

## **INCREASING PRESIDENTIAL DECISION-MAKING TIME IN NUCLEAR OPERATIONS**

### **I. The Issue**

At present the U.S. and Russia each maintain over 2,000 warheads on high alert status. These weapons, capable of being launched in 3 to 15 minutes, have a combined destructive power nearly 100,000 times greater than the Hiroshima atomic bomb.<sup>1</sup> Within a few minutes of receiving instructions to fire, U.S. and Russian land-based rockets with over 3,000 warheads could begin their 25-minute flights to their targets. Less than 15 minutes after receiving the attack order, U.S. and Russian ballistic-missile submarines could dispatch over 1,000 warheads.<sup>2</sup> These warheads could reach some of their targets within a few minutes. None of these missiles can be recalled or made to self-destruct. In an era of greatly improving U.S.-Russian relations, the two countries should carefully explore means of extending presidential decision-making time in the launching of nuclear weapons.

Even when nuclear forces are well funded and personnel highly trained, the practice of maintaining warheads on high alert increases the risk of catastrophe, as evidenced by U.S. and Russian false alerts. For example, on January 25, 1995, Russian radar operators thought a U.S. scientific rocket launched from Norway might be a missile fired from a submarine in the North Sea headed for Russia. For a brief, tense period, President Yeltsin, holding the “nuclear briefcase” that could order the firing of nuclear missiles in response, and his top nuclear advisers considered launching nuclear weapons at the United States.<sup>3</sup>

Both the U.S. and Russian militaries have procedures to prevent an accidental or unauthorized launch and have gone to extraordinary lengths to ensure strict control over nuclear weapons. But the equipment is not foolproof, and Russia’s early-warning and nuclear command systems are deteriorating badly. The CIA has reported that equipment controlling Russian nuclear weapons frequently malfunctions, and critical electronic devices and computers sometimes switch to combat mode for no apparent reason. Many of the radars and satellites intended to detect a ballistic-missile attack no longer operate.<sup>4</sup>

Extending presidential decision-making time in the launching of nuclear weapons could be accomplished through a variety of means, including: storing warheads separately from their delivery systems; placing heavy objects on the lids of land-based missiles; moving submarines out of the range of their targets; and removing the guidance systems from missiles. Capabilities exist for verifying many of these means. Satellites can monitor if warheads remain separated from missiles, if missiles are returned to docked ballistic missile submarines, and if heavy objects are removed from land-based

missile lids. Also, electronic seals can be placed on missiles that have had vital components removed. Many measures can be checked during the random on-site inspections permitted under existing nuclear weapons treaties.<sup>5</sup>

To deal with such technical and operational problems, former Senator Sam Nunn has advocated that Presidents Bush and Putin “should order their military leaders, in joint consultation and collaboration, to devise operational changes in the alert status of their nuclear forces that would reduce toward zero the risk of accidental launch or miscalculation; and, most importantly, expand the decision time available to each president before they would be forced to make the fateful decision to launch... They should begin by quickly identifying weapons designated for reduction under the Moscow Treaty, and then immediately stand down these weapons.”<sup>6</sup> This could be the prudent way to begin the process of backing the two countries, no longer enemies, away from an unnecessarily risky Cold War posture.

## **II. Recent Legislation**

- Section 1033 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2002 (P.L. 107-107) mandated that the administration’s 2001 Nuclear Posture Review consider the possibility of deactivation or de-alerting nuclear weapons or delivery systems immediately, or immediately after a decision to retire any specific warhead, class of warheads, or delivery system.
- Section 4 of H.R. 2351 and S. 1117, the “Nuclear Threat Reduction Acts of 2001,” introduced in June, 2001, proposed a U.S. policy to pursue with Russia formal arrangements to remove as many nuclear weapons of those two nations as feasible from immediate, launch-ready (or ‘high alert’) status, consistent with the national security of the United States, concentrating on those weapons earmarked for downloading, dismantlement, or elimination under the START II treaty.

## **III. Obstacles**

- There is still considerable suspicion between the U.S. and Russia when it comes to strategic nuclear operations. These suspicions could be reduced through greater communication between the nuclear commanders on both sides, as has been suggested by Gen. Eugene Habiger, the former head of U.S. nuclear forces (STRATCOM).<sup>7</sup>
- Presidential leadership will be required on both sides to instruct nuclear forces to institute procedures that will reduce greatly the likelihood of a nuclear exchange resulting from accident, miscalculation, or unauthorized action.

