



Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments

ANALYSIS

Biden Is Trying to Deter Putin from Using Nukes. His Staff Isn't Helping.

June 15, 2022 | *The Bulwark*

By: Eric Edelman and Franklin Miller

Related Expert: Eric Edelman

Over more than a half-century of national security debates, President Biden made unmistakably clear his desire to reduce both the possibility of nuclear weapons being used and the proliferation of those weapons. Sadly—for him, for our national interest, and for the world—his national security team seems intent on undercutting him at every turn.

Longstanding U.S. nuclear deterrence policy has confronted potential aggressors' use of nuclear weapons with the certainty of a devastating response while declining to specify exactly what form that response might take. Consistent with that tradition, in his New York Times essay on Ukraine policy, President Biden noted that "Any use of nuclear weapons in this conflict on any scale would be completely unacceptable to us as well as the rest of the world and would entail severe consequences."

Despite that, anonymous administration officials chose subsequently to inform reporters that should Russia's President Vladimir Putin use a nuclear weapon in the context of his aggression against Ukraine, the American response "would almost certainly be nonnuclear," specifying it could be "a combination of sanctions, diplomatic efforts and, if a military response is needed, conventional strikes." At first glance, that might seem like just another example of administration staff walking back the president's comments (a pattern that has apparently annoyed Biden), but this episode has both a backstory and real-world policy consequences that are more serious than other attempts to clean up a perceived misstatement.

Because Russian nuclear doctrine and exercises have suggested that Moscow might be prepared to use so-called "tactical" nuclear weapons to bring a regional conflict to a conclusion favorable to its interests, U.S. policymakers have had to wrestle with possible responses. Fred Kaplan's recent book *The Bomb* recounts that when weighing the possibilities of escalation during simulations conducted after the invasion of Crimea in 2014, several Obama administration subcabinet officers bucked the more traditional inclinations of their superiors and suggested that conventional military strikes and diplomacy might be the best response to a "limited" Russian nuclear attack. What took place behind the scenes in a classified setting in the Obama administration seems to be playing out publicly in the Biden administration—with the exception that the deputies and undersecretaries from 2014 are now in more senior positions.

Sending Putin a signal—intentionally or otherwise—that nuclear use might not elicit a nuclear response lowers his perceived risk in resorting to nuclear weapons in the first place. It flies in the face of the late Thomas Schelling's admonition during the Cold War that the most powerful deterrent is often "the risk that leaves something to chance." In other words, the more Putin sweats about the consequences of turning a conflict nuclear, the better. Taking a nuclear response off the table *ex ante* undermines President Biden's laudable objective of preventing nuclear escalation.

America's allies, our most valuable comparative strategic advantage in the fight against madmen authoritarians like Putin, already have reason to be wary. As the administration was preparing its Nuclear Posture Review, allied nations around the world lobbied against a "no first use" policy, which for them amounts to a "you're on your own" policy. They have received assurances that the NPR contains no such statement, but the document itself has not been released to them or to the public, so some are still understandably nervous. The logical allied response to squishy American resolve is to consider creating their own nuclear deterrent. This logic applies not just in Europe, but around the world—hence last week's call by senior Japanese politician Itsunori Onodera for "a national debate on extended deterrence including the U.S. nuclear umbrella".

Many members of Biden's national security team promoted a "no first use" policy when they served in the Obama administration. Having failed to persuade their seniors then, they resurrected this ideological crusade—in a world which had become far more dangerous in the interim—upon returning to office in 2021. The president needs to realize that such careless statements, which reflect the naïve hopes of some arms controllers but ignore the hard demands of security in a dangerous world, will result in disasters. They risk encouraging Putin to break the post-1945 nuclear taboo and they risk undermining our alliances and spurring proliferation.

President Biden has said what he needs to say to keep Putin's finger off the button. Maybe it's time he starts walking back some of his staff's comments.