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A Call for Japan to Support a US No-First-Use Policy

President Obama is reported to be considering changes to US policy to reduce the chance that nuclear weapons will be used, and to move the world further along the path to eliminating them. One possibility is that he will declare that the United States will not be the first to use nuclear weapons in a conflict and that the sole purpose of US nuclear weapons is to deter, and if necessary respond to, the use of nuclear weapons by others.

We strongly support the adoption of such a no-first-use policy and call on the Japanese government to support it as well.

A recent Japanese press report stated that some officials in the Abe government strongly oppose such a policy change.¹ This opposition appears to be driven by concerns that eliminating the option of a US nuclear response to a non-nuclear attack could reduce deterrence of such attacks against Japan.

These concerns are unfounded. Ten US senators recently wrote a letter to President Obama that called for a no-first-use pledge.² As they state, “In light of our unmatched conventional military capabilities, we do not need to rely on the threat of nuclear first-use to deter non-nuclear attacks on our homeland or our allies.” In addition, the strong ties between the United States and Japan and the presence of US servicemen in Japan should dispel any doubt that the United States would come to Japan’s defense in a crisis.

A frequent argument raised by opponents of a no-first-use policy is that it may lead Japan to develop its own nuclear weapons. Some US policy makers may find this argument compelling because some Japanese officials have voiced opposition to no-first-use. However, the Japanese public overwhelmingly opposes developing nuclear weapons. Even an official high-level Japan Defense Agency commission in 1995 concluded that there was no foreseeable circumstance in which it made sense for Japan to develop nuclear weapons.³

Rather than leaving open the possibility that it will initiate the use of nuclear weapons, the United States should instead be taking steps to increase the threshold for nuclear use. Given US conventional strength, maintaining the option to use nuclear weapons first sends the message that other nuclear weapon states should maintain this option as well, and could encourage nations without nuclear weapons to develop their own. The path to a safer world remains blocked as long as the United States refuses to make this change.

It is not surprising that changing the nuclear status quo raises concerns. But as President Obama said during his visit to Hiroshima earlier this year, “Among those nations like my own that hold nuclear stockpiles, we must have the courage to escape the logic of fear and pursue a world without them.”⁴ It would be tragic if Japan stood in the way of that pursuit. We do not believe the Japanese public would support such an outcome.

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¹ “Japan seeks talks with U.S. over ‘no first use’ nuclear policy change,” *The Japan Times*, July 15, 2016. Online at <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2016/07/15/national/japan-seeks-talks-u-s-no-first-use-nuclear-policy-change/#.V5enzfkrLDc>.

² Senate letter to Obama, July 20, 2016. Online at <http://www.markey.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/7-20-16%20EJM%20Letter%20to%20President%20Obama%20on%20Nuclear%20Weapons.pdf>.

³ Gregory Kulacki, *Japan and America’s Nuclear Posture*, March 2010. Online at <http://www.ucsusa.org/sites/default/files/legacy/assets/documents/hwgs/japan-american-nuclear-posture.pdf>.

⁴ “Text of President Obama’s Speech in Hiroshima, Japan,” *New York Times*, May 27, 2016. Online at <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/28/world/asia/text-of-president-obamas-speech-in-hiroshima-japan.html>.