

Ambassadors, Colonels, Generals sign letter to Duma and Congress on Operating Status

Written by John Hallam

Friday, 22 April 2011 16:46 - Last Updated Sunday, 08 February 2015 22:30

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_AMBASSADORS, COLONELS, GENERALS, POLICY EXPERTS, SAY REDUCE OPERATIONAL READINESS OF NUCLEAR WEAPON SYSTEMS

A highly distinguished list of Russian Colonels and Generals, Former UN ambassadors, and policy experts have written to the US Congress and the Russian Duma, urging them to reduce the operational readiness of nuclear weapon systems.

The group, which includes former Australian UN Disarmament Ambassador Richard Butler, Colonel Valery Yarynich (ret) (30 years in the Soviet Strategic Rocket Forces), Major-General Pavel Zolotarev (ret) (former Section Head of the Defense Council of the Russian Federation), John Steinbruner of the University of Maryland, Matthew McKinzie of the US Natural Resources Defence Council (NRDC), Prof. Sergei Kolesnikov (MP, Deputy Chair, Committee for Public Health, Russian Parliament, Co-President of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, Co - President PNND). It was coordinated by John Hallam of Nuclear Flashpoints and Steven Starr, Senior Scientist with Physicians for Social Responsibility, and calls for nuclear weapon systems in the US and Russia to be taken off launch-ready alert, so that computer error and human miscalculation are less likely to result in large-scale nuclear weapons use. Peer-reviewed studies predict this would not only destroy civilization, but would kill most humans and other complex forms of life.

The letter references a previous letter signed by 59 policy experts and NGOs, and a proposal contained in the prestigious journal Foreign Affairs, and co-authored by a number of the signatories (Colonel Yarynich and General Pavel Zolotarev, and Matthew Mc Kinzie of NRDC), which calls for drastic reductions in nuclear arsenals to under 500 weapons each, and for a lowering of alert status, and which argues that a rigorous statistical analysis shows that doing this will really reduce the risk of an accidental apocalypse.

According to the coordinators of the letter and the previous letter:

"What is shocking is that even after the negotiation of the New START treaty, thousands of nuclear weapons remain on alert, able to be fired in less than two minutes by an order from a presidential nuclear briefcase. What we are proposing here would if implemented, truly take the apocalypse off the agenda"

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RUSSIAN STATE DUMA AND THE U.S.A. CONGRESS,

COMMITTEES ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENSE

MINISTERS/SECRETARIES OF STATE FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENSE

Dear Duma and Congress Committees of Foreign Affairs and Defense, Ministers, and Secretaries of State,

Some weeks ago, following the entry into force of the New START, you received a letter from 59 lobbyists and policy experts that urged you to consider lowering the operational readiness of nuclear weapons.

As the previous letter explained, lowering the operational readiness of nuclear weapons is both a step towards the elimination of such systems, and a critical intervention to guarantee the survival of civilization and complex forms of life, including human life.

There are, as the previous letter pointed out, a number of recorded events in which human error, miscalculation and technical failure occurred in both US and Russian/Soviet nuclear C3I systems. We know these incidents have more than once taken both nations to the brink of inadvertent, large-scale use of nuclear weapons.

The authors of the previous letter wish to take this debate a little further by discussing a proposal by which a lowering in operational status of U.S. and Russian nuclear forces might be achieved. The proposal includes possible guidelines by which so-called 'strategic stability' might be evaluated in an open and transparent way. This would allow members of the public and independent experts to evaluate both the safety and consequences of failure of current and proposed nuclear postures.

A recent article by former US and Russian missile forces officers and others in the prestigious journal Foreign Affairs ('Smaller and Safer: A New Plan For Nuclear Postures' by Bruce Blair, Victor Esin, Matthew McKinzie, Valery Yarynich, and Pavel Zolotarev) shows convincingly that de-alerted nuclear forces would still be able to inflict crippling and unacceptable retaliatory strikes against any opponent that struck first. This means that arguments to the effect that this proposal could be somehow 'destabilizing' are absolutely incorrect.

The authors of this and the previous letter do not believe that nuclear deterrence can forever work perfectly. Endless perfection is impossible not merely because deterrence requires all parties to remain rational under all circumstances, but because it also requires accurate information at all times. The record of computer glitches and other technical failures is proof positive that this condition never applies. The demand for missile defense is in itself an acknowledgment that deterrence could fail. The very admission of a need to lower operational readiness and increase decision-making time is in itself a core argument against deterrence.

However, the 'Smaller and Safer' proposal in Foreign Affairs does not require the end of deterrence - the proposal can exist in the context of deterrence. Rather it aims to minimize the risk of absolute catastrophe posed by the continued maintenance of thousands of

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U.S. and Russian nuclear warheads in a launch-ready, high-alert status, able to be launched with only a few minutes warning.

The Foreign Affairs proposal:

(a) Reduces U.S. and Russian nuclear arsenals radically to less than 500 warheads each, and reduces overall nuclear arsenals (including tactical and inactive reserve weapons) from about 20,000 warheads to a total of 1000 warheads (or less) for the U.S. and Russia.

