

REDUCING THE RISKS OF NUCLEAR WAR THROUGH REDUCTIONS OF STRATEGIC NUCLEAR WEAPONS

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ABSTRACT

This paper reveals that the Yeltsin-Stepashin Administration quietly proposed to President Clinton, in 1999, deep stabilizing reductions in deployed strategic nuclear weapons to 1,000 on each side--far below the levels of 1,500 negotiated a decade later. In 2001, then-President Vladimir Putin endorsed just "such proposals for reductions that would preclude first-strikes" and urged his Government to study them. The United States is currently proposing "high level" discussions on "more stable, resilient and transparent strategic relationships" but seems to be planning to discuss only non-deployed nuclear weapons, conventional weapons and anti-ballistic missile systems. We appeal to the Russian Government to expand these discussions to include stabilizing reductions of strategic nuclear weapons and an end to first-strike strategies and to offer suitable proposals to the United States.*

The main current obstacles to further disarmament of strategic forces arise from two issues. On the American side, the strategic war planners want enough warheads to maintain the option of a disarming attack on Russia. On the Russian side, the strategic war planners are uncertain that further strategic reductions on both sides will enhance the Russian ability to defend against such an attack.

For more than a half-century, U.S. war planners have wanted to maintain sufficient weapons to attack and disarm Russian strategic forces if the Russian army should ever invade Western Europe. This began, in 1954, with Secretary of State Dulles' announcement that the U.S. would adopt a policy of "massive retaliation" against such an invasion. The U.S. Strategic Air Command (SAC) then developed the strategy of massive retaliation into a finely honed war plan that included disarming attacks on Russian forces (as well as attacks on Russian cities) with B-52 bombers.

Later the Kennedy Administration ordered that the war plan provide the President with options, and one option became a counterforce strike against Soviet strategic forces.

This disarming attack option was part of a strategy that came to be called "extended deterrence," meaning that it extended deterrence beyond deterrence of a Russian attack on the U.S. homeland to deterrence of a Russian attack on, or invasion of, our allies. This strategy has not changed. Buried in the 2010 Nuclear Posture Review, on page 30, is the assurance that the United States posture includes "the continued provision of extended deterrence."

As another example, on October 28, 2008, at a speech given by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates to the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (See <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/events/?fa=eventDetail&id=1202>), the Secretary was asked (by me)

why his speech had three references to extended deterrence twenty years after the end of the Cold War. He said that this threat was related to deterrence of events in Eastern Europe.

In fact, a key reason that the recent New Start negotiations limited warheads to only about 1,500 was that the strategic war planners in the U.S. Strategic Command (STRATCOM) [the successor to SAC] said that was as low as they were willing to go and the Administration decided not to challenge them. The war planners even argued that they had an obligation to maintain a "prompt" response for the President that he could use, if he wished, if Russian missiles seemed about to be launched and he wanted to preempt that attack.

As a result, Trident submarines are left on 15-minute alert underwater alert to launch missiles that could arrive in Russia within an additional ten minutes. Backed up by land-based missiles, these weapons can attack all Russian strategic targets except underwater submarines. This keeps Russia under the gun and, in principle, nervous if any serious crisis arises. And this strategy is certainly not necessary to deter an attack upon the U.S. homeland.

This hair-trigger readiness for pre-emptive attack is a machine that threatens humanity. Like an untreated wound that can eventually become infected, leaving such an option open invites disaster.

One approach to eliminating this option, which I have urged for a dozen years, is to negotiate disarmament to sufficiently low and equal levels. In 1998, when I led a delegation of five strategists to the headquarters of SAC, it was confirmed to me, in private conversation, that such a disarmament process would put extended deterrence out of business. This was pretty clear on numerical grounds.

Since the Cold War had been over for ten years already, Europe was in no danger of invasion and, in any case, Russian-European conflicts could not be resolved with threats of general nuclear war. Accordingly, in order to induce a major revamping of the war plans, I began suggesting that both sides reduce their forces to equal levels of 1,000 or lower; this was 500 warheads below what the Pentagon was insisting on.

On July 16, 1999, I met in Moscow with President Yeltsin's Prime Minister, Sergei Stepashin, who was planning to visit Washington a week later. In the meeting, I suggested a grand bargain with President Clinton with two aspects: a) that both sides reduce their strategic forces to 1,000 warheads; and b) that, in consideration of this, Russia permit the United States to build the small anti-ballistic missile system against North Korea that the United States was pressing for. (I had been lobbying the Soviet Union to accept limits on anti-ballistic missiles for thirty five years--and was often, in Russia at least, considered a father of the ABM Treaty. So my advice to *permit* a small ABM was noticed.)

The proposal was summarized on a button that read: "Truncate the Sword and the Shield Becomes Harmless". It meant that at a level of 1,000 warheads, the Pentagon sword would not be able to disarm Russian strategic weapons sufficiently to make an American shield workable against the residual Russian force. Accordingly, with 1,000 warheads on a side, there would be no strategic danger to Russia in permitting a small ABM to be built.

