

TO DE-ALERT OR NOT TO DE-ALERT, THAT IS THE QUESTION...



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INTRODUCTION

Whilst CND believes that Britain and all other possessors of nuclear weapons should eliminate them as a key component of their defence and foreign policy, de-alerting nuclear weapons is an issue high on the international nuclear disarmament agenda. It is seen by many nations as an essential prerequisite and an important signal of a nations commitment to nuclear disarmament.

During the Cold War the world lived in constant fear of an all-out nuclear war. Thousands of weapons were on hair trigger alert, ready to be launched instantly. But the Cold War is over now. The fear of some sudden enemy attack has been reduced. The uncertainty surrounding the Millennium Bug and the affects it may have reminds us of the hazards of having nuclear weapons on hair trigger alert and makes de-alerting all the more urgent. There is no possible reason for keeping any nuclear weapons on continuous alert. So why do the nuclear weapon states (NWS)¹ cling to this dangerous and purposeless posture?

WHAT EXACTLY DOES DE-ALERTING MEAN?

De-alerting is the process of increasing the amount of time needed to prepare nuclear missiles for launch.²

There are various suggestions as to how this could be implemented, for example:

- Nuclear forces can be removed from 24-hour alert
- Warheads could be taken off missiles and stored in a separate location
- ICBM silo lids can be immobilised so that only a large crane could open them
- The missile guidance system could be disabled
- The safety switches could be pinned in such in a way that missiles would be unable to be launched

One of the aims of de-alerting is to reduce international tension. Any or all of these steps can be verified through the use of international observers. De-alerting in itself is not nuclear disarmament but it immediately removes the very real danger of nuclear missiles being launched either by mistake or by misperception. It begins the vital process of building trust between the nuclear-armed states. Even more important, it is a de-emphasis of the role of nuclear weapons within a nation's defence and foreign policy. It can be seen as a sign of commitment to nuclear disarmament.

WHY SHOULD THE NUCLEAR WEAPONS STATES DE-ALERT?

The United States and Russia still have most of their nuclear weapons on high alert.

'Within just a few minutes of receiving instructions to fire, a large fraction of the United States and Russian land-based rockets (which are armed with about 2,000-3,500 warheads respectively) could begin their 25-minute flights over the North Pole to their wartime targets. Less than 15-minutes after receiving the orders to attack, six U.S. Trident submarines at sea could loft roughly 1,000 warheads and several Russian ballistic-missile submarines could dispatch between 300 and 400.

¹ The Nuclear Weapon States include Britain, France, China, Russia and the United States.

² Bruce G. Blair, Harold A. Feiveson and Frank N. von Hippel. "High Risk Nuclear Postures" Committee on Nuclear Policy Briefs, Vol. 1:18. (December 97).

*In sum, the two nuclear superpowers remain ready to fire a total of more than 5,000 nuclear weapons at each other within half an hour.*³

The NWS would like us to believe that the possibility of a nuclear war prompted by a false alarm is too remote to consider. However, accidents do happen and more regularly than most people realise. The most recent example of human error almost caused a nuclear war:

*On 25 January 1995, a rocket originating from the Norwegian coastline appeared on Russian early warning radar screens. The Russia Strategic Rocket Forces went into emergency mode. President Yeltsin was notified and the 'nuclear briefcase' was activated for the first time. Throughout Russia, nuclear forces were put on the highest state of alert, ready to be fired as soon as the command came through. Fortunately, it was discovered that the rocket was harmless and would land in the Arctic, far from Russian territory. The Russian authorities had been notified of the planned launch but the right people were not notified of the launch.*⁴

With the declining state of affairs in Russia, the safety of the country's nuclear weapons systems is also deteriorating. The early-warning network has been reduced due to the loss of Soviet radar installations outside Russia's current borders. To make matters worse, there is not enough money to keep monitoring systems up to date and the equipment frequently malfunctions. In fact, there is not even enough money to pay gas and electric bills. In February 1997 the Strategic Rocket Forces (the military unit responsible for operating intercontinental ballistic missiles) staged a strike protesting pay arrears and poor equipment. After this, Russia's defence minister, Igor Rodionov, said: *"if the shortage of funds persists ... Russia may soon approach a threshold beyond which its missiles and nuclear systems become uncontrollable."*⁵

In 1991, General Lee Butler advised then US President George Bush to stand down his Strategic Command bombers. General Butler made the comment, *"Among its advantages, it is easily reversible in physical terms. However, once implemented, politically it would be extremely difficult to reverse."*⁶

The new millennium is shrouded in uncertainty. Can the nuclear weapons states say with certainty that every single one of the 36,000 nuclear weapons, all of the command and control systems, all of the design, manufacturing and testing infrastructure are fully compliant? With less than a year to go, the situation looks perilous. The U.S. and Britain are both behind schedule in ensuring their systems compliance. Russia is facing a financial crisis and does not have the estimated \$3 billion that it needs to tackle the problem. China is reporting that over half of their most crucial enterprises have not been checked.⁷ This issue could have global implications and the only solution is for NWS to de-alert. Take all nuclear weapons off alert and remove the warheads. This would eliminate the risk of either an accidental launch or any country thinking that it is being attacked.