(b) Almost completely eliminates the possibility of an accidental or inadvertent nuclear war, as a result of cyber attack, sabotage, human and/or technical error.

In addition, the Foreign Affairs proposal completely refutes arguments against de-alerting that have been raised by its opponents, namely that de-alerting could be de-stabilizing, because there would be an incentive to 'cheat' by surreptitiously re-alerting and engaging in a 'disarming first strike'. This is indeed the point of the statement that the technical analysis upon which the proposal is based, demonstrates that even in circumstances of a surprise attack, a disarming first strike cannot be initiated without the attacker running the risk of receiving an unacceptable level of damage from a retaliatory strike (see http://www.globalzero.org/files/FA_appendix.pdf).

It is well to remember that the environmental and climatic consequences of virtually any nuclear war would lead to global nuclear famine. This includes nuclear weapons detonated in any disarming first strike and/or retaliation. The point of the argument is that nuclear war is much LESS probable under the proposed scheme.

The computer simulations of nuclear war used in the Foreign Affairs proposal show quite decisively that de-alerted and greatly reduced nuclear forces preclude the possibility of some sort of destabilizing 're-alerting race'. De-alerted nuclear forces allow decision-makers increased decision-making time, greatly reducing the chances that they might inadvertently terminate civilization due to a false warning of nuclear attack, generated by computer error and/or miscalculation.

The nuclear states continue to keep many of the issues of nuclear strategy and the posture of nuclear forces in the strictest confidence. This prevents an honest evaluation of the actual probability of nuclear war, which is always a possibility as long as thousands of nuclear weapons remain on high-alert status.

In fact, the President Obama administration has taken a number of modest but essential steps towards a more open policy, declassifying both its Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) and its cyberspace security program. We note that the declassified NPR, while it refused to lower operational readiness, DID refer to the need to increase decision-making time. This is an important concession. The NPR also confirmed that US silo-based missiles and some submarine-based missiles are, indeed, kept at launch-ready, high-alert status.

A transparent evaluation of 'strategic stability' and nuclear posture, through a process that is open to public and expert scrutiny, is essential if progress is to be made in moving toward nuclear postures that remove the possibility, however remote (or otherwise), of complete catastrophe. Indeed, such openness will enable the kind of probability analysis that must be

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done, if we are to arrive at a truly realistic assessment of the dangers that current or proposed nuclear postures pose.

We are confident that any objective analysis of nuclear posture will conclude that lowering levels of nuclear alert, and drastically increasing decision-making time for senior military officers, presidents and ministers of defense, is essential to assure human survival.

As a first step, to improve the objectivity of this analysis, we offer to prepare and conduct an open working meeting of officials and independent experts to discuss existing approaches designed to resolve the problem of launch-ready nuclear forces.

Signed:

Richard Butler, Ambassador, Chair, Middle Powers Initiative, Australia

John Hallam, People for Nuclear Disarmament, Nuclear Flashpoints
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Sergei Kolesnikov, Deputy-Chairman of Committee for Health Care of
Russian State Duma, PNND Co-President, academician

Matthew McKinzie, Senior Scientific Consultant, Nuclear Program,
National Resources Defense Council, USA

Steven Starr, Senior Scientist, Physicians for Social Responsibility, USA

John Steinbruner, Director of the Center for International and Security
Studies at Maryland (CISSM), USA

Valery Yarynich, Colonel (Ret.), Soviet/Russian Strategic Nuclear Forces
(1959-1992), C3 (Command, Control, and
Communications Systems)

Pavel Zolotarev, Major-General (Ret.), Deputy Chief, Department of
Defense Council of Russian Federation (1997-1998)

MONDAY 21 FEB WHAT NEXT AFTER NEW START ENTRY INTO FORCE?

CONGRESS,DUMA, URGED TO LOWER OPERATIONAL READINESS OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS SYSTEMS

With the entry into force of the New START Treaty at the Munich Security Conference, nuclear disarmament NGO's worldwide have written to the Russian State Duma and the US Congressional committees of Defence and Foreign Affairs, once more urging them to take steps to lower the operational readiness of strategic nuclear weapon systems.

According to the authors of the letter: "To this day, the US and Russia maintain approximately 2000 warheads each, in a status in which they can be launched in as little as 2 minutes. Twenty years after the cold war has supposedly finished, this makes no sense at all, yet Pentagon and Kremlin strategic planners still refuse to stand down weapons whose use would in all probability terminate not only civilisation, but most complex land-based living things if used to destroy cities.

The entry into force of New START, which for some time looked as if it might not take place at all, gives some hope of further progress to nuclear disarmament - even if it is largely undercut by the massive modernisation program.

Policy - makers are asking 'what can be done next'?

There are a number of things on the table, but the main ones are the fissile material cutoff treaty (FMCT), currently stalled in the UN Committee on Disarmament, and US ratification of the CTBT. Both of these are important and worthy goals, but look unlikely to progress in the immediate term.

