

Letter to Obama and Medvedev on Operational Readiness/JDEC

Written by John Hallam
Wednesday, 31 March 2010 19:10 -

START/POST - START NEGOTIATION

NUCLEAR WEAPONS OPERATIONAL READINESS JOINT DATA EXCHANGE CENTRE (JDEC)

PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA
PRESIDENT MEDVEDEV
PRIME MINISTER PUTIN
SECRETARY OF STATE HILARY CLINTON
SECRETARY OF DEFENCE ROBERT GATES
UNDER-SECRETARY ELLEN TAUSCHER
FOREIGN MINISTER SERGEI LAVROV
US AND RUSSIAN NEGOTIATING TEAM IN GENEVA

Dear President Obama, President Medvedev, Prime Minister Putin, Secretary of State Hilary Clinton, Foreign Minister Lavrov, Secretary of Defence Robert Gates and Ellen Tauscher, and Russian and US negotiating team in Geneva:

We are writing to you a second time about the US-Russia negotiation for a treaty to replace START, to again urge that the matter of the operational readiness of US and Russian nuclear weapon systems and the Joint Data Exchange Centre be put on the table. Our earlier letter to President Obama and copied to President Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin, focussed on the US nuclear posture review, is attached.

We are not writing to try to hurry you: On the contrary, we believe that a good agreement is by far the most important thing. It is vital however, that forward movement towards both an agreement the elimination of nuclear weapons sooner rather than later be maintained.

The operational status of nuclear weapon systems is a matter of vital importance for the maintenance of strategic stability globally. As long as the US and Russia maintain a number of thousands of warheads in a posture in which they can be launched relatively quickly, in the words of the ICNND (International Commission on Nuclear Nonproliferation and Disarmament) (p27) 'The prospect that a catastrophic nuclear exchange could be triggered by a false alarm is fearful and not fanciful.'

The ICNND continues:

"...The issue of most immediate concern which certainly does *not* have to wait for reductions in weapon numbers, is the huge number of weapons that remain on dangerously high alert, planned to be launched more or less immediately on receiving information (or what is believed to be information) about an opponents attack."

The ICNND recommends, "...It is crucial that ways be found to lengthen the decision - making fuse for the launch of any nuclear weapons and in particular - while recognising the difficulty and complexity of the negotiating process - that weapons be taken off launch-on-warning alert as soon as possible."

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We note that in these quotes the ICNND gives a possible way around some difficulties that you may be encountering in your negotiations. It specifically says that the lowering of operational readiness does not have to wait until further reductions in weapon numbers (though such reductions are in our view also of vital importance). Similarly, reductions in operational readiness do not have to await the resolution of diplomatic disagreements revolving around the deployment of US missile defence systems.

Further reductions in warhead numbers, vital as they are, together with a solution to the problems posed by missile defence, can wait while reductions in readiness go ahead.

Those reductions in readiness would however, by taking significant tension out of the relationship, make advances in other areas easier.

The same can be said for proceeding with JDEC. JDEC alone may not eliminate the risk of accidental nuclear war, but it will undoubtedly be helpful and useful. Your governments have now three if not four times agreed that JDEC should take place. It is high time JDEC was operationalised!

An accidental nuclear exchange between the US and Russia would involve thousands of warheads not just one or two. As such it would be a global catastrophe. The environmental consequences of such a catastrophe would, according to the highly respected Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, "leave the Earth virtually uninhabitable".

The measures required to take this particular apocalypse off the agenda are modest and ought to be relatively easy for your two governments to agree on. Placing operating status on the table at this stage would be a solution to many of the other negotiating problems you face, and would make a real step forward to the elimination of nuclear weapons, whilst removing a real and present risk to the continuance of civilisation and the human species.

We hope you will find this useful in your deliberations,

(Note that we are sending you once more an earlier letter addressed to President Obama, concerning the US nuclear posture review)

Signed:

John Hallam

Steven Starr

Doug Mattern

—.....

TAKING THE APOCALYPSE OFF THE AGENDA: LOWERING OPERATIONAL READINESS OF NUCLEAR WEAPON SYSTEMS

President Barack Obama

President Medvedev

Prime Minister Putin

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov

US and Russian Negotiators in Geneva

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cc

Secretary of State Hilary Clinton
Under-secy of State for Nuclear Disarmament and Nonproliferation Ellen Tauscher
House of Representatives Committees on Defence and Foreign Affairs
Senate Committees on Defence and Foreign Affairs

The letter below was initially sent to President Obama in the light of the ongoing US nuclear posture review. It remains relevant in the light of the ongoing START/Post START negotiation between the US and Russia, and should command the attention of US and Russian negotiators.