Prime Minister Stepashin, who had been Chairman of the Defense and Security Committee of the Supreme Soviet was well-informed. He liked the idea, and when I suggested a joint picture, he said: "And I'll wear your button; this is for the Washington Post."

The State Department was shown the photograph and warned that the Prime Minister was going to make this proposal, which, I later learned, had been signed off on by all the relevant Russian security agencies. And he did make this proposal in a private meeting with President Clinton.

This was, certainly, a high-water mark in disarmament proposals. Why has nothing like that happened? Why are reduction levels still 50% higher, at 1,500, ten years later?

The immediate reason was that President Clinton told the Prime Minister: "Unfortunately, Vice President Gore is running for office and he doesn't want any trouble." The Administration did not even want public discussion of this offer lest it seem to the public that it had rejected a wonderful proposal for political reasons. Soon Prime Minister Stepashin was out of office. In any case, the Democrats lost the election and the Republicans were much less interested in proposals of this kind.

When, eighteen months later, with a letter to President Putin, I asked the Putin Administration to renew the proposal, he sent me an excellent incisive verbal reply on March 5, 2001, through the Russian Embassy in Washington, explaining that he had ordered intensive investigation of "your ideas and proposals for reductions that would preclude first strikes". (And on March 7, in Moscow, the distinguished analyst and former Duma member, Alexei Arbatov, proposed, in a press conference, limits of 1,000 and small changes in the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty--so the idea was still alive a decade ago.)

NEEDED: DISCUSSIONS ON STRATEGIC STABILITY

So where are we now? While the nuclear war planners in America may still feel that disarmament to low and equal levels is dangerous because it would lead to MORE stability, i.e., undermine the theoretical threat of a U.S. disarming attack on Russia, the Russian nuclear war planners may feel that further mutual reductions might make their strategic force less safe.

This issue cries out for joint discussion. Accordingly, I propose that Russian and American war planners meet and discuss this topic: "The Impact of Strategic Force Reductions on Nuclear Stability in Crises." One place for this discussion would be under the New Start Treaty Consultative Commission.

In the absence of these discussions, one can already see how future disarmament will be wrapped around the existing war plans like scaffolding around an existing building. This is the usual approach to arms control negotiations because defense ministries in both Washington and Moscow normally have a veto over anything that might affect their deeply desired programs. In this case, if no special efforts are made, the next agreement will include tactical nuclear weapons with a ceiling for the sum of strategic and tactical nuclear weapons, making it easier to obscure the fact that strategic warhead limits themselves are being maintained since any reductions can be effected by lowering numbers of tactical nuclear weapons.

CONCLUSION

By winning the friendship of President Ronald Reagan, and through his other policies, President Gorbachev ended the Cold War and enormously reduced the risk of world destruction through nuclear war. All mankind should be grateful to him. But the risk of such nuclear destruction still exists.

War plans are very slow to change. After the British burned down the U.S. Capitol in 1812, the United States maintained war plans against the British for more than a century, until 1935. I believe that the Russian war plans against attacks from Europe had a similar longevity.

But U.S. war plans for general nuclear war put large parts of humanity at risk and perhaps Russians do also, albeit for different reasons. In any case, a doomsday machine has been created with a fuse that depends upon many factors: political conditions, the avoidance of crises, the avoidance of crazy leaders, and weird accidental scenarios. The danger of these war plans should be defused through disarmament.

Based on former President and current Premier Vladimir Putin's response to my 2001 letter and on the general common sense shown by the Obama Administration, I believe there will be a chance, in a second term of President Obama, to strike the necessary disarmament deal.

Accordingly, we should prepare the ground for such an agreement with high-level discussions of how nuclear disarmament can be used to resolve this problem.

The U.S. Nuclear Posture Review says that the United States will pursue high-level, bilateral dialogues with Russia and China aimed at promoting "more stable, resilient, and transparent strategic relationships." But when the Posture Review explains what it wants to discuss, it talks only about U.S. "missile defense and conventionally-armed missile programs"--not extended deterrence, which is, of course, much the more important issue.

So I appeal to President Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin to accept these discussions but to expand the agenda to include reductions and nuclear stability. Eventually, I would hope, the Russian Government would reintroduce the kind of proposal offered by President Yeltsin and Prime Minister Stepashin for dramatic stabilizing cuts that would put an end to first-strike strategies and that it would offer suitable proposals to the United States. The American Government, quietly wedded to extended deterrence, is not likely to make such a proposal but it might agree to one if Russia urged it.

Because of Russia's painful history, its citizens feel as strongly about peace and security as any nation on earth. On behalf of humans everywhere, we appeal to Russian leaders to take the lead in pursuing agreements that will lead to nuclear stability through deep cuts.(End)

*My recently published memoir discusses these events. See "Catalytic Diplomacy: Russia, China, North Korea and Iran", 2010, available at www.amazon.com. An earlier memoir, "Every Man Should Try: Adventures of a Public Interest Activist" (PublicAffairs, 1999) was published in Russian with an introduction by Academician Evgeny Velikhov and contains related preliminary information.