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

By Dr. Harold Feiveson

Comments prepared for 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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First, I found the discussion of definitions in the comments by Russian experts on U.S. papers valuable. Here the Russian definition of launch on warning (LOW-B) does appear close to what Slocombe in his article called launch under attack (LUA). I assume that the LOW used in the main Russian paper is what Miasnikov calls LOW-B. Miasnikov says that the Russian term, OVU, is close to LUA but “differs from LOW-B.” I think this distinction could be made clearer than it is in the paper.

On the main Russian paper, three points are made or implied:

1. LOW-B (or something close to this) is needed and helpful for deterrence. And it need not introduce unacceptable risks.
2. Certain de-alerting schemes are not needed and could be risky.
3. Joint U.S.-Russian measures could further reduce risks of inadvertent or mistaken launches.

I will comment here only on first two.

In summary, in both cases, I believe the authors could take more into account two possibilities: (a) deterrence of a first strike by the adversary does not require the threat of a massive retaliatory attack – in the past shaped by counterforce and damage-limiting goals; and (b) reducing force readiness does not always have to be transparent.

LOW-B?

The apparent Russian support for LOW-B is to me the most troublesome part of paper. (I may have misinterpreted the arguments here, but if so, I do believe the authors could explain in more detail how their use of LOW in the paper differs from LOW-B.)

I find persuasive, Slocombe’s dictum: “The doctrinal step is to establish a clear strategic policy that abjures reliance on LUA ... and requiring the military to shape its plans and its forces consistent with this principle.” [Slocombe, p. 25]

Why cannot Russia meet this goal? It is true that with subs in port, and mobile missiles not dispersed, the Russian forces are more vulnerable to a first strike out of the blue than are U.S. forces in peacetime. But (a) a bolt out of blue is not credible, and (b) a minimal survivable force would in any case be a powerful deterrent.

In this sense, I believe that the analysis could make a stronger distinction between what is needed for deterrence and what is needed for damage limiting.

Let us say that Russia perceives an attack underway, and so wants to send off its missiles. What are the missiles aimed at? Not U.S. silos presumably since the attack is already underway. And not cities, which would lead to destruction of U.S. and Russian societies both. Well, it is deterrence you say – the U.S. would not launch an attack if any Russian warheads would survive; but that could be achieved without the massive strategy of LOW-B.

I believe that this is what Slocombe alludes to: “There is a tendency to define target coverage goals by the capabilities of the full force, not its survivable elements, and this tendency to permit maximum capabilities to define sufficiency creates pressures to rely on LUA to meet the goals.” [Slocombe, p. 26]

The Russian practice of keeping subs in port and mobile missiles in base until there is a crisis should not be supplemented by keeping forces on LOW-B.

Are de-alerting schemes risky?

On paper’s “concerns over de-alert” two points should be stressed. The first is related to the above point; if we focus on survivability and deterrence, not some elusive massive counterforce and damage-limiting capability, some of concerns lessen or evaporate. Secondly, the authors might look at the issue of transparency – what if de-alerting schemes were taken unilaterally and were not transparent? This would have value in diminishing risks of high alert and little of the risks the authors are concerned about. See Paul Podvig article in *Science & Global Security*, “Reducing the Risk of an Accidental Launch,” Vol. 14, 2006. Podvig’s conclusion: “The U.S. and Russia should develop and implement measures that would keep their entire forces at low levels of readiness *without revealing their actual alert status.*” On how much transparency there should or should not be, I am, I must admit, uncertain; but it would be valuable for authors to consider the question.

The paper puts forward some specific concerns about de-alerting, and here again, I think several of the points addressed could be expanded. For one, the concerns appear to address mostly the de-alerting by the separation of warheads from delivery vehicles; other schemes may be less draconian.

On the specific, numbered points, let me make just a very brief preliminary comment:

1. De-alert would make deterrence less effective. If weapons are survivable, deterrence need not be diminished.
2. There exist joint measures to “guarantee” no possibility of accidental or non-authorized launch? What are these exactly?

3. Removing warheads from missiles could be destabilizing. Certainly, if not done with great caution, such de-alerting could as indicated raise serious concerns.
4. De-alerting U.S. and Russian forces without addressing other nuclear weapon states could be problematic. Are UK, France, and China missiles on alert? And so what if they are? Not clear what issue is here.
5. De-alerting ICBMs affects Russia more than U.S. Sending subs on patrol without warheads and missiles “does not make any sense.” On first, it is not persuasive that Russia has to rely on alert forces for deterrence. On second point, submarine missiles could have delays in place even if subs are on patrol.
6. This concern of conventional attacks on nuclear tipped missiles seems to me exaggerated. What an act of folly for U.S. to attack nuclear missiles with conventional missiles, including cruise missiles!
7. On morale: in my talks with missile control officers and B-52 crew, I had opposite impression; morale could be enhanced by de-alerting.
8. Re-alerting race could be destabilizing. This issue for sure it has to be carefully addressed. But dangers may be exaggerated if (a) some part of strategic force is survivable, and (b) not all of the de-alerting measures are transparent.

Finally, authors might fruitfully address four points that are not now discussed in paper:

- (a) How do the strengths and weaknesses of early warning systems impact command and control of strategic forces, and thus affect the risks and value of de-alerting measures?
- (b) What is significance if any, of missile defense in addressing the stability of de-alerting measures?
- (c) Is there a role for missile-destruct options to be put in place?
- (d) How do the strategic force reductions called for in the paper affect the arguments put forward in the paper respecting the risks of de-alerting?