When you have nuclear weapons systems on high alert, the possibility that a mistake is made, be it human or mechanical is dramatically heightened. Such occurrences lead us to ask why the nuclear weapons states are relying on a weapons system where the misjudgements of one or two people could lead the world to nuclear war.

³ Bruce G. Blair, Harold A. Feiveson and Frank N. von Hippel, "Taking Nuclear Weapons off Hair-Trigger Alert." *Scientific American* (November 1997), pp 74-81.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Commander Robert Green RN (Ret'd), discussion with General Butler, 8 April 1997.

⁷ Michael R. Kraig and Herbert Scoville Jr, *"The Bug in the Bomb."* By the British American Security Information Council

THE STATUS OF DE-ALERTING AT THE INTERNATIONAL LEVEL

NATO and Russia

Since 1994, the US and Britain have each had "de-targeting" agreements with Russia. In 1997 France and Russia reached a similar agreement, and in 1998 China also agreed to de-target its nuclear weapons. However, these de-targeting agreements are largely symbolic since it is possible "quickly to restore operational targets to the missiles should the need arise".⁸ Russian weapons are programmed to default automatically to the last programmed target if launched accidentally or intentionally. It would only take a few minutes to retarget the missiles. So, although de-targeting may seem to be a significant step towards de-alerting, in actuality it does little more than provide a nice public relations story.

Nonetheless, some NATO members are increasingly taking an interest in the question of de-alerting. In 1997, Canada proposed to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Preparatory Committee meeting in New York that the nuclear-weapon states should undertake measures such as "demating" of nuclear warheads from missiles.⁹ In 1998, the new German government stated in its Coalition Agreement that it would "advocate a lowering of the alert status for nuclear weapons".¹⁰

In addition, at the 1997 NATO-Russia summit in Paris, a NATO-Russia Permanent Joint Council was established "to build increasing levels of trust, unity of purpose and habits of consultation and co-operation between NATO and Russia".¹¹ The Council's work includes: defence policy and the military doctrines of NATO and Russia; arms control and nuclear safety issues. An "experts" working group has been established to look into these issues, including de-alerting, in more detail.

The Canberra Commission on the Elimination of Nuclear Weapons

The Canberra Commission was established as an independent commission by the Australian government in November 1995 to propose practical steps towards a nuclear free world, this includes the related problem of maintaining stability and security during the transitional period and after the goal of a nuclear free world was achieved. Included amongst the Commission's members were Field Marshal Lord Carver (Chief of the Defence Staff 1973-6), Robert MacNamara (US Secretary of Defense under Kennedy and Johnson) and Professor Joseph Rotblat, winner of the 1995 Nobel Peace Prize. Following is the Commission's view on de-alerting:

*'Nuclear weapon states should take all nuclear forces off alert status and so reduce dramatically the chance of an accidental or unauthorised nuclear weapons launch. In the first instance, reductions in alert status could be adopted by nuclear weapons states unilaterally. The physical separation of warheads from delivery vehicles would strongly reinforce the gains achieved by taking nuclear forces off alert. This measure can be implemented to the extent that nuclear forces can be reconstituted to an alert posture only within known or agreed upon timeframes.'*¹²

⁸ Letter from the Ministry of Defence Directorate of Nuclear Policy to CND, 23 February 1994.

⁹ Coalition Agreement between the SPD and Alliance 90/The Greens, Bonn, 20 October 1998.

¹⁰ Statement of Ambassador Mark Moher to the 1997 NPT Preparatory Committee meeting, 8 April 1997.

¹¹ "Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Co-operation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation", Paris, 27 May 1997.

¹² Report of the Canberra Commission on the Elimination of Nuclear Weapons, Australian Ministry of Foreign Affairs & Trade (August 1996).

United Nations

Numerous nations have been advocating de-alerting as a sign of the NWS commitment to nuclear disarmament at every international forum. The most recent call was within a resolution presented to the United Nations General Assembly First Committee (Autumn 1998, Disarmament and Security) headlined 'Towards a nuclear-weapon-free world: The need for a New Agenda'. The document contains text calling for NWS to de-alert along with other steps towards disarmament.

Robert Grey of the United States said that *'his country had carefully considered that issue and had agreed with Russia on pre-launch notification of strategic launch vehicles and space launchers. It believed, however, that the "wholesale adoption" of de-alerting measures led to instability. Because such measures were unverifiable, a situation could arise in which the potential that one country might quickly return to alert status could start a dangerous rush by all to do so, leading to greater instability. The United States had, instead, targeted its efforts at improving command and control systems, as a more valuable approach than wholesale de-alerting.'*¹³

Peter Goosen of South Africa responded to this by saying *'The call for nuclear-weapon States to de-alert their nuclear weapons was not intended to create instability, but to slow down the reaction time that could lead to a nuclear weapons exchange. The process of de-alerting was intended to create stability through delay, so that in the time it took to decide to start a nuclear war, there would be a delay in launching those weapons, during which time sense and good reason might prevail.'*¹⁴

The UN General Assembly adopted the resolution by a vote of 114 in favour to 18 against, with 38 abstentions. France, Britain, Russia and the United States voted against the resolution; China abstained from the vote¹⁵. Twelve out of the sixteen NATO members defied the NWS and abstained from the vote, only Turkey, India, Pakistan and a host of NATO and EU applicants joined the NWS in voting against the resolution.