Dear Presidents Obama, Medvedev, Prime Minister Putin, Hilary Clinton, Ellen Tauscher, and members of the Nuclear Posture Review:

Now is the time to ensure that the ongoing START negotiation fully incorporates the intentions you laid out in President Obama's election manifesto, in statements subsequent to his election, and in his Prague speech.

In keeping with the spirit of your stated goal to create "a world without nuclear weapons", and to "reduce the role of nuclear weapons in our national security strategy" we strongly urge that you use the START/Post-START negotiation to fundamentally re-evaluate the role which nuclear weapons play in current military planning.

We urge that you:

- o Significantly reduce total inventory of both reserve and deployed nuclear weapons
- o Remove all nuclear weapons from high-alert, quick-launch status
- o Renounce the pre-emptive use or first use of nuclear weapons
- o Rescind nuclear-war-fighting plans including counter-force missions and the policy of massive retaliation
- o Evaluate the environmental consequences of the use of our nuclear arsenal.

The authors of this letter are in particular focussed on the need to lower the operational status of nuclear weapon systems as President Obama outlined subsequent to his inauguration. Resolutions on operational readiness passed the General Assembly in 2007 and 2008. In 2009, the sponsors of the resolution decided not to submit it, in order to facilitate the internal review processes of your governments.

Taking the leadership role in the vital task of reducing, and then ending, the threat of nuclear weapons through their complete worldwide elimination, would be the greatest gift possible for present and future generations, and a wonderful legacy for your Nobel Peace Prize.

Now is the time for the US-Russia Post - START negotiation to take note of concerned American and global opinion and make the necessary, long overdue, changes in nuclear policies and postures. Doing so would not only dramatically reduce the role of nuclear weapons in national security strategy as per President Obama's Prague speech but would, literally, 'take the apocalypse off the agenda'.

(More detail contained in what follows in the brief on the next page.)

POLICY BRIEF ON OPERATIONAL READINESS

When President Obama campaigned for the presidency, prominent amongst his campaign promises was one to negotiate with Russia to lower the operational status of nuclear weapon systems. This was repeated on the White House website subsequent to his inauguration.

The issue of the operating status of nuclear weapons, at first sight a technical one, is nonetheless one with truly apocalyptic implications that go right to the core of the reasons for eliminating nuclear weapon systems. It is seen by many as a human survival issue.

In an October 2008 article entitled 'Minimising the Likelihood of Human Extinction' the prestigious Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists noted, in a list of ultra - important 'must do's' that included measures to ameliorate climate change and track incoming asteroids, that two items topped the list of things we need to do to ensure humans are still here a hundred years hence: - we must lower the operational readiness of nuclear weapons systems, and we must eliminate them.

Calls to lower the operational status of nuclear weapon systems are made in a number of widely supported UN resolutions, notably the 'Operational Readiness of Nuclear Weapon Systems' (A/RES/63-41) resolution sponsored by Chile, Malaysia, New Zealand, Nigeria, Sweden and Switzerland, India's Reducing Nuclear Dangers resolution, the 'Renewed Determination Toward the Total Elimination of Nuclear Weapons' resolution which the US now actually Co-sponsors, and the 'NAM' resolution.

The Canberra Commission back in 1996, and the 2006 Blix Commission made strong recommendations to lower the state of operational readiness of nuclear weapon systems.

In 2004/5, 44 Nobel prizewinners from across the spectrum of Nobel disciplines signed an appeal by two of the authors of the letter you are now reading, urging a lowering in the operating status of nuclear weapon systems. (As many as 102 nobels have over the past two decades, signed onto appeals urging their elimination.) (Text of appeal appended to electronic versions)

When in January 2007 Kissinger, Schultz, Perry and Nunn, in their now famous Wall Street Journal op-ed, advocated 'a series of agreed steps that would lay the groundwork for a future free of the nuclear threat', the first of these steps was the lowering of operational readiness of nuclear weapon systems. This was repeated in more detail in 2008.

The reasons for such action are utterly compelling. Notwithstanding obfuscations and denials (notably from the previous US administration) there is absolutely no doubt that the US and Russia both maintain large numbers of nuclear warheads atop missiles configured so they can

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be launched in two minutes or less.

This places unrealistic - indeed impossible - expectations on decisionmakers, including the President, who are forced to decide, in extremely compressed timeframes on whether or not to order a launch-- A decision whose utterly apocalyptic implications require a little more than 2-8 minutes preceded by a 30 second briefing to think about.

