021 *Integrated Review*, taking verbatim a sentence from recent NATO documents: “The fundamental purpose of our nuclear weapons is to preserve peace, prevent coercion and deter aggression.” The United Kingdom says that it would only use nuclear weapons in “extreme circumstances of self-defence, including the defence of our NATO Allies,” but remains “deliberately ambiguous about precisely when, how and at what scale” it would consider nuclear use. The United Kingdom’s nuclear declaratory policy is therefore less restrictive than a “sole purpose” or “no first use” declaration would be, leaving open the possibility that UK nuclear weapons are relevant to deterring non-nuclear attack.

It appears unlikely that the Biden Administration will pledge “no first use”, but a “sole purpose” declaration is reportedly still on the table. The UK government has not publicly commented on “sole purpose,” but it has privately expressed its concerns to the United States, and reportedly also did so under the Obama Administration. “Sole purpose” may not be logically identical to declaring “no first use,” but UK officials still appear to fear that it could embolden Russian conventional military aggression under the nuclear threshold, and undermine assurance of eastern NATO allies. “Sole purpose” also implies avoiding nuclear deterrence vis-à-vis strategic non-nuclear attacks, which by contrast have played an increasing role in recent UK nuclear thinking.

A “sole purpose” declaration would put US national nuclear policy at odds with the most recently agreed NATO consensus text, creating a diplomatic headache that the United Kingdom would likely prefer to avoid. It could also leave the United Kingdom stranded, in theory if not necessarily in practice, as the only nuclear-armed contributor to formal NATO nuclear planning for scenarios that did not include adversary nuclear first use.

The *Integrated Review* saw an increasing emphasis on nuclear deterrence in UK strategy for the first time since the end of the Cold War, which makes it unlikely that the UK government would wish to modify its own declaratory policy to fall in line with a US shift in the opposite direction, although it might come under pressure to do so. Yet however unhappy the UK government might be with a US decision to adopt “sole purpose,” it would presumably try to make the best of the situation. This would likely mean focusing on limiting any potential damage to alliance cohesion, finding compromise language at NATO to take into account the US shift, and reassuring allies of the United Kingdom’s (and P3’s) commitment to deterring Russian aggression.

The United Kingdom will presumably wish to avoid publicly arguing that a “sole purpose” declaration inevitably means a crisis for the alliance, in case the Biden Administration does take that path. And indeed, there is no prima facie reason why US and UK declaratory nuclear policies must be identical, as long as they are fundamentally compatible. The United Kingdom has long argued that its independent nuclear forces provide a “second centre of decision-making” which adversaries have to take into account. Moreover, making progress towards multilateral nuclear disarmament has been and remains a long-standing UK policy, so any impetus that “sole purpose” gave to that effort – however sceptical UK officials might be that it will do so – should be welcome.

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