

REDOUBLING NUCLEAR WEAPONS REDUCTION

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Faced with the erosion of Russia's ability to control its nuclear weapons, President Clinton should initiate a process of reciprocal unilateral actions with President Boris Yeltsin. The process would be similar to the actions initiated by President Bush six years ago to allow Mikhail Gorbachev to withdraw to Russia tactical nuclear weapons from the other republics when the Soviet Union began to disintegrate.

This time the need is to allow Russia to take its nuclear missiles off their accident-prone launch-on-warning posture. Both the United States and Russia retain this Cold War stance despite the pledges of Clinton and Yeltsin to stop aiming strategic missiles at each other's countries. Their missiles' hair triggers remain operational inasmuch as U.S. and Russian commanders need only a few seconds to reload the target coordinates into the missile-guidance computers.

The United States will have to take the first step, because the survival of most of Russia's missile warheads depends on Russia launching them at the first sign of enemy attack. The number of invulnerable Russian warheads deployed at sea or on land-mobile missiles deployed away from their bases has fallen to about 200. In contrast, the United States keeps missiles carrying more than 2,000 warheads on submarines at sea at all times.

Specifically, President Clinton should order the U.S. Strategic Command to take the following actions:

Remove to storage the 500 warheads carried by U.S. MX missiles. These highly accurate missiles, specifically designed to attack their Russian counterparts, are to be deactivated by 2003 in any case under the START II agreement.

Open the safety switches inside the silos of the 500 Minuteman III missiles so that they cannot be launched before maintenance crews revisit each silo. President Bush immobilized 450 Minuteman II missiles in this fashion in the fall of 1991. Gorbachev reciprocated. If Yeltsin reciprocates this time, both countries should take further steps to immobilize their missiles in a manner that would take longer to reverse and be easier to monitor.

Deactivate the eight U.S. ballistic-missile submarines that would otherwise be slowly retired over the next 10 years under START II and START III agreements and put in storage half of the warheads carried by each of the 10 remaining submarines. The stored warheads should include all the 400 high-yield W88s, which pose a first-strike threat to Russia's missile silos. To lend further stability, the sea-based missiles should be kept at least one day from launch readiness.

After adopting these measures, the United States would still have a potent and invulnerable deterrent force composed of about 600 warheads at sea, each with several times the destructive power of the bomb that destroyed Hiroshima. This dampens any pressure to re-alert more forces during a crisis.

In response to these U.S. initiatives, we would expect Yeltsin to order immediate deactivation of the silo-based missiles slated for elimination under the START II Treaty. These missiles carry almost 3,000 warheads. We would also expect him to order the removal of the warheads from Russia's rail-based missiles and deactivation of the 15 or so Russian ballistic-missile submarines that will be retired over the next 10 years under START II and START III.

Most of these de-alerting initiatives could be readily verified through routine satellite observation and the on-site inspections already being conducted to verify existing agreements. Verification that submarine missiles at sea have been de-alerted will require the parties to devise new monitoring arrangements.

Without in any way weakening deterrence, these initiatives would substantially reduce the risk of an accidental nuclear catastrophe.

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