However, progress COULD be made, on lowering the operational readiness of nuclear weapon systems - and lowering the operational readiness of nuclear weapon systems, so that presidents and senior military have more than a mere 8 minutes maximum to decide on whether or not to unleash the apocalypse - is a step that would do more to assure the security of the world than any other step short of the complete elimination of nuclear weapons. It is a relatively easy and cost - free step with massive positive consequences.

We call on Duma and Congress to act to take the apocalypse off the agenda by taking nuclear weapons off high alert status immediately."

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WHAT NEXT AFTER NEW START ENTRY INTO FORCE?

INCREASING DECISION-MAKING TIME FOR STRATEGIC NUCLEAR WEAPONS

To: Congress and State Duma Committees on Foreign Affairs and Defence

Ellen Tauscher
Rose Gotemoeller
Hillary Clinton
Sergey Lavrov
Anatoly Serdyukov

Russian and US UN Missions

Dear Members of the Russian State Duma and the US Congress, Foreign Ministers, Defence Ministers, and Secretaries of State ,

First of all, the authors of this letter would like to congratulate you on the New START Treaty's Entry Into Force.

While new START is a modest step - many say, too modest - toward a nuclear weapons-free world (an objective to which both the US and the Russian governments are committed by article VI of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty), rejection of this Treaty would have been a very significant setback for efforts to reduce the risk posed by nuclear weapons for civilisation and human survival.

However there is much more to be done. Ratification of new START is not at all an 'end point', but merely a step on a road that must lead sooner rather than later to the complete elimination of all nuclear weapons and to their being outlawed under a nuclear weapons convention, as envisaged in the Five Point Plan put forward by United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon and noted in the NPT 2010 Final Declaration.

An absolutely vital step in reducing the risks posed by large nuclear arsenals to the world, and in reducing the salience of nuclear weapons in security policies, is to increase the time available

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for decision-making in nuclear crises (or purported crises), by lowering the operational readiness of nuclear weapons. This is often referred to as 'de-alerting'.

Reducing the alert status of nuclear forces was initially recommended in 1996 by the Canberra Commission and repeated in 2006 by the Blix Commission, and again by the International Commission on Nuclear Nonproliferation and Disarmament (ICNND).

As a presidential candidate, Barack Obama pledged negotiations with Russia to reduce the alert status of US and Russian nuclear weapons systems. As President he took the first step in the Nuclear Posture Review by committing to maximise presidential decision-making time during a nuclear crisis. Reducing operational readiness or 'de-alerting' is the only way to do this.

The operating status of nuclear weapons is the sole subject of two resolutions that regularly pass the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA):

Operational Readiness of Nuclear Weapon Systems (most recently adopted 157-3, text attached) and Reducing Nuclear Danger.

It is also mentioned in United Action Towards the Total Elimination of Nuclear Weapons resolution sponsored by Australia and Japan, (for which both the US and Russia now vote in favour, and of which the US is also a sponsor) and in the NAM resolution. The global consensus for lowering the operational readiness of nuclear weapons could not be clearer.

The risks of maintaining nuclear weapons on high alert are illustrated by a series of terrifying incidents in which the issue has been not the launch of one or two 'rogue' missiles, but the use of the core strategic forces of either the US or Russia. The world has on a number of occasions been literally saved by the cool nerves and resourcefulness of Russian and US military personnel and presidential aides.

The use, by miscalculation or malfunction, of even a small fraction of the US or Russian strategic arsenals (including 2000 launch-ready, high-alert warheads) would terminate not just civilisation but would threaten the elimination of most humans and many other complex forms of life, as shown by the recent studies performed by Toon, Robock, and others.

A stratospheric soot layer produced by firestorms from the use of those weapons would drastically lower global temperatures and cause catastrophic damage to the Earth's protective ozone layer, causing widespread famine and species extinction. (See Nuclear Winter references).

De-alerting will not by itself completely eliminate the possibilities of a nuclear first strike or of nuclear retaliation. Either would spell catastrophe for the entire world. However it does render nuclear weapons use based on miscalculation, malfunction, or incorrect information much less likely, and make further steps to the elimination of nuclear weapons easier.

Until nuclear deterrence itself is renounced as incompatible with human security and human survival, even small steps in the right direction will be inadequate to the scope of the danger in which we have placed ourselves.

De-alerting should be accompanied by further steps to lower the role of nuclear weapons in security doctrines (which de-alerting itself helps to do) and build the cooperative framework for a nuclear- weapons-free world, and a Nuclear Weapons Convention. De-alerting would in the

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meantime substantially reduce the risk of an accidental nuclear war -- an outcome that should find favour even with those who continue to be wedded to nuclear 'deterrence' policy.

Increasing decision-making time by going to lower alert levels has been called for by blue-ribbon commissions of the highest caliber, by Nobel laureates, and by almost all UN member-states in the General Assembly. It is time for the US and Russian governments to heed this call from the whole of the rest of the world, and take the apocalypse off the global agenda. This step, of de-alerting, is the very least that can and should be done immediately towards that end.

Signed:

—
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'Nuclear Winter' references

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