

Reducing Alert Rates of Nuclear Weapons

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Study research and analysis by Hans Kristensen and Matthew McKinzie in 2012 based on generous grant from the Swiss Government. The study does four things:

1. Reviews status of alert nuclear forces of the United States and Russia. We estimate that they have roughly 1,800 warheads on alert missiles. That is more warheads than the total nuclear stockpiles of the rest of the world's nuclear weapon states combined. France and Britain also have nuclear forces deployed ready for use, but at lower readiness level.

2. Describes complete or partial de-alerting steps undertaken in the past. We find that despite warnings against de-alerting, the United States and Russia have previously de-alerted entire force categories or reduced warheads on remaining alert forces.

3. Reviews arguments used for and against de-alerting. Studies concluding de-alerting is unwise generally do not present analysis but simply state that re-alerting would be dangerous; analysis tends to be secret. We were even told that one cited DOD study did not exist.

5. Analysis of effect of nuclear force configuration and alert status on US and Russian strike scenarios. We find that neither side has the ability to conduct a disarming first strike and be confident to prevent significant retaliation.

But even if all forces were taken off alert and the other side managed to conduct a surprise counterforce attack, several dozen ICBM warheads would still survive, capable of inflicting considerable damage on the attacker. Even a retaliation of only 37 300-kt warheads on US cities could cause upwards of 115 million casualties. Current alert postures are 10-100 times greater than what would be needed to ruin either country in a countervalue attack.

We conclude that it is possible to reduce alert levels through a phased approach starting with taking lower-priority weapons off alert first. For example, if two-thirds of US ICBMs are de-alerted together with Russian SS-19s, it would enhance the stability of deterrence by reducing the disparity of alert platforms.

6. Ends with a Conclusion and phased de-alerting annex.

* Re-alerting race main argument against de-alerting. Verification and cost are others. The re-alerting argument is, according to the US NPR, that taking ICBMs and

SLBMs off alert “could reduce crisis stability by giving an adversary the incentive to attack before ‘re-alerting’ was complete.”

* While it is important to reduce alert levels in a coordinated and responsible manner, we conclude that the re-alerting argument is a “straw man argument” for two main reasons:

First, it ignores that the current alerted postures already include “generating” nuclear forces, increasing alert rates, and uploading hundreds of additional warheads onto ICBMs, SLBMs and bombers.

If re-alerting in a crisis is dangerous, then “reconstituting” or increasing alert levels in a crisis are also dangerous. But as we argue in the report, a re-alerting race that takes three months under a de-alerted posture is much preferable to a re-alerting race that takes only three hours under the current highly alerted posture.

Second, it ignores that neither the United States nor Russia has the capability to conduct a successful disarming first strike against the other as long as a sufficient number of the other sides’ SSBNs are at sea.

* This conclusion is confirmed by a recent DOD report we obtained under FOIA that concluded that even a Russian disarming first strike would have “little to effects” on the US ability to retaliate.

Indeed, the DOD report concludes that Russia “would not be able to achieve a militarily significant advantage by any plausible expansion of its strategic nuclear forces, even in a cheating or breakout scenario under the New START Treaty.”

The DOD report does not conclude that the SSBNs at sea have to be on alert, only that they have to be at sea, secure, and capable of launching a significant retaliatory strike.

* Some have argued that alert nuclear forces give the President more time to think in a crisis. But that argument turns reality upside down because it is the short time lines created by nuclear alert forces that puts the President in a position of having to make quick launch decisions in the first place.

As a report co-authored by former STRATCOM Commander General Cartwright stated recently, “the short-fused Minuteman and strategic submarine alert forces, together with the supporting rapid reaction command system, *impose a severe constraint* on presidential deliberation and choice during a crisis or conflict.”

* Despite official opposition to de-alerting, opponents acknowledge that there are important risks associated with have nuclear forces on alert. Open ocean targeting was reaffirmed by the NPR, which also recommended studying how to lengthen decision times.

* Obama administration post-NPR review is formally examining options for reducing alert levels of nuclear forces, including whether it is still necessary to posture forces against a Russian surprise attack. The 1212 DOD study obtained under FOIA appears to clearly conclude that such a scenario is not likely.

* In conclusion:

De-alerting is not destabilizing provided it is done in a phased and responsible manner.

Warning of re-arming race of de-alerted forces is a “straw man argument” that ignores significant re-arming of existing alert posture.

Even Russian alert attack against completely de-alerted US forces would not be capable of disarming the US or prevent significant retaliation.

Alert postures fuel excessive planning dynamic and worst-case assumptions that prolong competitive nuclear relationship that undercuts efforts to reduce numbers and role of nuclear weapons.