

There are two major incremental steps by which the world can be made safer from the threat of nuclear war, and from the potentially catastrophic effects thereof.

These are

--To reduce the total number of nuclear weapons.

--To reduce the probability of nuclear weapons use, whatever the number of weapons, by lowering the alert levels of nuclear weapon systems and decreasing the role of nuclear weapons in security strategies.

Both steps are canvassed in the manifesto of the current Obama administration. Reductions in warhead numbers were prominent in President Obama's recent Prague speech.

Both steps need to be on the table for negotiation during the current round of negotiation on a successor to the START treaty.

Both are steps for which massive international support exists, and on which potentially promising statements have been made in both the US and Russia.

Both steps have potential application to countries other than the US and Russia, though the UK and France claim that their nuclear weapons systems are not on alert, and have been used as examples that the US and Russia ought to follow in arguments for lowering the operational status of nuclear weapons systems.

China also claims that its DF5 strategic component is not on high alert. However, as China updates and modernises this, it seems more and more likely that China's long – range strategic missiles will assume more and more of a quick – launch posture.

Both reduction in the numbers of warheads and in alert status have potential application also to India and Pakistan, as computerisation, centralisation, and automation of nuclear command and control mechanisms in the subcontinent could have the perverse and paradoxical effect of putting it on a 'hair-trigger'.

In October and December 2008, the First Committee and Plenary of the General Assembly adopted a widely - supported stand-alone resolution on the operational readiness of nuclear weapon systems, GA63/41 (L5), sponsored by Chile, Malaysia, New Zealand, Nigeria, Sweden and Switzerland, by 141 votes to 3. A similar resolution had been adopted in 2007 when it attracted wide attention, by 139-3. A number of other resolutions including India's Reducing Nuclear Danger, the NAM resolution, and the Japan-Australia Renewed Determination resolution, also contained good language on Operational Readiness/Operating Status of nuclear weapon systems. However the resolutions sponsored in 2007 and 2008 by Chile, Malaysia, New Zealand, Nigeria, Sweden and Switzerland were unique in that they were:

(a) Stand - alone resolutions on Operational Readiness that attracted support from across the spectrum of the GA, including from many NATO states including in 2008, Germany, Norway, Italy, Iceland, Belgium, Portugal, and Spain as well as traditional US allies Japan and Australia.

(b) They came about in part as a response to the recommendations of the 2006 Blix report on WMD (recommendation 17) and in part as a direct and welcome response to lobbying from NGOs including an appeal signed by 44 Nobel prize-winners and 364 NGOs and parliamentarians.

A call to lower operational readiness was a critical element in the final declaration of the Year 2000 review Conference, as one of the '13 steps'.

It has been a consistent theme of NPT working papers from a number of countries and groups, and factual summaries since.

Operational Readiness/Operating Status was included in somewhat greater detail than previously in the chair's factual report of the 2008 prepcom:

"15. States parties also attached significance to reducing the deployed status of nuclear weapons through de-alerting and de-targeting, to reducing reliance on nuclear weapons and to securing greater information from nuclear-weapon States on the active and reserve status of nuclear arsenals with a view to increasing confidence among all States parties. They welcomed the efforts of some nuclear-weapon States in this regard, noting such practical measures can raise the threshold for uses of nuclear weapons and help avoid the risk of accidents and miscalculation."

Abolition NGOs welcome statements in the most recent CD by the representatives of Algeria on behalf of the Group of 21, by Malaysia, and by Turkey, on Operational Readiness in the context of nuclear disarmament.

So what is it that makes the slightly mind - glazing topic of the operational readiness of strategic nuclear weapon - systems one of literally apocalyptic significance?

Why, for example, did an article in the September 2008 online edition of the highly respected Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, cheerily entitled 'minimising the risk of human extinction' give a list of measures needed to avoid that contingency, with lowering the operating status of nuclear weapon systems (along with their elimination) topping the rather consequential 'to - do' list, even before climate - change measures and incoming large asteroids?

