

A Call for *Global Zero Alert*: No Nuclear Weapons on Hair-Trigger Status

The U.S. and Russia are now strategic partners, yet they are still poised to destroy each other with thousands of nuclear weapons on hair-trigger alert. The world is still minutes away from nuclear war by mistake or miscalculation.

The events of September 11th have shown us that the unexpected can happen with dire consequences. If the unexpected happens with nuclear weapons, the results will be catastrophic for humanity and the planet. As the world's nuclear superpowers the U.S. and Russia must set a standard: No nuclear weapons should be kept on high-alert status—poised for immediate launch.

The Bush Administration's Nuclear Posture Review

The Bush administration has completed a *Nuclear Posture Review* (NPR) that will guide Pentagon planning on nuclear weapons for the next decade and beyond.

In the forward to the NPR, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld claims: "...the Nuclear Posture Review puts the Cold War practices related to planning for strategic forces behind us..." But the reality is that the NPR signals more of the same Cold War nuclear policies.

For example, the US still plans to continue threatening Russia with scores of nuclear weapons on hair-trigger alert—even though the two nations are supposed to be allies in the fight against terrorism. This will only serve to push Russia to keep *its* missiles poised for a quick launch. "Launch on warning" can still lead to nuclear war caused by a false alarm or computer error.

The Bush administration says it wants to significantly reduce the US nuclear arsenal and calls for removing warheads from missiles and storing them separately (a form of *de-alerting*). *But the NPR is fatally flawed:*

- The Pentagon intends to take ten years to do what could easily be done in three-- remove 3800 nuclear warheads from missiles (other forms of de-alerting like pinning open motor switches, could be done much more quickly).
- Even after ten years the U.S. would still have up to 800 nuclear weapons on high-alert status—equal to 10,000 Hiroshima bombs.
- Instead of destroying nuclear weapons slated for elimination the Pentagon plans to store them. Leaving open the possibility of future deployment of these weapons makes the claim of "reductions" extremely dubious. By substituting a form of stretched out de-alerting for disarmament, the Bush plan does a disservice to both.

What's Needed? A Real Change in Nuclear Posture

- Nuclear weapons slated for elimination should be taken off line immediately, a warheads removed from missiles and *stored, secured and verified*;

- These weapons should be dismantled so that reductions in nuclear arsenals are irreversible;
- The U.S. and Russia should work to remove all their nuclear weapons from hair-trigger alert status.

A Safety Standard the World Can Live With: No Nuclear Weapon Poised for Immediate Launch

By committing to extend decision-making time for *all* nuclear weapons the U.S. and Russia would help secure a critical margin of safety and create an international taboo against hair-trigger nuclear postures. The goal should be *Global Zero Alert* for all nuclear forces.

Why Global Zero Alert?

- Keeping hundreds of nuclear weapons on hair-trigger alert is inherently dangerous. It spurs other nuclear nations to put their weapons on high alert. The only comprehensive remedy is the rapid removal of warheads from delivery systems, where they can be *stored, secured and verified*.
- The attacks of September 11 show us that the unanticipated can happen. There is the ongoing danger that terrorists could: seize control of a mobile Russian intercontinental nuclear rocket—and circumvent safeguards to fire it at the U.S.; or hack into and gain control of Russian or U.S. nuclear missile launch systems.
- A *Global Zero Alert* standard would send a message to other nuclear powers like India, Pakistan, and China, that keeping nuclear weapons on high alert is unacceptable.
- Immediate and comprehensive de-alerting of all nuclear weapons, if accompanied by adequate monitoring procedures, would increase mutual reassurance and pave the way for deeper reductions in nuclear arsenals. It would de-legitimize the use of nuclear weapons.

Russian NGO Support for De-alerting

In October of 2001, a briefing paper advocating Russian/U.S. de-alerting was written by noted scientists associated with the Russian Academy of Sciences. More than 20 Russian NGO organizations endorsed the paper with the following statement:

“More than ten years after the end of the Cold war, Russia and the U.S. still maintain thousands of nuclear weapons in a high-alert posture—ready for immediate launch. This nuclear posture compresses decision time for leaders in both nations to a matter of just minutes and increases the chances of nuclear war starting by accident or miscalculation. We believe the Presidents of Russia and the U.S. should work together to devise operational changes in the nuclear forces of their respective nations that would result in the verifiable “standing-down” of these nuclear forces. This would increase considerably the launch-decision time for each President and profoundly reduce the risk of accidental nuclear war.”

It’s time for the U.S. and Russia to take leadership to secure the verifiable standing down of all nuclear weapons.