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Reframing De-Alert*

By Dr. John Steinbruner

Discussion paper 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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'Reframing De-Alert'

By

Professor John STEINBRUNER

Director, Center for International and Security Studies at Maryland, University of Maryland; Chairman of the Board, Arms Control Association

The idea of de-alerting nuclear forces has been discussed in some detail in the professional literature, but there has never been any official diplomatic effort to accomplish it. The basic answer to the question as to why de-alerting has not yet occurred is that it has not been attempted.

The primary reasons why it has not been attempted have more to do with the fundamentals of security policy than with the technical details of the various proposals that have been privately advanced. An acceptable deactivation process would have to be worked out by the organizational units that operate and support nuclear forces, and they could do so if so instructed. They cannot be expected to initiate such a process, however, since it would require revisions of basic security objectives, operational principles and institutionalized procedures far beyond the scope of their authority. Reforms of the magnitude required are necessarily undertaken by the political system as a whole and generally emerge only in response to compelling circumstance.

It has long been both difficult and distasteful to imagine a circumstance involving the explosion of a nuclear weapon that might be compelling enough to force a deactivation process. Instead of indulging in such an exercise, I prefer to imagine a process of enlightenment whereby the risk of catastrophe is recognized before it occurs and common sense adjustments are made to prevent it. Those willing to be optimistic to that extent might at least hope the recent meltdown of the financial markets might provide an analogy that induces such enlightenment. The misconception of risk that underlies current security policy is different in character from those that generated the financial crisis but comparable in significance. At least in principle the lesson might be extracted.

The UN General Assembly resolution on de-alerting explicitly recognizes the underlying risk of inadvertent engagement and provides political and moral encouragement for considering de-alerting as a remedy. It does not acknowledge, however, the practical fact that the de-alerting of nuclear forces would have to be accompanied by conventional force limitations and fundamental changes to prevailing security relationships. In commenting on the specific de-alerting issue, let me provide an excerpt as follows from a CISSM working paper, "Security Policy and the Question of Fundamental Change." That paper discusses the broader issues that would have to be addressed as well.

Under the prevailing doctrine of deterrence, which currently provides the foundation for global security, the operationally coupled nuclear forces of Russia and the United States are widely considered to have established a stable balance of power arrangement, with each providing a global check on the other. Since that assumption has self-reinforcing features, there is an incentive to preserve it as long as the forces are active, but in fact it is doubtful that the deployment configuration meets the

technical requirements of stability. The US force has sufficient preemptive capability to put the Russian capacity for retaliation under some question, a fact that during the Cold War period would have been the occasion for very active diplomacy. Under its recent, assertively self-reliant policy, the United States has so far considered the disparity to be a legitimate advantage and at any rate has not accepted any direct discussion of mitigating it. As best can be judged from the public record, the Russian government has not pressed the issue directly, but it is evident that their vehement objections to United States ballistic missile defense installations in the Czech Republic and Poland are related to the underlying problem.

Institutionalized policy in the United States currently envisages indefinite continuation of legacy operational practices under which American deterrent forces

- systematically prepare massive attack plans independent of any immediate circumstance of possible use,
- direct those attack plans primarily against Russian and Chinese military forces
- maintain thousands of weapons on immediately available alert status capable of covering primary targets.

It has long been recognized that those forces are technically configured and operationally inclined for preemption, despite the commitment to retaliation required by formal deterrence doctrine, for the basic reason that the priority counterforce purposes of the underlying attack plans can only be achieved if most of their specific missions are preemptive in character. Given the disparity in investment, the United States capacity for preemption will continuously improve, forcing Russia into increased reliance on rapid reaction of its deterrent force and even anticipation of attack in order to assure itself that an American preemptive attack could not be completely decisive.

The American public has little detailed understanding of this situation, but the political system as a whole appears willing to continue legacy practices indefinitely. Four prominent figures have recently supported the ultimate objective of eliminating nuclear weapons but have not advanced a program that would meaningfully alter the prevailing configuration of forces anytime soon. This apparent acquiescence does not preclude fundamental redirection, however. Dramatic revisions of legacy practices must be considered possible and eventually even likely for three basic reasons.