Why has everyone from the original (1996) Canberra Commission to the 2006 Blix Commission, to Kissinger, Nunn, et al, given a high priority to this issue?

The answer is fairly obvious. The US and Russia, notwithstanding denials that they are, or ever were, on 'hair-trigger alert', undeniably keep a large number (estimated by Blair at 2,654 by Kristensen more recently 2,300) of nuclear warheads in a status in which they can be launched at roughly 2 minutes or less notice. This fact is never disputed - what is done is to haggle over the term 'hair trigger' and its meaning and significance.

The fundamentals of US and Russian nuclear postures have not altered since the cold war, in

the sense that both sides maintain forces that can be launched at extremely short notice and that both sides maintain operational plans and procedures that depend on the ability to execute such launches.

This fact has consequences for the time-frame in which decisions can be taken. As long as significant numbers of nuclear warheads physically can be launched at short notice, and as long as the assumptions built into nuclear postures are that they must

be so launched before the missiles of an opponent can reach them, a highly compressed decision-making time is imposed on military personnel and presidents, at command centres, and the Presidential nuclear briefcase, (which may be in the middle of an audience with the Pope, an election speech, or at home with family).

Panic - stricken (or at least highly stressed) military personnel or Presidents may have minutes to decide on very incomplete information whether what looks like an incoming attack is in fact high clouds over North Dakota (Serpukhov-15/Col Stan Petrov, midnight 26 Sept 1983), a faulty chip in a Colorado switching - station (Stratcom 1981), or a Norwegian weather research rocket (Yeltsin 1995).

The kind of 'careful' decision-making that is claimed by Chilton and others in such a situation is simply not credible. Gen. Chilton's recent assertion that 'the gun is in the holster' is misleading: In reality the gun has indeed been cocked the last 40-50 years and precisely needs to be returned to the holster. Putting the gun back in the holster is precisely what lowering operating status is about. Then we can proceed with a long overdue disassembling of the gun(s).

Defenders of current policies point out that just because some forces **CAN** be launched quickly, this does not mean that they

WOULD

be so launched in an emergency (or in an event that might for vital minutes be

THOUGHT

to be an emergency).

This is indeed true, as if it was not true we simply would not be here to talk about it! Quick (and cool) decision-making by both presidents (and/or their aides) and anonymous heroes in US and Russian command centres has on a number of occasions literally saved the world. Clearly, the fact that we are here at all is in itself proof positive that in each case, the decision was **NOT** to launch forces that could have been launched in minutes.

But this is not the point – or rather, it is all too precisely the point.

The simple fact that at least some nuclear forces are available for virtually instantaneous launch and that procedures exist (and are practiced on a regular basis), and that those procedures are a central part of force posture and strategic planning mandates absolutely that decisions, hopefully negative ones, (ie not to fire, or to wait) must be made in very short timeframes under conditions of the most extreme stress imaginable for any decision-maker.

Panel Presentation to 2009 NPT Prepcom On Operational Readiness

Written by John Hallam

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As long as at least some nuclear forces remain launch-ready, Presidents, Ministers of defence, military chiefs of staff, and officers in nuclear command centres **can only have have minutes in which to take decisions of literally apocalyptic proportions**

- even if the decision is to do nothing.

Recent research by US scientists (Toon and Robock 2008/9) on the effects of the use of US and Russian arsenals indicates that even at SORT levels of 2200-1700 warheads (and even at as low as 1000 warheads), the use by malice, madness, miscalculation or malfunction of the 'on alert' portions of US and Russian strategic nuclear forces would be terminal for civilisation and possibly for humans.

There are those who say that we are 'stuck with' deterrence until nuclear weapons are completely abolished. The stakes are such, as the above shows, that trusting our fate to deterrence seems like playing Russian (or American) roulette with the world. If this analysis shows anything other than the advisability of lowering the alert status of nuclear warheads, it is an indictment of deterrence, which can work only if humans, satellites, and computers are never in error and never miscalculate, and have perfect access to information. The record of near – misses for civilisation is in itself a most powerful argument that deterrence, even if it works in the shorter term, (questionable) is in the long term a guarantee that mistakes – even innocent ones – will be terminal for everyone and everything. Somewhere, sometime, malice, madness, miscalculation or plain malfunction will bring catastrophe.

