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Experts Warn of Accidental U.S., Russian Missile Launches

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David Ruppe, Global Security Newswire

01/29/2004

http://www.nti.org/d_newswire/issues/2004_1_28.html#C80DE2E1

WASHINGTON — The United States and Russia unnecessarily continue to maintain thousands of strategic nuclear missiles on high alert for mutual deterrence, heightening the possibility of a catastrophic, unintended launch, an expert said this week at a nuclear arms control conference here.

"All of the thousands of U.S. and Russian launch-ready weapons only represent an accident waiting to happen and a temptation to terrorists to gain control over them," said Center for Defense Information President Bruce Blair, speaking Sunday at a conference sponsored by the Nuclear Policy Research Institute (see *GSN*, Jan. 26).

Blair said U.S. early warning and decision-making procedures and the weapons themselves have been kept on a "hair trigger."

When U.S. satellites detect a possible rocket launch, U.S. crews at the North American Aerospace Defense Command near Colorado Springs, Colo., have only three minutes to determine if the incident is an actual missile attack or a nonmilitary event, such as a space launch, wildfire or solar reflection off of oceans or clouds, he said. Such nonmilitary events occur daily, he said.

If a strike is suspected, then the president and his top advisers convene a telephone briefing during which an officer is given 30 seconds to brief the president on his retaliatory options and their consequences, he said.

The president then would have a few minutes to select his response to ensure that U.S. nuclear attacks could be effectively launched by underground and undersea crews minutes later, Blair said.

The majority of U.S. missiles — deployed on land, in the air and at sea — are intended for mutual deterrence against a Russian or U.S. attack, a situation Blair said has been unnecessary since the end of the Cold War.

"The dirty little secret of America's current nuclear policy is that 99 percent of the nuclear weapons budget, planning, targeting, and operational activities still revolves around this one anachronistic scenario," he said.

"The rationale is a throwback to the Cold War, but however absurd, it still is the axis of current nuclear operations," he said.

"Scratch Russia from the list of enemies, as it should be, and all justification for maintaining a large U.S. nuclear arsenal evaporates," Blair said.

Blair and other experts charged that the size of the current U.S. arsenal was kept unnecessarily large in part because of persisting Cold War suspicions within the U.S. military and also because of institutional inertia.

"A small fraction of the current U.S. arsenal of 10,650 bombs would amply cover all plausible nuclear threats to the American homeland, U.S. allies and interests overseas, if only the idea of fighting a large-scale nuclear war with Russia received the ridicule it deserves," Blair said.

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