First, the magnitude of threat embedded in the operational forces does not remotely fit the deterrent rationale. Under current political circumstances it is not credible to claim that an adequate deterrent effect – that is, one necessary to dissuade a rational actor from initiating attack – requires threatening massive retaliation from thousands of nuclear weapons. To the extent that an operationally displayed retaliatory threat is required at all, an adequate deterrent effect could be achieved with tens of weapons targeted in response to immediate circumstances and probably less than ten would be sufficient. The wielding of thousands of preprogrammed weapons projects an intention to preempt rather than to deter, and that intention will never be considered legitimate from a global perspective. The United States is not independently strong enough to defy global opinion indefinitely.

Second, the continuous coupling of large alert forces programmed for massive attack certainly enables a catastrophic accident to occur. One can argue about the probability of such an event and one can hope that it has indeed been rendered very small by measures designed to assure prudent central control, as responsible officials regularly assert. There can be no credible categorical assurance, however. Indefinite continuation of legacy practices entails some risk of catastrophe that is essentially impossible to quantify and difficult to judge. The risk arises not from hostile intent but rather from the inherent difficulty of managing dispersed operations involving thousands of individuals. The categorical discounting of this risk bears some loose but ominous analogy to the spectacular failure to understand the dynamics of risk in the global financial markets. If adequate deterrence can be achieved without running the risk of active deterrent operations, there is no justification for doing so.

Third, the dispersed pattern of weapons deployment resulting from legacy operations entails a greater risk of terrorist access than would be the case in a more protected configuration of forces. To the extent that deliberate assault from apocalyptic terrorists, who could not be identified or located in advance, is considered more likely than deliberate attack from any state leader who could be so identified, there is reason to shift to a more protected deployment pattern.

Most individuals not embedded in the contemporary security bureaucracies and even some who are readily identify an inherently superior configuration of deterrent forces involving hundreds rather than thousands of weapons that are not programmed for attack, are held in secure storage and are never put on immediately available alert status unless their actual use is immediately required. Suitably designed and supported by continuous monitoring, that configuration of forces would render any residual disparity in preemptive capacity far less threatening, would essentially eliminate the risk of catastrophic accident and would provide robust deterrent potential that could be specifically activated in any situation that appeared to require it. Moreover, by putting all nuclear weapons into secure, continuously monitored storage, that force configuration would also establish much higher standards of protection against unauthorized access.

Although such a transformation of prevailing practice is easily conceptualized, it would be difficult to accomplish. It would involve extensive institutional adjustments in Russia and in the United States and those adjustments would have to be carefully coordinated. Direct discussions between the two governments would be an essential first step, and formal negotiations would eventually be necessary. A complete arrangement would ultimately require the agreement and alignment of the other nuclear weapons states as well, but it would be important for Russia and the United States as the main protagonists to initiate a process of progressive restraint on their forces. That would logically entail:

- Gradual and explicitly scheduled removal of fabricated weapons from operational status to secure storage separated from delivery systems with associated verification arrangements;
- Initiation of an international identification and continuous monitoring arrangement that in full maturity would provide the basis for accurate

accounting and assured security of all fabricated weapons and explosive isotopes;

- Reduction in the size of total stored national weapons stockpiles significantly **below** the asymptotic limit of mass social destruction (variously estimated in the range of 1000 – 1500 targets).
- Categorical prohibition of any initial use or threat of use of a nuclear weapon for any purpose.
- Corresponding prohibition on the **unauthorized** initial use of conventional weapons for any offensive mission.

If that substantive agenda is to succeed, it would have to be accompanied at a minimum by a political initiative explicitly designed to transform the security relationship between Russia and the United States, and ultimately China as well, from one based on the historical principles of confrontation to one seriously dedicated to collaboration for mutual advantage. Such a transformation is clearly in the real long-term interest of all three countries, but is not their prevailing inclination. As the stronger party, the United States bears the primary obligation to initiate that process.