Maintaining arsenals on high alert configuration was insanely risky during the Cold War, when there were even larger numbers of warheads on alert and when there were just too many occasions (often only known about other than to the luckless military personnel and presidents who participated in them, years after the event) on which one can say with justice that the world came just too close to ending. The September 1983 events in which Colonel Stan Petrov participated (and to whom the world arguably owes its existence) and the 1995 Norwegian research rocket incident are cases in point.

There is even less reason, now that the cold - war confrontation has supposedly ended, to maintain any nuclear forces whatsoever in these dangerous configurations. Yet as long as even some nuclear forces remain in a quick-launch configuration with operational plans and procedures that assume this, the entire decision-making framework will be distorted by these quick-launch forces.

President Obama, in his election manifesto, promised to negotiate with Russia to lower the operational status of nuclear weapon systems, a promise that was repeated after his inauguration.

It is vital that this promise is not forgotten.

Elements in the militaries in both Russia and the US will resist the implementation of a lowering in alert status. Already, there has been much muddying of the water in discussions on alert status by those who wish to retain existing postures. They must not be allowed to prevail.

The current talks between the US and Russia on the successor to the START Treaty which expires in December, are an ideal opportunity to take action to implement Obama's promises to negotiate with Russia to achieve lower operational status of nuclear weapon systems.

Accordingly, a large number of NGOs and distinguished individuals have written to Presidents and Ministers Obama, Medvedev, Putin, Biden, Clinton, and Lavrov, urging the US and Russia to take the opportunity offered by the START successor negotiation to open the way to the elimination of nuclear weapons by 'taking the apocalypse off the menu' - by reducing the operational status of nuclear weapon systems as urged by the GA63/41 resolution, and by the Reducing Nuclear Danger, Renewed Determination and NAM resolutions as well as by the summaries and final declarations of a number of NPT meetings.

Abolition NGOs call on the United States and Russia to take steps to negotiate to lower the operational status of their nuclear forces, and to make this a priority subject for negotiation during the current START negotiations, conscious of the fact that such a move can never be anything other than beneficial to genuine strategic stability, the enhancement of which is precisely the reason we do this.

Abolition NGOs welcome plans by the US and Russia, repeatedly announced but never implemented, to increase stability by means of information exchange,(JDEC) but note that this cannot substitute for a lowering in nuclear weapons operational status. We emphasise that these plans remain unimplemented. While the US and Russian governments have announced three times an intention to build JDEC, it remains unbuilt.

Abolition NGOs welcome statements by the UK and France to the effect that they have already taken steps years ago to change the 'notice to fire' on their submarine - launched missiles from minutes to days. We urge them to be more transparent about these claims to have changed the 'notice to fire' on their SLBM forces from minutes to days.

Abolition NGOs urge The UK and France accordingly both to press the United States and Russia to do as they have done, to take further steps, and to support the relevant resolutions in the General Assembly.

If the UK and France have indeed lowered the state of operational readiness of their nuclear weapon systems as they say they have (and there is no reason to doubt it), then it would be consistent for them to advertise the fact and to vote yes to the operational readiness resolution. Their 'no' vote is entirely inconsistent with what they say they have done. We urge them to change it to a yes.

Abolition NGOs call on India, Pakistan, and China, to refrain from placing their nuclear forces in a quick - reaction mode, and to refrain from operational plans that require rapid responses. We note with apprehension moves by all three to upgrade both the number of warheads they deploy and the response – times they are capable of and the levels of automation and degree of centralisation of their command and control systems.

We call on all states parties and in particular those who sponsor resolutions in the General

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Assembly calling for a lowering in operational readiness of nuclear forces, to take diplomatic action to bring those resolutions to the attention of the nuclear weapon and nuclear - capable states, and in particular to that of the US and Russia in the context of the START successor negotiation.

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