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# Comments on “De-Alerting: Decreasing the Operational Readiness of Strategic Nuclear Forces”\*

By

*Amy Woolf, Dr. John Steinbruner, and the Honorable Walter Slocombe*

Comments presented at the seminar on “Re-framing De-Alert: Decreasing the Operational Readiness of Nuclear Weapons Systems in the U.S.-Russia Context” in Yverdon, Switzerland, 21-23 June 2009.

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*\*The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the conference sponsors.*

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**Amy WOOLF, Dr. John STEINBRUNER, and the Honorable Walter SLOCOMBE**

## **AMY WOOLF:**

There are some really interesting statements in their paper, that show some deeper policy and political differences. For example, they argue that the JDEC failed because the Bush Admin lost interest in arms control; on our side, we tend to argue that it stalled because Russia threw up contracting and liability barriers. They also seem to argue that a "deep cuts" arms control treaty that addressed all of Russia's concerns is all that's needed to improve international security and strategic stability. Interesting stuff, but it doesn't help us set an agenda for the meeting.

They do raise one area of discussion that we haven't addressed at all. They mention things like the Hot Line and the 1971 Agreement on measures to reduce the threat of nuclear war. They didn't mention the Nuclear Risk Reduction Centers, or the Accident Measures Agreement. We could spend some time going over these, and other agreements (like de-targeting, JDEC, the Y2K joint monitoring center) to identify previous efforts to tackle pieces or parts of the false warning and accidental launch problems. These might provide absolutely no guidance, or we might get some ideas on things that work and things that don't.

I don't think it would be worth our time, at this meeting, to go through their list of "concerns" with de-alerting that they present, either to challenge them or to agree with them (mainly because we don't agree among ourselves). But some of these are the issues that would have to be addressed and solved before either side is willing to move forward on de-alerting. Hence, this list might provide guidance for a future work plan; if we, at the meeting, agreed that altering alert postures is something that deserves further study, then going through this list, or an agreed version of it, to find ways to maximize the benefits and minimize the risks of de-alerting is something that could prove useful.

Finally, they don't address, at all, the issue of extending warning and decision time. The Strategic Posture Commission identified this issue for further study and action. So, this seems to be, at least, an acceptable starting point, within the U.S., for discussions on alert rates and nuclear posture. I don't know if the Russians have thought about it all, but we may get some interesting ideas from them if its on the meeting's agenda.

## **JOHN STEINBRUNER:**

"Convergence" of current opinion from within the respective security establishments will predictably reject the idea of de-alerting nuclear forces. Both sides claim that active deployment practices are reliably safe and strategically necessary.

As you know, I disagree. I believe that the categorical assurances stated in the paper are not valid and that the putative problems of stability they cite as impediments are not as intractable as they suggest.

I do agree with the mostly implicit underlying contention of the paper that any significant change in prevailing deterrent practice would have to be accompanied by robust measures of reassurance regarding conventional forces.

**WALTER SLOCOMBE:**

In general, I agree with most of this clearly argued and constructive paper (entirely apart from my immense respect, as a one-time halting student of Russian, for people who can write so clearly and persuasively in a foreign tongue).

In particular –

- There is a mis-match between the (genuine, if manageable) issue of reducing as close to zero as possible the risk of an unauthorized or mistaken use of nuclear weapons and “de-alerting” as usually defined, i.e., as “implementing some reversible physical changes in a weapon system that would significantly increase time between decision to use ... and ... launch.” Such measures are either (1) not necessary to eliminate, for all practical purposes, risks of true technical accidents or unauthorized launcher and/or (2) technically infeasible and moreover they would be affirmatively dangerous in the event of crisis.
- The problems of accidental or unauthorized launch have already been addressed by each side – through launch control procedures and the like.
- In this connection, I would add only that while “de-targeting” can be rapidly reversed, it is useful in that in the event of a (very, very improbable) accidental or unauthorized launch, the missile would land in the ocean, or at any rate, not in a populated area.
- No doubt improvements in such measures are possible, but they so strongly serve each side’s unilateral interest that there is every reason to believe that whatever can be done will be done — at least if the leadership on each side makes clear they want it done. (Implicitly the Russian paper notes an instance of this by describing the “weakening” of the Russian EW system in the past tense.) The changes in our overall relationships have not yet eliminated the need for a residual deterrent, but they have made it both necessary and safe to take additional protective measures against accidents or mistakes.
- Without necessarily agreeing that all the blame for failure to implement past agreed measures is on the US side (even if the blame is politely attributed to the Bush administration), I definitely agree with most of the Russian paper’s suggestions that there are useful steps – other than de-alerting in the sense defined – to reduce whatever dangers still exist. In particular these suggestions include measures such as improving data exchange and insuring

