US and Russian Nuclear Forces: Status and Trends in Light of the Smaller and Safer Article

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Presentation to Panel on Smaller and Safer Article and De-alerting of Nuclear Weapons
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Overview

• The value of *Smaller and Safer*
• U.S.-Russian Nuclear Stockpiles
• Nuclear Posture Trends
• Obama Administration De-alerting Policy
• Nuclear Mission Trends
Value of Smaller and Safer

- Challenges core argument against de-alerting...
  “The NPR considered the possibility of reducing alert rates for ICBMs and at-sea rates of SSBNs, and concluded that such steps could reduce crisis stability by giving an adversary the incentive to attack before “re-alerting” was complete.”
  

- ... by demonstrating that even at force levels much lower than today (500 warheads), an adversary at comparable force levels could not hope to “win” with a first strike

- Undermines secrecy sanctuary enjoyed by war planners by presenting public with methodology for examining issue and questioning claims
US and Russian Nuclear Stockpiles

Russia: 12,000 warheads (8,000 stockpile, 4,600 deployed (2,600 strategic, 2,000 tactical)

United States: 9,000 warheads (5,000 stockpile, 2,400 deployed (1,900 strategic, 500 tactical)
Projection for 2020 includes expected U.S. and Russian stockpile and force structure reductions. Still far from 500 warhead level examined in Smaller and Safer article.
Nuclear Posture Trends

With New START treaty limit of 1,550 deployed strategic warheads and 700 deployed strategic delivery vehicles (SDVs) by 2017-2018 and no sub-limits or limits on non-deployed weapons, there is little constraint on planned force structures:

**Russia**
- Fewer SDVs with high warhead load
- Less than 400 SDVs
- Fewer ICBMs with more warheads
- Low SSBN tempo, shrinking force
- Same bomber force
- Limited upload capacity

Estimated warheads on alert:
- 2010: ~1,000
- 2020: ~500

**United States**
- More SDVs with lower warhead load
- More than 700 SDVs
- More ICBMs with fewer warheads
- High SSBN tempo, stable force
- Reduced bomber force
- Significant upload capacity (SSBN)

Estimated warheads on alert:
- 2010: ~800
- 2020: ~580
Obama Administration De-alerting Policy

Before Election:

“We'll work with Russia to take U.S. and Russian ballistic missiles off hair-trigger alert, and to dramatically reduce the stockpiles of our nuclear weapons and material.”

*Chicago Speech, October 2007*

Obama Will Work with Russia to Take Nuclear Weapons off Hair-Trigger Alert: The United States and Russia have thousands of nuclear weapons on hair-trigger alert. Barack Obama believes that we should take our nuclear weapons off hair-trigger alert – something that George W. Bush promised to do when he was campaigning for president in 2000. Maintaining this Cold War stance today is unnecessary and increases the risk of an accidental or unauthorized nuclear launch. As president, Obama will work with Russia to find common ground and bring significantly more weapons off hair-trigger alert.

*Barack Obama on Defense Issues, 2008*

After Election:

“work with Russia to take U.S. and Russian ballistic missiles off hair trigger alert…”

*White House web site, February 2009*

“……………………………………………………”

*Prague Speech, April 2010*

“The NPR considered the possibility of reducing alert rates for ICBMs and at-sea rates of SSBNs, and concluded that such steps could reduce crisis stability by giving an adversary the incentive to attack before “re-alerting” was complete.”

“Maintain the current alert posture of U.S. strategic forces: U.S. nuclear-capable heavy bombers off full-time alert, nearly all ICBMs on alert, and a significant number of SSBNs at sea at any given time.”

*Nuclear Posture Review Report, April 2010*
Instead of de-alerting, NPR decided to:

- Continue the practice of “open-ocean targeting” of all ICBMs and SLBMs so that, in the highly unlikely event of an unauthorized or accidental launch, the missile would land in the open ocean. The United States will ask Russia to re-confirm its commitment to this practice.

- Make new investments in the U.S. command and control system to maximize Presidential decision time in a nuclear crisis.

- Explore new modes of ICBM basing that could enhance survivability and further reduce any incentives for prompt launch. Such an assessment will be part of the Department of Defense’s study of possible replacements for the current ICBM force.

Russia has not shown interest in de-alerting.
Nuclear Mission Trends

How are the nuclear missions of the United States and Russia evolving?

Russia

• New military doctrine maintains and modernizes Cold War-like force; not clear if role is reduced or increased
• Appeals less counterforce focused: “evasive” planning in light of US offensive and defensive capabilities
• Preemptive use language toned down but probably remains in secret version
• US seen as yard stick: strategic parity essential but unattainable
• Nuclear weapons compensate for conventional decline
• China a growing contingency

United States

• NPR protects Cold War-like force structure and does not reduce role
• Offensive counterforce-countervalue planning with broad target base and numerous strike options
• Bush-era preemption toned down; Global Strike merged with strategic war plan (OPLAN 8010)
• Russia seen as yard stick; but strict parity no longer important
• China a growing contingency
• Regional adversaries included

Goal: reduce role and salience of nuclear weapons. Transition from dynamic counterforce planning to relaxed minimal deterrence posture
Conclusions

• *Smaller and Safer* provides essential tool for public debate to understand and question claims made by those who argue that de-alerting is impossible and dangerous

• It seems clear that even the force levels under New START treaty are significantly in excess of security needs

• Despite progress in reducing Cold War nuclear force levels, U.S. and Russia still retain basic Cold War posture and policies

• United Nations must keep pushing for progress on further nuclear disarmament and lowering of alert levels for nuclear forces
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