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De-Alerting of Nuclear Forces: A Policy Imperative*

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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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De-Alerting of Nuclear Forces A Policy Imperative *

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Introduction

Placing military forces on some level of alert status is not a new concept and has been a basic tenant of military readiness for centuries. So it comes as no surprise that as the Cold War progressed into the 1950's and beyond, the United States, Soviet Union, Great Britain, France, and China placed at least some of their respective nuclear forces on alert. What is surprising, however, is the fact that nearly 20 years after the end of the Cold War those nations continue to have at least some of their nuclear forces at essentially the same alert postures.

Three Factors

There are three major factors for the current dilemma. First, the Cold War did not end with a spectacular victory that resulted in surrender or capitulation by any of the participants, thus the usual disarmament by the loser did not happen. As a matter of fact, it was not until October 1997 that the US Congress legitimized the end date of December 26, 1991 for the Cold War as part of the Financial Year 1998 National Defense Authorization Act. The five major nuclear powers that participated in the Cold War were not incentivized to de-alert especially in light of the concerns that their basic national survival was at risk with other nations having these weapons of mass destruction.

Next, de-alerting has been examined in the past but the wrong people were asked to develop the implementation strategy. That strategy should include the ability to generate those forces back to an alert status in a reasonable time period. The engineers who designed the systems, not the military professionals who operate these systems, should be the ones tasked with developing the technical protocols for de-alerting. This has not happened. The challenge is not with bomber or ballistic missile submarine forces which can be taken off alert and regenerated rather quickly, but with the ICBM forces. The natural state of a silo based ICBM, except in the China case, was designed and engineered to be sitting in a silo, fueled, power on, warhead in place ready for an immediate launch upon the receipt of an authorized launch directive. There are certainly technical challenges to de-alerting ICBMs, but those challenges are what professional engineers are trained to overcome. As a note, the Chinese have it about right and have done so for most of the Cold War and beyond. Their silo based ICBM force is not fueled and the warheads not mated.

Finally, as the major nuclear powers have evolved their post- Cold War national security strategies, the issue of de-alerting has essentially not risen to the awareness level of the policy maker. Hence, the dilemma, simply stated, is that de-alerting is not for the most part an operational imperative, but a decision to be made by the policy maker...and that has not happened.

Up to this point in the post Cold War period, the policy makers have unfortunately largely ignored the de-alerting issue. Now is an ideal time for multilateral action to be taken by policy makers as we are significantly reducing our operational nuclear stockpiles to take aggressive de-alerting actions.

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