

August 2021

Open Letter to the United Nations General Assembly and Delegates to the  
September 26 UN High Level Meeting on Nuclear Disarmament  
From People for Nuclear Disarmament, Human Survival Project and the  
Abolition 2000 Working Group on Nuclear Risk Reduction

RE:  
**NUCLEAR RISK REDUCTION,  
the REAGAN-GORBACHEV dictum  
and  
NO FIRST USE**

**Summary:**

--UNGA/First Cttee Welcome reaffirmation by Presidents Putin and Biden of the Reagan-Gorbachev dictum that a 'nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought'.

--Prioritise Nuclear Risk Reduction Measures in First Cttee and the Sept 26 High Level Meeting

--Urge No First Use Postures and Policies in Sept 26 High Level Meeting and the First Committee,

**Dear Delegates to the High Level Meeting of Sept 26, and UNGA First Committee:**

On 11 Sept last year, a group of us [wrote to you](#) urging that the Sept 26<sup>th</sup> High Level Meeting, the upcoming 10<sup>th</sup> NPT Review Conference, and/or the UNGA General Assembly (First Committee) reaffirm the Reagan Gorbachev Joint Statement of Geneva 1985, according to which '**A Nuclear War Cannot be Won and Must Never be Fought**'. This was done in a context in which nuclear risk reduction was (and is more than ever) of existential importance, and in which the adoption of postures and Policies of **No First Use** are becoming an obvious way to reduce those risks.

Since then, Presidents Putin and Biden in Geneva, (appropriately) adopted a [Joint Presidential Statement on Strategic Stability](#) in which they reaffirmed that '*A Nuclear War Cannot be Won and Must Never be Fought*'

**The UN General Assembly (First Committee) should welcome and echo that declaration. Ideally this should be done by a unanimous resolution.**

This declaration is so important however, because the actual risk of a nuclear war is as high as it has ever been. The most well – known indicator of nuclear risk, the [hands of the Doomsday Clock](#), are currently at 100 seconds to 'midnight', which is as close as they have ever been, including at the most perilous moments of the cold war.

The Stockholm Initiative has prepared a [working paper on nuclear risks](#), which while unfortunately not mentioning the easiest risk reduction measure – **No First Use** - contains much that is good. Above all, the working paper underlines the importance of risk reduction measures more broadly.

The Stockholm Risk Reduction working paper notes that:

“...International concern about nuclear risks has come to the forefront in recent years, and urgent action is needed to implement risk reduction

measures. Various developments and trends substantiate this assessment, notably a deteriorated international security environment, great power strategic competition, stress on the nuclear arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation architecture, the emergence of regional tensions and the potentially destabilising implications of several technological developments....”

and:

“...There now exists a broad range of research on nuclear risks. The humanitarian, economic, environmental and societal consequences of nuclear weapons detonations are better understood than before. Likewise, there is now greater awareness about concrete aspects of the risk of use of nuclear weapons – be it intentional, accidental, by miscalculation, misperception, or unauthorised use, including by non-state actors. This growing understanding only underlines the urgent need to address nuclear risks....”

As can be seen, both the Stockholm Initiative Working Paper and the Doomsday Clock emphasize the existential urgency of measures to reduce nuclear risk. The reaffirmation of Reagan-Gorbachev is merely an essential first step to affirming that Governments that have the physical means to accomplish the destruction of civilization and much else in short order, are not actively planning to do so, and have no immediate plans to bring about the destruction of each other and the rest of the world.

Diminishing the likelihood of nuclear war taking place via madness, miscalculation, malfunction, or malware requires a range of common sense measures that include **No First Use** commitments, policies and postures, De-alerting, transparency measures such as the implementation of proposals for a Joint Data Exchange Centre, (JDEC), and avoidance of provocative military exercises close to each other’s borders with nuclear-capable forces. The Stockholm Initiative Working Paper outlines many of these. A [full outline of risk reduction measures](#) from an NGO perspective has been prepared by Abolition 2000.

President Biden as Vice-President, expressed repeated support for **No First Use**.

In Jan 2017, he said:

“Given our Non-nuclear capabilities and the nature of today's threats, - its hard to envision a plausible scenario in which the first use of nuclear weapons by the United States would be necessary. Or make sense.”

In March 2020 he wrote in Foreign Affairs that:

“I believe that the sole purpose of the US nuclear arsenal should be deterring – and if necessary retaliating against – a nuclear attack. As President I will work to put that belief into practice in consultation with the US military and US allies.” The Democrat platform also supported **NFU**.

In December 2020, the Abolition 2000 Risk Reduction Working Group [wrote to president-Elect Biden](#), on risk reduction.

And in advance of their June 16 Geneva Summit, 1200 distinguished people [endorsed an Open Letter to Presidents Biden and Putin](#), urging them to adopt policies of **No First Use** and to reaffirm Reagan-Gorbachev (which latter, they did).

**No First Use** policies are officially held by both India and China, and it is arguable that, far from being a policy that one can 'drive a truck through' that in China's case at least the policy is built into the physical structure of its nuclear forces in that they are designed for survivability rather than quickly initiating nuclear warfare.

A **No First Use** policy or posture would mean that in practice, if nobody is willing to fire first, then no-one will fire, and nuclear war will not take place.

The adoption of **NFU** policies would also open the door to the nuclear armed and allied states joining a multilateral process for the global prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons. As long as these states rely on nuclear weapons for purposes other than deterring from nuclear attack – such as to respond to threats from conventional weapons or other WMD – it is very unlikely they will join a nuclear abolition process.

While arguments can go to and forth amongst the theologians of nuclear stability or lack thereof, it remains clear that adoption of **No First Use** policies and postures by one or both sides of a strategic 'pair' whether it be India-Pakistan or NATO-Russia, or US-China, will considerably reduce nuclear risks. So too would the adoption of the broad menu of nuclear risk reduction measures canvassed both by the Abolition 2000 working group and by the Stockholm initiative, to mention but two amongst a number of helpful initiatives.

Risk Reduction and **NFU** has become a matter of literally existential (life-and-death) importance, and which will immeasurably facilitate the elimination of nuclear weapons whether by the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, a Nuclear Weapons Convention, a 'step by step' process, or some hybrid process.

Accordingly we urge delegates and governments to prioritise risk reduction measures broadly, and **No First Use** specifically, as the existential matters that they are, and to take appropriate action in international fora to further them.

Signed:

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