



Uncovered Nukes: Tactical Nuclear Weapons

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Tactical nuclear weapons threaten the international nonproliferation agenda. The November summit between President Bush and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin, followed by publicly disclosures of the U.S. Nuclear Posture Review 2002, yielded the announcement on reductions in operationally deployed strategic nuclear warheads to a level between 1,700 and 2,200. Reductions in strategic nuclear weapons are a welcome, much needed step in what President Bush has called, "moving beyond the Cold War." However, these reductions are unlikely to include between 4,000 and 15,000 tactical nuclear weapons, mainly in the Russian arsenal.

Tactical nuclear weapons have never been the subject of a formal arms control effort, despite that these 'uncovered nukes' pose dangers equal to or above those of strategic nukes. US and Russian Presidential initiative undertaken in 1991 and 1992 have yielded some reductions, but have not done enough to address the dangers posed by these weapons.

Unless the United States and Russia make stronger commitments to address tactical nuclear weapons, cold war-era nuclear dangers will remain a present and growing threat to international peace and security. Efforts by the United States and Russia could serve as the basis for broader, multilateral initiatives on these weapons. Meanwhile, the presence of TNW undermines the Nonproliferation Treaty in both letter and intent.

Unique Dangers

'Tactical nuclear weapons' (TNWs) include a broad array of atomic explosive devices, ranging from so-called nuclear landmines and nuclear artillery shells to air-dropped or missile launched nuclear warheads. TNW yields range from relatively low (0.1 kiloton (KT)) to higher than the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki (10-15 KT, upwards to 1 megaton). Even a very low-yield atomic blast would create highly damaging effects, above and beyond what a conventional explosion of the same size could produce. Furthermore, because TNWs are often smaller in size, and because of the manner which they may be safeguarded and deployed, TNW can be more susceptible to theft and unauthorized or accidental use. Misuse of a TNW would cause unprecedented destruction, and potentially lead to a broader nuclear exchange.

The TNW arsenal of the United States is estimated at 1,670 warheads. These are stored mainly at facilities in the US mainland, but 150-200 US TNW are deployed across eight bases in Europe. Estimating the Russian arsenal is more complicated. There are numerous conflicting accounts, and serious doubt about whether the Russians themselves even know the total number of TNW they have. The most recent estimate of the Russian TNW arsenal is around 3,590 deployed weapons, but when estimates of warheads stored or slated for dismantlement are taken into account, these estimates grow to as high as 15,000. Without greater international attention toward controlling these arsenals, these weapons, or their components, could fall into the hands of nuclear aspirant states or non-state actors such as terror networks.

TNW and the War on Terror

The rise of international terrorism presents a particularly grave and compelling reason to develop an international regime to monitor and control, the presence of TNWs. TNW may be easier to transport and more vulnerable to theft and illicit or unauthorized use than other nuclear weapons.

The Russian TNW arsenal poses particular problems. Concerns about the theft of Russian nuclear weapons or material or the contracting out of nuclear expertise have been paramount since the end of the cold war. Exacerbating these worries is the possibility of unemployed or underpaid nuclear technicians, the fallout of a crumbling Russian economy, who may be tempted to illegally sell nuclear matter to terrorist groups and renegade states. Poorly guarded borders and sloppy customs procedures add to this problem.

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In the hands of nuclear terrorists, tactical nuclear weapons could wreak havoc and destruction far-surpassing anything witnessed in New York on September 11. The initial damage could claim tens of thousands of lives and destroy many square miles of property. The area and its surroundings would be rendered uninhabitable by nuclear contamination lasting decades. After-effects of radiation exposure would manifest themselves in victims across a broad geographic area for years and years to come.

Intelligence experts note that terrorist organizations already have attempted to acquire these weapons. Although claims of Al Qaeda's possession nuclear weapons are unconfirmed, President Bush, has warned that "They are seeking chemical, biological and nuclear weapons." The possibility of terror organizations acquiring TNW or any nuclear materials remains a very real possibility. This need for international efforts to control and reduce this class of weapon through a successful initiative on TNWs is paramount.

Time for Controls & Reduction, Not Use or Development

Existing tactical nuclear arsenals, in addition to dangers of leakage into the wrong hands, also undermine nonproliferation efforts supported by the United States, Russia and the other more than 180 signers of the Nonproliferation Treaty. Worse, in the United States and Russia there are about developing new classes of these weapons. Such development would smack up against the intentions of NPT and give strong incentive for other nations to develop their own arsenals.

As Presidents Bush and Putin appear on the threshold of unprecedented progress in strategic nuclear reductions, to truly achieve nuclear security in the post-cold war era, they must address tactical nuclear weapons. This includes not only remnant arsenals from the Soviet Union, but also calls in the United States and Russia for the possible development of new classes of these weapons.

President Bush has supported his nuclear reduction proposal by claiming "It's a new day." Indeed, as September 11 has demonstrated, it's a new world. Responding to this new world requires attending to not only the threats that linger from the past, but addressing those that face us now and in the immediate future. Tactical nuclear weapons reductions and controls are an essential element of meeting this challenge.

What Should Be Done Now

1. **Build upon the START** (Strategic Arms Reductions Treaty) process. The START framework can serve as a basis to ensure control with adequate data sharing, verification and monitoring. As it appears cooperation between the United States and Russia is improving, particularly in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, it would make sense in the context of START III and current discussions to address TNWs.
2. There is a need for mechanisms, such as the **Cooperative Threat Reduction**, (Nunn-Lugar) initiative, that would enable the United States, Russia, and partner nations to implement common decisions. Adding the effective involvement of an official representative from one or more international organizations to relevant fora, would help to assure more stability and accountability, and provide a sustainable element that could better withstand difficulties in bilateral relations;
3. **Withdraw tactical nuclear weapons from Europe** to address longstanding Russian security concerns, particularly as NATO continues to expand eastward, in exchange for a pledge from Moscow that it will share data on the status and location of its TNW arsenal, and download and significantly reduce its forward deployed tactical nuclear weapons;
4. **Proceed with TNW disarmament by category in a step-by-step approach.** It would be worth pursuing a global limit on specific types of weapons, if done in conjunction with a prohibition on the development and deployment of all redesigned or new models of tactical nuclear weapons.

For an in-depth account of the dangers of tactical nuclear weapons see the report by the Fourth Freedom Forum, "Uncovered Nukes: Tactical Nuclear Weapons and the Challenge of Arms Control," available at <http://www.fourthfreedom.org/php/t-d-tnw-index.php>.

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