The NWS continue to be unreceptive to suggestions on ways forward in the disarmament process proposed by the non-nuclear weapons states. They are holding on to outdated philosophies that have no place in the political and military environment present in the world today.

The Nuclear Weapon States (NWS) Position

<i>What the NWS say:</i>	<i>But in Reality:</i>
By taking their weapons off alert, they would become susceptible to an attack that could destroy their warheads before they had a chance to re-install and launch their own missiles.	This argument is only applicable if the situation arose where one country was on high alert and the other was not. It is recognised that most de-alerting steps need to be taken reciprocally, making the above statement invalid as all sides would have to take the time to re-install and alert their systems.

¹³ United Nations General Assembly First Committee # 3123, 29 October 1998, New York.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ United Nations General Assembly #9526, 4 December 1998, New York.

<p>De-alerting would make NWS more vulnerable to terrorist attacks and/or blackmail.</p>	<p>The damage and global outrage would outweigh any benefits terrorists might make from such a threat. Even suicidal terrorist tactics would not be helped by allowing NWS to react promptly, in fact, such a rash reaction might actually play into the hands of a terrorist.</p>
<p>From a national security standpoint, de-alerting would undermine the continuous threat that nuclear weapons have on 'rogue' nations, such as Iraq. Re-alerting weapons in response to possible danger could needlessly escalate crisis situations where the implied threat was needed though actual use of nuclear weapons was highly unlikely.</p>	<p>Though the threat may only be implied, it still heightens the risk of actual usage. This strategy is ineffective in the long run and shows the carelessness with which NWS throw around the nuclear threat.</p>
<p>The principles of nuclear deterrence would be undermined if weapons were de-alerted. This could diminish the 'stabilising' affect the nuclear deterrents have in a developing crisis.</p>	<p>The logic of deterrence can definitely be questioned, however, even if the deterrence theory held water, it would not be affected by de-alerting. NWS would continue to maintain a nuclear arsenal. The only change would be a system that delays the actual use of the weapons. This could in fact decrease the chances of a hasty, irresponsible decision being made when tensions are heightened.</p>

WHERE DOES BRITAIN STAND IN ALL OF THIS?

In the Strategic Defence Review published in 1998, the government stood by their outdated deterrent philosophy. In response to questions regarding whether or not Britain would de-alert, the report states *'consideration was given to more radical de-alerting measures, such as taking submarines off deterrent patrol, and removing warheads from their missiles and storing them separately ashore... Our work concluded, however, that neither step would be compatible in current circumstances with maintaining a credible minimum deterrent with a submarine-based nuclear system.'*¹⁶

Note the use of the word 'radical'. What is radical about storing weapons on shore to reduce the chance of an accident as well as to give people time to think things through before starting something that could potentially kill millions? The report goes on to say that *'Ending continuous deterrent patrols would create new risks of crisis escalation if it proved necessary to sail a Trident submarine in a period of rising tension or crisis.'* The review also claims that taking measures to de-alert could lead to *'earlier and hastier decision making'*. Right now missiles can be launched in approximately five minutes; if de-alerting measures were taken this period of time would obviously be extended. How would this cause earlier and hastier decision-making? Paradoxically, a Policy Statement by the Foreign Office said *'...the warning*

¹⁶ The Strategic Defence Review, London: The Stationary Office, July 1998

time for the re-emergence of a major threat of general war proportions [is] to be measured in years; and the trend in this respect is towards longer warning times'.¹⁷

Another argument used by Britain against de-alerting Trident is that since Britain's nuclear arsenal is small compared to that of Russia or the U.S., de-alerting would have a disproportionate affect on national security. This point is invalid because even Britain's 'limited' arsenal is capable of causing mass destruction. Just one of Britain's 192 Trident warheads has eight times the power of the Hiroshima bomb, which killed 200,000 people. Arguments along the lines of 'How many times over could we destroy the world?' are meaningless.

CONCLUSION

The majority of the world's nuclear forces remain on high alert status, ready for launch within minutes. This policy may have been seen as appropriate by the nuclear weapons states during the Cold War. CND feels that it was not appropriate then and it is most certainly not so today.

Not only is it unnecessary it is also destabilising, displaying the high level of importance still attached to nuclear weapons as instruments of war. It increases the chances of an unauthorised or accidental nuclear launch and ignores the fundamental changes that have occurred in the international security environment.

The removal of nuclear forces from high alert is an important confidence-building measure. Such measures if coupled with the demating of the nuclear warheads from their delivery vehicles would send a positive signal to the rest of the world and maintain the momentum towards the global abolition of nuclear weapons.

¹⁷ *Official Report*, 16 June 1997, col. 83