

Nuclear first use?

No thanks!

Peter Jenkins

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Mindful that a review of NATO's 'strategic concept' is under way, the British branch of Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs recently commissioned a survey of British public opinion in relation to NATO's nuclear policy. (Pugwash Conferences is a non-governmental organization that was awarded a Nobel Peace Prize in 1995.)

There were 2093 respondents to the survey, representing a broad range of social and economic backgrounds and the four constituent realms of the United Kingdom. Asked whether they would wish NATO to engage in nuclear retaliation, if Russia were to use nuclear weapons against one or more NATO members, 51 percent of respondents answered 'yes'. This suggests a group half-open to the use of nuclear weapons in certain circumstances.

The picture changed when the questions focused on the 'first use' of nuclear weapons. Asked to consider the possibility of Russia invading one or more of the Baltic states without using nuclear weapons, 70 per cent wished NATO to refrain from using nuclear weapons in any ensuing military operations, and 65 per cent wished NATO to rely exclusively on non-nuclear weapons in such operations.

In effect, the survey revealed a two-thirds opposition to NATO retaining the first-use option that a 2010 review of NATO's strategic concept left open. NATO's 2010 strategic concept describes the alliance's nuclear policy as follows: 'Deterrence, based on an appropriate mix of nuclear and conventional capabilities, remains a core element of our overall strategy. The circumstances in which any

use of nuclear weapons might have to be contemplated are extremely remote.’

The British government appears to be unaware of this public opposition or unready to be influenced by it. The *Financial Times* reported on 30 October 2021 that Britain was among the US allies in Europe and the Far East/Pacific who have been ‘lobbying Joe Biden to not change American coverage on the usage of nuclear weapons amid concern the president is contemplating a “no first use” declaration that might undermine long-established deterrence methods geared toward Russia and China’.

The impression one gains from talking to people who are familiar with governmental thinking is that the British government sees retention of first use as a handy antidote. First, it’s an antidote to uncertainty. Self-evidently it would be rash, the argument goes, to renounce first use without reason to be confident in NATO’s ability to deploy sufficient non-nuclear strength to deter potential Russian aggression. But too little is known about Russian capabilities and intentions for that confidence to be attainable. That being so, only one conclusion is possible: NATO must retain the threat of first use of nuclear weapons. Second, it’s an antidote to the risk of having to increase British defence spending and persuade European partners to follow suit. Were a reliable estimate of Russian capabilities and intentions obtained, it might indicate that Europe needed to spend more on its non-nuclear defences. That would be unwelcome: in Europe, increases to defence spending do not offer the political attractions they seem to possess for US administrations.

Retaining first use also avoids having to engage in constructive diplomacy with ‘Putin’s Russia’. Back in the 1970s, NATO members held ‘mutual and balanced force reduction’ talks with the Soviet Union. These talks were not easy but led eventually to the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe. This established comprehensive limits on key categories of conventional military equipment. Realistically, 2020s diplomacy could aspire to producing a mutual balance of NATO and Russian non-nuclear forces in theatres where NATO fears Russian aggression (and Russia fears NATO aggression). It might even generate confidence in the absence of aggressive Russian intentions.

Nuclear doctrine features in the British government’s equation, too. UK officials tend to believe that the threat of first use will cause potential aggressors to think twice before starting a non-nuclear conflict by sowing doubt about their ability to control escalation. The threat of first use is, they believe, the surest way of avoiding nuclear use. This seems questionable. Is threatening first use of nuclear weapons a credible

deterrent? As the use of nuclear weapons would turn front-line states into wastelands, potential aggressors can reason that public opinion in those states would be strongly opposed to first use; they can infer that this opposition would exercise a determining influence on the decision-making of democratic governments. A sufficiency of non-nuclear defensive capabilities would provide a more credible deterrent.

It can also be argued that first-use doctrine is built on speculation. It supposes that, once initiated, the use of nuclear weapons can be limited, and nuclear escalation avoided. There is no empirical evidence for this supposition. It would be more reasonable to suppose that the consequences of a resort to nuclear weapons would be unpredictable but potentially catastrophic.

To British Pugwash the case for NATO renouncing first use, getting to grips with uncertainty while engaging Russia diplomatically, and spending more on non-nuclear defences, if necessary, seems compelling. On the evidence to date, the British government—apparently heedless of British public opinion—takes a different view. One can imagine a US decision to advocate NATO renunciation of first use, prompting a British change of heart. In the absence of that, however, a ringing declaration on page 17 of the UK's national report to the 10th Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference will sound a little false: 'The Nuclear Weapon States have a responsibility to reduce the risk of nuclear conflict.'