a capability to destroy a “rogue” missile in flight that could further reduce risks without the costs of physical separation. The point that such arrangements could be multilateralized, at least in terms of distributing data, is an excellent one, and has some political significance in the context of bringing the other declared (and for that matter de facto) nuclear weapons states into the process.

- The most important point of convergence is recognition that the US and Russia continue to regard it as necessary – and indeed the “primary role” of NW -- to maintain a deterrent hedge against each other. The day may come when that is no longer true, but until it does de-alerting in the sense of physical disablement from ready status is not going to happen, and would be dangerous if it did. An attempt to enforce a “technical” obstacle to maintaining such a deterrent before the two sides agree that it is substantively unnecessary will get nowhere, and at a minimum diverts from things that could usefully be done – on practical safety measures, and more important on further substantive controls, on non-proliferation, and on getting back on a course of overall constructive US-Russia international relations.
- One issue mentioned in the Russian paper, on which I have a different view is the need for maintaining a LUA/LOW posture. I outlined in my paper why I think the US should, unilaterally and as a matter of sound strategic planning, develop a doctrine that does not require, or even contemplate, LUA, even though the physical capability will remain. I recognize the argument that the Russian nuclear force is more reliant on potentially vulnerable silo ICBMs than the US, but there are substantial Russian submarine and mobile forces – forces that are in fact being modernized -- that should make it unnecessary (as it is already unwise) for Russia to rely on the deterrent effect of a LUA/LOW capability from forces at risk from a first strike. Reducing vulnerability reduces the dangers of miscalculation or misunderstanding (because it reduces the need for very rapid action) without in any way diminishing crisis stability – in fact it enhances it. (Personally, I have always regarded the Soviet – and now Russian – practice of keeping so large a part of their potentially invulnerable submarine and mobile forces in a vulnerable posture as a sign – not of indifference to the risk – but of an understanding that any serious prospect of either the US or Russia using NW will arise only in a time of grave crisis where there is plenty of time to mobilize. For reasons outlined in the Russian paper, however, there are costs and risks of relying on such measures in a crisis, and it would increase stability (and Russian security) to move toward ceasing to so rely.
- I fully agree that, in addition to taking the steps outlined to implement past agreements on data exchange and to explore other, similar steps to reduce risks of accidents and unauthorized launches, the two nations should move promptly to agreed, legally binding, steps to reduce their strategic nuclear forces, replacing the expiring START agreement and the vague Moscow Treaty. (And of course the Russian paper is entirely correct in noting that de-alerting of systems that have been agreed to be reduced in advance of deadlines would be a useful confidence building step in connection with a new

agreement – as it has been in predecessor treaties.) The details of how new agreements should work – and the very important question of how to expand the scope of arms control beyond “strategic” to other nuclear forces, materials, and technology – is beyond the remit of our group. But for the record, I should say that I disagree with the idea of linking progress on that issue to that of building (or not) a missile defense against the Iranian threat, or deploying a handful of conventional warheads on SLBMs.

All this said, I acknowledge that John Steinbruner is correct that the views in the Russian paper (as in mine and Amy’s) are the “official” and “orthodox” view – and must be debated, not simply assumed to be correct. I look forward to that discussion next month.