## **IV. Q & A**

**Q: Won’t U.S. national security be harmed if U.S. nuclear weapons are taken off high alert?**

**A:** No, U.S. national security will be improved because the risk of a nuclear exchange resulting from accident, miscalculation, or unauthorized action will be reduced. The first step should be to stand-down from the deployed arsenal those weapons that are in line for removal under agreements such as the Treaty of Moscow.

**Q: If we remove weapons from high alert can we be sure that the Russian's reciprocate?**

**A:** Steps can be verified through satellite surveillance, on-site inspections and tagging of critical parts that are required for the weapons to be on high alert. The process will require collaboration between the United States and Russia but that is exactly what is needed to reduce the likelihood of a catastrophic, accidental nuclear war between two countries that are no longer enemies.

**Q: Do only nuclear abolitionists support increasing presidential decision-making time?**

**A:** No, one of the most prominent advocates of taking such steps is former U.S. Senator Sam Nunn (D-GA), who has a very strong record on national defense issues. Extending presidential decision-making time was also supported by President Bush during the 2000 presidential campaign and in the 2000 Republican National platform.

## **V. Talking Points**

- By encouraging Russia to take some of its weapons off high alert, U.S. national security will be strengthened. As long as thousands of weapons are on high alert, the U.S. and Russia risk a nuclear war that could kill hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people as the result of accident, miscalculation, or unauthorized action.
- Friends (the United States and Russia) should not continue to threaten each other with nuclear war.
- During the 2000 presidential campaign, candidate Bush proposed taking some weapons off high alert. This possibility was reiterated in the 2000 Republican National platform.
- Extending presidential decision-making time in the launching of nuclear weapons would be like putting a much-needed safety lock on these weapons.
- With sufficient verification, extending presidential decision-making time would reduce nuclear tensions between the U.S. and Russia by further diminishing any lingering suspicion of a surprise attack.
- Extending presidential decision-making time would help dissuade other countries from placing their nuclear weapons on high alert. Finally, it would signal to the world that the two largest nuclear weapons states are serious about eliminating the threat of nuclear war.

## **VI. Factoids**

- The U.S. and Russia maintain approximately 2,400 and 1,900 warheads, respectively, on high alert status. These weapons are capable of being launched in 3 to 15 minutes on flights that would take from a few minutes to 25 minutes.
- The U.S. and Russian weapons on high alert have a combined destructive power nearly 100,000 times greater than the Hiroshima atomic bomb.

- In 1995, Russia mistook a scientific rocket for a missile possibly headed for Moscow. The Russian leadership briefly considered launching a preemptive nuclear strike.

## **VII. Applicable Treaties, Legislation, and Other International Agreements**

- None.

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<sup>1</sup> Back from the Brink Campaign and the Project on Participatory Democracy, “Short Fuse to Catastrophe,” February 2001, p. 2, accessed at: <http://backfromthebrink.org/factsheets/newbk.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Lachlan Forrow, et. al., “Accidental Nuclear War: A Post-Cold War Assessment,” *The New England Journal of Medicine*, April 30, 1998, Vol. 338, No. 18.

<sup>3</sup> Editorial, “Nuclear Trigger-Locks,” *The Boston Globe*, April 23, 2000, p. F6.

<sup>4</sup> Sam Nunn and Bruce Blair, “From Nuclear Deterrence to Mutual Safety; As Russia’s Arsenal Crumbles, It’s Time to Act,” *Washington Post*, June 22, 1997.

<sup>5</sup> Nunn and Blair, *op. cit.* and Back from the Brink, “Questions and Answers...”

<sup>6</sup> Sam Nunn, “Keynote Address at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace 2002 Non-Proliferation Conference,” November 14, 2002, accessed at: [http://www.nti.org/c\\_press/speech\\_samunn\\_1114.pdf](http://www.nti.org/c_press/speech_samunn_1114.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> Gen. Eugene Habiger, Testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Hearing on The Treaty on Strategic Offensive Reductions (Treaty of Moscow), July 23, 2002.