

WHERE WOULD ALL THE MISSILES GO?

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During the first Clinton-Dole debate, the president proudly stated: "There are no nuclear missiles pointed at the children of the United States tonight and have not been in our administration for the first time since the dawn of the nuclear age." The facts can be interpreted otherwise.

Although President Clinton and Russia's Boris Yeltsin agreed to stop aiming strategic missiles at one another after May 1994, they did not implement their pledge in any meaningful sense. Neither removed the wartime aim points from their missiles' portfolios of preprogrammed targets. Neither lengthened the amount of time needed to initiate a deliberate missile strike. And the risk and consequences of an accidental or unauthorized launch barely were affected by their pledge.

So what actually has been done to honor the agreement? No one knows for sure because no provision was made for verification. But I can clarify crucial details because of my knowledge of U.S. missile-aiming practices and information about analogous Russian practices given to me by their experts.

In a meeting in early 1992 at my research institution, John Steinbruner, Fred Ikle and I proposed to a group from the Russian Foreign Ministry that our governments act to reduce the risk of nuclear accidents and cement our new post-Cold War relationship by taking all strategic missiles off alert -- that is, modifying them so that they could not be launched quickly. The Russians conveyed the recommendation to President Yeltsin, who immediately called for an end to the United States and Russia targeting missiles at one another's territory. To the chagrin of Russian planners, who thought the idea ridiculous, the proposal rapidly gained political momentum and acceptance in both countries.

To fulfill their obligations, the Russian military set their intercontinental missiles on what they call a "zero flight plan." This setting sounds good, but it is nothing more than a symbolic gesture, because the missiles' memory banks retain their wartime targets. If Russia decides to launch strategic rockets, a single order sent from Moscow to the rockets over an automated computer network is all that it would take to reprogram all of them for their wartime targets. Time required for the retargeting: 10 seconds.

And what if a missile is launched accidentally or illicitly? It automatically would switch from its "zero flight plan" back to its primary wartime target. In short, Russia did nothing to diminish its missile threat to the United States.

For its part, the United States set its missiles on a trajectory that ends in the ocean, while preserving, just as the Russians did, the previous wartime aim points in the missiles' memory banks. A few strokes on a computer keyboard are all it would take for launch officers to redirect the missiles to their wartime targets. Time required to retarget the entire U.S. missile force for Russian destinations: 10 seconds.

As for illicit launches, anyone who managed to circumvent the safeguards certainly would be able to perform the simple keyboard strokes that would aim the weapons at Russia.

Having the missiles aimed at ocean targets does mean that a missile launched accidentally because of an electrical short-circuit or other malfunction would land harmlessly in the ocean. This one positive practical consequence of the detargeting pact has negligible importance, however, because a purely accidental launch is extremely unlikely.

All these changes, though negligible, apply only to land-based strategic missiles. The targeting changes made to missiles on submarines were even more trivial.

The standard practice for decades has been for the United States to aim its submarine missiles at ocean targets whenever they are brought to maximum launch readiness in peacetime -- for instance, during the routine testing of guidance gyroscopes. In wartime, aim points are fed into the missiles just before firing. Time required to load Russian aim points into the entire U.S. submarine missile force, which carries thousands of warheads: a few minutes. Russian subs are in a similar position.

Despite the president's reassurances, the American (and Russian) public should take little comfort in the effectiveness of the missile detargeting pact. Far bolder steps need to be taken before their leaders can take credit for ending the nuclear missile threat to our countries' children.

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