“No First Use” of Nuclear Weapons — Complicated Common Sense

By Kelly Lundeen

On April 15 Senator Elizabeth Warren, D-Mass., and Representative Adam Smith, D-Wash., introduced a bill declaring that the United States would “not use nuclear weapons first.”

“This bill would strengthen deterrence while reducing the chance of nuclear use due to miscalculation or misunderstanding. No First Use would allow the US to sustain a credible deterrent and avoid nuclear war,” said Smith.

The bill, if enacted, would establish a U.S. policy that the President, in a declaration of nuclear first-use, would be required to seek UN Security Council approval, prior to launching an attack.

The bill’s provisions require a future President to report to Congress, showing that the military’s judgment was not that the first-use of nuclear weapons would succeed.

While the primary purpose for the expansion is to double the number of storage rooms at WIPP, the expansion of the US nuclear arsenal is not re-established deterrence. A first strike is what deterrence is supposed to prevent.

The effect of a no-first-use law would be that in a conflict situation there would be no danger of surprise nuclear attacks, which unnecessarily escalate tension. An “opponent” receiving warnings of an incoming missile could feel reassured that the weapon isn’t nuclear and would not have to consider responding with immediate nuclear retaliation. However, critics point out that countries potentially targeted with US nuclear weapons would have to trust the US no-first-use pledge.

If the no-first-use bill becomes law, it would follow in the footsteps of four of the eight other nuclear-armed states. China started a trend in 1964 making a pledge, which it has reaffirmed many times, “not to be the first to use nuclear weapons at any time or under any circumstances.” Additionally, China has called for an international no-first-use treaty among the nine nuclear-armed states, which would constitute a significant milestone in keeping the weapons from ever being used again.

In 1998, India adopted a no-first-use pledge, and in 2016 North Korea made the same commitment. In a 2018 statement by Vladimir Putin, Russia declared that it would use nuclear weapons only as retaliation. Even though the promise was reported by the AP, and the other pledges have all been covered in mainstream media, they are not often considered effective commitments, which raises the question of their usefulness.

The new no-first-use bill is literally 14 words long, less than a quarter of the length of the nuclear stockpile. The bill would also cause deaths in the millions. They could be taken off hair-trigger alert and decommissioned. Air and sea-based nuclear missiles and bombs could be physically separated from bombers and submarines, as China has done.

Of course, a no-first-use policy is common sense, and a cheaper policy than the status quo. While the US wants to pave the path to true security, all 5,550 nuclear warheads must be demobilized and subject to a no-first-use policy.


Some of the Pentagon’s B61 thermonuclear bombs in storage, probably at Kirtland Air Force Base, New Mexico. US government photo.