

Overcoming Political Obstacles to Lowering Operational Readiness

by

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In an important development, in early December 2007, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution on "Decreasing the Operational Readiness of nuclear Weapons Systems," with 139 in favour, 3 against, and 34 abstentions.

The resolution, co-sponsored by Chile, New Zealand, Nigeria, Sweden, and Switzerland, attracted attention and some controversy, despite its careful and low-key wording.

A similar resolution is to be submitted this year in First Committee. It would be very highly desirable for an even higher level of support to be shown for the second iteration of this vital resolution.

This second iteration comes at a very sensitive juncture at which on one hand, there is a new window of opportunity for progress on what is a literally apocalyptic issue, with one presidential candidate (Obama) having stated that he is willing to look at taking nuclear weapons off high-alert, and even the other candidate making ritual bows to nuclear disarmament - and on the other hand, growing tension between the US and Russia, and increasingly alarming statements coming from both sides. The growing US-Russia tension, with statements from Sarah Palin that almost seem to seek war with Russia, and matching statements from Russia suggesting that the entry of Georgia into NATO could lead to war, underline as nothing else could, just how terribly important this resolution really is.

The six governments initiative followed a strong NGO campaign on the issue of Operating Status/Operational Readiness and recommendations from a number of highly authoritative bodies including the WMD Commission (Recommendation 17), and an appeal signed by 44 Nobel prizewinners

jointly authored and coordinated by myself, and Doug Mattern of the Association of World Citizens.

Interest in the draft UN resolution was clear from the high turn-out to a panel on Operational Status of Nuclear Weapons held on 17 October 2007, exactly a year ago, which featured New Zealand Ambassador Don Mackay, Swedish Counsellor Magnus Hellgren, and de-alerting advocates Steven Starr and myself (John Hallam), coordinator of the 44-nobels international appeal on Operational Status of Nuclear Weapons.

A further panel was held in Geneva at the Prepcom, with Ambassador Labbe chairing it and the Swedish, and Swiss ambassadors speaking, as well as Steve Starr and myself. Representatives of all the nuclear weapons states were present.

Of particular interest and concern to the audience of diplomats, UN officials, and civil society were the reports of incidents where high alert status could have resulted in a nuclear exchange by accident or miscalculation, the information on possibilities for infiltration of nuclear command systems by terrorists, and the new models of severe climatic change from the use of even a small number of nuclear weapons.

A statement was made at an informal session of the CD on 31 July, by Swiss ambassador Georg Streuli on behalf of an expanded group of sponsoring governments, consisting of Chile, Malaysia, New Zealand, Nigeria, Sweden and Switzerland.

The reason so many people have urged that nuclear weapons be taken off launch-on-warning is that there have been numerous incidents involving mishaps with nuclear command and control systems.

(More detail is given in the detailed briefing paper on operational readiness and commonsense way to avoid an accidental apocalypse.)

In all of these terrifying incidents, the ultimate issue at stake was the possible use of the on-alert strategic inventories of the U.S. and Russia.

The insertion in 1979 of a practice tape for a massive Soviet attack on the US into the main command computer at NORAD produced it seems, 'blind panic'. Threat assessment conferences were held, the National Emergency

Airborne Command Post (known as the 'doomsday plane') was launched, minuteman crews were ordered to be launch-ready, and nuclear-armed fighter-bombers were taxied to the edges of runways with engines running.

Similar measures were enacted three times running, when computers showed between hundreds, and thousands, (the numbers kept varying) of incoming Soviet missiles. The fault was eventually traced to a faulty chip in a Colorado switching station.

On 26 September 1983, Colonel Stanislav Petrov of the erstwhile Soviet missile corps, went on watch on the graveyard shift at Serpukhov - 15. As a systems designer he would not normally have been doing watch duty, which would have been performed by someone more junior.

At around half-past midnight lights began flashing and sirens began wailing as the brand-new, state-of-the-art satellite surveillance system picked up first one US launch and then five of them.

Note that the US incidents had all been caused by computer 'glitches' of one sort or another. However this Russian incident was not a computer glitch. The satellite surveillance system itself - the raw data - showed five launches.

