

REDUCING NUCLEAR DANGERS - Letter to Putin, Obama, Lavrov, Kerry

Written by John Hallam

Friday, 02 October 2015 15:47 - Last Updated Friday, 02 October 2015 15:48

The letter below has been faxed to:

- President Putin
- Sergei Lavrov
- Russian NY and Geneva UN missions
- US NY UN Mission
- Kerry
- US Secy of Defence
- House subcommittee on Strategic Forces
- Senate Subcttee on Strategic Forces.

John Hallam

REDUCING NUCLEAR DANGERS

President Vladimir Putin
President Barack Obama
cc
Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov
Secretary of State John Kerry
Congressional and Duma Committees on Strategic Forces
Policymakers

Dear Presidents Obama and Putin, Foreign Ministers and Secretaries of State, Members of Duma and Congressional Committees on Strategic Nuclear Forces, and Policymakers:

You have already received letters from Generals James Cartwright and Vladimir Dvorkin, former commanders of American and Russian missile forces, from International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW), and from faith leaders worldwide expressing deep concern, if not alarm, at the possibility that tension between Russia and NATO may spiral out of control with a catastrophic outcome. We strongly echo and endorse all that has been said in those letters, and in the related study on de-alerting by Global Zero headed by Generals Cartwright and Dvorkin.

According to that study,

“Tension between Russia and the West over the Ukraine crisis has brought the parties one step closer to the precipice of nuclear brinksmanship, the point at which nuclear risk skyrockets,”

and:

“it has flared to the point that it is producing dangerous misunderstandings and action-reaction cycles with strong escalatory updrafts.”

We note that on the 40th anniversary of the signing of the Helsinki Document establishing the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly adopted a resolution which ‘Expressed deep concern at increased nuclear threats arising from the deteriorating relationship between Russia and NATO,’ and ‘Called on all OSCE States with

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nuclear weapons or under extended nuclear deterrence relationships to reduce the risks of a nuclear war by taking nuclear weapons off high-alert, and by adopting no-first use policies.'

Like the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, we are deeply alarmed over the direction in which the confrontation over the borders of the Ukraine may be going. Like the OSCE Assembly, we believe nuclear risk reduction measures are a matter of urgency. What is placed at risk by an ongoing and deepening political, and increasingly a military, confrontation between NATO and Russia far exceeds in importance the future power and credibility of NATO and of Russia, and any territorial issues between them.

What is placed at risk, in the very worst case, is civilization itself, and potentially, human survival. This is not of course to say that a completely 'apocalyptic' event sequence is what WILL take place, or even that this is the most likely outcome of such a sequence. We all hope and pray that nothing of the sort takes place and that a peaceful negotiated settlement of issues arising from the 2014 Ukraine crisis is eventually reached by all parties, including Russia. However, the likelihood of a catastrophic outcome is by no means zero. The record of history – especially of August 1914 – shows that even where national leaders are confident that they have everything in hand, events can spin out of control with consequences that are completely out of proportion to anything that might initially have been at stake.

Confrontational attitudes and actions, (particularly between militaries), no matter who initiates them or who is to 'blame', can as the European Leadership Network points out, all too easily lead to accidental conflict or even to just plain catastrophic accident. If this were to lead to deeper and prolonged military conflict between two parties (such as in the Baltics) there is no telling where it would stop, or if it could be stopped at all without spiraling (as in 1914) into a conflict that no-one actually sought, but which no-one did enough to prevent.

The involvement of nuclear-armed forces in mirror-imaged and adjacent exercises conducted within kilometers of each other and without adequate (or any) communications between the rival forces recklessly courts disaster. Such exercises should never take place.

But should, for any reason, nuclear weapons be brought into play, even at a tactical level, it is hard to see how the level of conflict could be controlled and prevented from escalating to the use of land-based, silo-based high-alert nuclear forces. These number just under 1000 warheads on both the Russian and the US sides, with somewhat larger numbers of submarine-based warheads available.

The use of those silo-based, high – alert forces would destroy NATO, Russia and other countries as functioning societies in slightly over an hour.

It would also bring about the immediate deaths of up to a billion people, depending on precisely what targeting strategies were followed.

Smoke from burning cities (see below on non-targeting of cities) would then enter the upper stratosphere where it would remain for a number of decades, bringing about temperatures lower than the last ice-age, and making agriculture impossible, or nearly so, throughout the temperate

zone for decades.

The majority of humans even in countries untouched by hostilities, would starve.

Again, we are not saying this is what WILL happen, but neither can anyone reasonably assert that it will NOT happen. The fact is that the probability of this kind of outcome is nonzero and is unacceptably high.

If the awful possibilities outlined above are to be avoided, a number of commonsense steps need to be taken. Most of them have been discussed at length in various international fora. Most of them have been suggested in the correspondence you have already received.

1) Nuclear weapon systems that are currently kept on high alert need to have their posture changed so that they are no longer in such a status. The maintenance of nuclear weapons on high alert gives decision-makers ridiculously short time-frames (minutes), in which to make utterly apocalyptic decisions. Those decisions can only legitimately be made in at least a 24-72 hour time-frame if at all ever. We fully endorse the advice of Generals Cartwright and Dvorkin on this matter. Your attention is also drawn to a number of General Assembly resolutions urging a lowering in operational readiness, notably the resolution on 'Operational Readiness of Nuclear Weapon Systems' resolution sponsored by NZ, Switzerland, Sweden, Chile, Malaysia and Nigeria, and India's 'Reducing Nuclear Dangers' resolution. These resolutions are regularly adopted by massive majorities(166 yes votes including key US allies for 'Operational Readiness') in the General Assembly.

2) In 1998, the US and Russian governments, in the wake of a 'near miss' in 1995, when a weather research rocket was mistaken for a US SLBM, agreed to establish a Joint Data Exchange Center. That agreement has been reaffirmed a number of times, most recently in 2010. The Joint Data Exchange Center however remains unbuilt. It should be made operational at the very earliest.

3) A series of measures concerning nuclear posture, notably 'no first use' doctrines and a decision to no longer target cities (as noted above cities are the most prolific source of the black smoke that brings about nuclear winter) would also make a vast contribution to the reduction of the risk of nuclear catastrophe. Because of the indiscriminate impact on civilians and other non-military targets, any retaliation against cities would be the most egregious violation of international humanitarian law. Even an incoming attack involving the incineration of dozens of major cities must not be retaliated against in kind because of the even-more-profound catastrophic climate disruption which would ensue. These decisions would require deep changes to nuclear postures and doctrines.

The safest nuclear weapon by far is one that does not exist at all. The majority of the worlds governments and parliaments, not to mention NGOs, see the elimination of nuclear weapons not as something it might be 'nice' to do 'in some century', but as an urgent existential priority. We ask that the nuclear weapon states to view the complete and total elimination of nuclear weapons, as mandated by the Nuclear Nonproliferation treaty (NPT) itself, as an urgent existential priority.

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Finally, we affirm strongly that solutions to the Ukraine crisis itself are not to be found by blaming and pointing fingers at or by either party. Nor are they to be found in the use of military force. They can be found only by a fair negotiated diplomatic settlement involving compromises including on matters that may be seen by some to be 'non-negotiable'. The solutions lie in a willingness to negotiate precisely over 'non-negotiables'. Only a settlement that takes the interests of all concerned into account, and that does so in a way that is clearly fair can be made to stick.

Military force – by either side – is not the answer.

Even if a solution cannot immediately be found, the importance of taking measures to ensure that there is never a premature and catastrophic end to civilization and much more, is utterly paramount.

Signed

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