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Bombs Away

By BRUCE BLAIR, DAMON BOSETTI and BRIAN WEEDEN

WHILE most Americans were horrified and angered by the attacks on the morning of Sept. 11, 2001, few probably felt the same level of frustration as one of us, Brian Weeden. He was serving on nuclear alert at a Minuteman missile bunker deep under the Great Plains. Despite having the most destructive weapons ever invented at its hands, our military was powerless to deter, disrupt, punish or destroy this new type of adversary.

Indeed, the Minuteman launching crews were “locked down” at their bunkers for 96 hours. Why? To shield them from terrorists. In the aftermath of the attacks, our nuclear forces were given all sorts of added protection against possible attacks on the bases. This meant huddling in convoys under armed escort while traveling to and from bunkers. The symbolism was obvious, and humiliating: we had gone from being the nation’s defenders to being the hunted.

On top of it all, there was little reason for us to be there. With the Soviet Union’s having collapsed a decade previously, the rationale for maintaining America’s (or Russia’s) standing arsenals had all but disappeared. Nuclear war between Russia and America had become inconceivable. The need to deter a Soviet nuclear strike, the mission for which the three of us spent a combined 12,000 hours underground on launching duty over four decades, had disappeared.

By 2001, the United States and Russia had reduced their combined arsenals, mostly voluntarily but also through negotiated agreements, to 30,000 total weapons from 55,000, including warheads that were deployed, those held in reserve and those scheduled to be dismantled.

About half of our Minuteman missile had bases closed. Weapons were removed from nuclear bombers and put in storage. Doves of pilots, as well as land- and sea-based nuclear missile crews, sought retraining to acquire new, more useful skills. Men and women entering military service chose more promising fields: conventional warfare, space operations, anti-ballistic missile defense and cyberdefense.

Since 9/11, the American and Russian nuclear arsenals have shrunk further, by about one-third. Today, the real nuclear threats facing both nations are small arsenals in the

hands of weak governments and “loose” weapons that might fall into the hands of terrorists.

In comparison with these threats, and given the irrelevancy of nuclear weapons in dealing with terrorism, the remaining American and Russian stockpiles of some 20,000 total warheads are bloated and should be drastically cut. A nuclear arsenal beyond the bare minimum adds no protection — it only creates an opportunity for terrorists to get their hands on ready-made weapons to turn against us.

[The New Start treaty](#), which was signed by President Obama and President Dmitri Medvedev of Russia in April but is being held up by some Senate Republicans, is exactly the arms control agreement we need today. Back in the cold war, we wanted to monitor and regulate the superpower competition. But now we need a treaty that promotes cooperation. There is more at stake than the modest goals of New Start, which calls for 30 percent cuts in strategic arsenals and a stepped-up program of monitoring and on-site inspections.

The treaty could serve as a stepping stone to a round of still-deeper cuts in the two arsenals, followed by serious negotiations with all other nuclear powers. The initial goal of these multilateral talks should be the phased reduction of their arsenals. The longer-term goal is elimination of all nuclear weapons.

Unfortunately, Senator Jon Kyl of Arizona [has demanded that the administration commit to spending \\$85 billion](#) on modernizing our nuclear weapons facilities over the next decade and making other concessions as the price for approving New Start. This demand, as well as the Pentagon’s call for an additional \$100 billion to upgrade nuclear forces, makes no sense. Modernizing and expanding our capacity to maintain an outmoded strategy dealing with an obsolete threat only wastes resources.

We know the power of our arsenal and have held in our hands the keys and launching codes to use it, in crises ranging from the Yom Kippur War of 1973 to the recent North Korean missile tests. But we also know the limits of what it can achieve. We believe the billions envisioned for new weapons could be invested far more wisely in counterproliferation and counterterrorism efforts.

And, while we can’t speak for all of our former colleagues still serving in nuclear bunkers, we know that a growing number of them view their jobs as increasingly irrelevant. It is a blow to their morale to see their leaders harp on the importance of

nuclear deterrence when every day they see how pointless it is to be preparing to fight the last war — the cold war.

President Obama shares the vision of Ronald Reagan that, in the end, eliminating our arsenals is the only lasting, effective and realistic solution to the nuclear dangers confronting the world today. Ratifying the New Start treaty is the first step on the path to reaching that goal.

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