A number of instances of computer, satellite, or human, error have taken place over the last 30 years, wherein we have been minutes, or even seconds, from the greatest catastrophe imaginable, as thousands of nuclear warheads are launched. So far we have been saved from an entirely avoidable apocalypse in each instance by a seeming miracle. (There is an extensive literature on this).

Recent (2006) work by Toon and Robock and others using the latest NASA climate simulations makes it clear that even the use of as little as 0.03% of global nuclear arsenals (ie, in a conflict between India and Pakistan) would have catastrophic global climatic consequences. The use of the 'on alert' portion of US or Russian nuclear forces would, according to these climate models, terminate civilisation and possibly humans as well as many other living species.

The world as a whole therefore has an entirely legitimate interest in the nuclear postures of the two leading nuclear weapon states who still hold 95% of all the world's nuclear warheads, and who continue to maintain a substantial portion of them in a state in which they can be launched within minutes. The governments of the world have made their position clear by voting 141-3 for the operational readiness resolution when it was last adopted by the UN General Assembly in Jan 2009. (Text of resolution appended to electronic versions)

Most recently, there have been important developments in this area.

The six governments announced that for just 2009, they are putting the operational readiness resolution 'on hold'. This was done in the hope and expectation that deep changes might be made in US nuclear posture generally which would commit the US to the lowering of its nuclear weapons posture. The hope was expressed in many quarters that 'the next time the operational readiness resolution goes up it will be possible to pass it by consensus' (ie, that the US itself will be in a position to vote for it). It is to be devoutly hoped that this may come to pass.

On 21-23 June of 2009, an important workshop was held on the subject, attended by senior US and Russian generals, academics, and think - tank people, which produced an 'outcome document' that was presented at a workshop in the UN on 15 Oct, attended by the authors of this letter. The outcome document, published by the East-West Institute, strongly urged a lowering in operational readiness of nuclear weapon systems.

('Re-Framing Nuclear De-Alert' appended to electronic versions of this letter.)

President Obama had exactly the right instinct when he placed a commitment to lower operating status on his election manifesto.

If this issue slips off the agenda he will have chosen (by default) to continue playing roulette with computer error, malfunction, misjudgment and the fate of all humans and most other living things.

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Steps taken last June and July by Presidents Obama and Medvedev to revive the Joint Data Exchange Centre in Moscow, announced three times but never implemented, are to be welcomed - assuming they are implemented.

If implemented JDEC will not eliminate the possibility of accidental nuclear war but it may help to make it less likely.

Now is the time for the US Nuclear Posture Review to take note of concerned American and global opinion and make the necessary, long overdue, changes in nuclear policies and postures to - literally - take the apocalypse off the agenda.

Signed:

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Agenda item 89
General and complete disarmament
Chile, Malaysia, New Zealand, Nigeria, Sweden and Switzerland: draft resolution
Decreasing the operational readiness of nuclear weapons systems

The General Assembly,

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Recalling its resolution 62/36 of 5 December 2007,

Recalling that the maintenance of nuclear weapons on high alert was a feature of cold war nuclear postures, and welcoming the increased confidence and transparency since the cessation of the cold war,

Concerned that, notwithstanding the end of the cold war, several thousand nuclear weapons remain on high alert, ready to be launched within minutes,

Noting the increased engagement in multilateral disarmament forums in support of further reductions to the operational status of nuclear weapons systems,

Recognizing that the maintenance of nuclear weapons systems at a high level of readiness increases the risk of the use of such weapons, including the unintentional or accidental use, which would have catastrophic consequences,

Also recognizing that reductions in deployments and the lowering of operational status contribute to the maintenance of international peace and security, as well as to the process of nuclear disarmament, through the enhancement of confidence-building and transparency measures and a diminishing role for nuclear weapons in security policies,

Welcoming bilateral initiatives, such as the proposed United States/Russian Federation Joint Centre for the Exchange of Data from Early Warning Systems and Notification of Missile Launches, which can play a central role in operational status reduction processes,

Also welcoming the steps taken by some States to reduce the operational status of their nuclear weapons systems, including de-targeting initiatives and increasing the amount of preparation time required for deployment,

1. Calls for further practical steps to be taken to decrease the operational readiness of nuclear weapons systems, with a view to ensuring that all nuclear weapons are removed from high alert status;
2. Urges States to update the General Assembly on progress made in the implementation of the present resolution;
3. Decides to remain seized of the matter.