Dr. Bruce Blair, former Minuteman ICBM Launch Control Officer and now President of the World Security Institute, clearly rebutted the US denial, made at the 2007 UNGA First Committee, of its having forces on 'hair-trigger alert.' Dr. Blair countered that U.S. standard operating procedures still envisage massive retaliation to a presumed strike in timeframes that allow only for rote, lightning-fast, checklist-based decision-making. Such decisions could starkly affect the survival of civilisation, yet the commander of STRATCOM it seems, has but 30 seconds to brief the US president on his options, and the president has but a few minutes to make a decision that could be unbelievably momentous.

Dr. Blair stated: "Both the United States and Russia today maintain about one-third of their total strategic arsenals on launch-ready alert. Hundreds of missiles armed with thousands of nuclear warheads-the equivalent of about 100,000 Hiroshima bombs-can be launched within a very few minutes."

Dr. Hans Kristensen, Director of the Nuclear Information Project of the Federation of American Scientists, has effectively rebutted U.S. claims that

U.S. nuclear forces are planned and postured to provide the President with maximum decision time and flexibility.

The possible use of between tens and thousands of nuclear warheads, as a consequence of madness, malice, miscalculation, or malfunction is both a catastrophe beyond imagination, and is completely avoidable.

The need to lower the operational readiness of nuclear weapon systems is clear enough. Coordinated actions and agreements to lower the operational readiness of nuclear weapons systems would be both a major step toward the goal of nuclear weapons abolition and a vital interim measure that would vastly decrease the likelihood of such an entirely avoidable accidental end to civilisation.

So also would taking other measures that would decrease the chance of accidental nuclear weapons use, such as the implementation of the Memorandum of Understanding establishing a strategic stability centre, three times announced by the US and Russian governments but never implemented.

However, doing it, while easy enough from an administrative and even a cost point of view, will meet political obstacles.

These largely centre around those in bureaucracies and military hierarchies who still believe that 'deterrence' is necessary.

A further obstacle has been the refusal to admit that the US even retains forces in a posture in which they can be launched within minutes although in this respect procedures have clearly not substantially changed since the cold war. This was the position taken by the US last year.

Significant pressure on US presidential candidates and on the US Congress once a new US President is in place could however make a real difference to this. A potential window of opportunity exists. It is vital that once a new President is inaugurated in the US, an immediate approach is made at the highest diplomatic level, to both the President, the Secy of State and of Defense, and to the relevant Congressional committees (Defense and Foreign Affairs), with the text of the General Assembly resolution in hand, urging a lowering in operational readiness of US and Russian nuclear weapons systems.

Statements being lightly made in some quarters about the possibility of war with Russia do nothing to help the situation but do underline for anyone who is in any way based in the real world, the pressing need for the measures this resolution advocates.

I urge everyone here who takes seriously the preambles of so many resolutions in which nuclear weapons are said to be a threat to human survival, to give the issue of operating status or operational readiness the highest priority. This is not mere diplomatic boilerplate, it is literally true.

I especially urge them to lend their governments' authority both to the efforts by Chile, Malaysia, New Zealand, Nigeria, Sweden, and Switzerland, and to the efforts of other governments -India, Japan, NAM and Australia -to press for a lowering in operational readiness of nuclear weapons systems. This is a call that needs to be made in NPT Prepcom and Revcon working papers and in end of the year statements to the General Assembly as well as in votes.

To this end, there needs to be maximum cooperation between different groups on the floor of the General Assembly. A number of resolutions include at least some reference to operating status and India's Reducing Nuclear Dangers also focuses exclusively on this topic. A strong showing for ALL of the resolutions on operational readiness, starting obviously with this one, and including Renewed Determination, NAM, and Reducing Nuclear Dangers, would be very helpful.

A significant change in the number of abstentions (34 last year) would underline the urgency, not only of lowering operational readiness but of making progress on article VI obligations generally.

I also particularly urge both official nuclear weapons states and others that have nuclear weapons systems to take on board repeated votes by UN bodies and to revise their doctrines and operational procedures so that the "notice to fire" of nuclear weapons systems is measured in days, weeks and months rather than minutes, and to take whatever other measures will avoid an accidental apocalypse. It is time that we started to make real progress on nuclear disarmament and this is the place to start.

Finally I wish to say a very big thank you, to the governments of Chile, Malaysia, Nigeria, New Zealand, Sweden and Switzerland both for their

efforts on behalf of the planet as a whole in sponsoring the resolution, and a little more locally, for their efforts in sponsoring this panel. In previous years much of the work has been done by Steve and myself. To have it done by six governments is for us a new experience.

I conclude by reminding us all that the only truly safe nuclear weapon is one that does not exist.

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