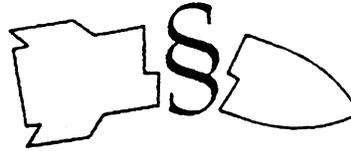


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Initial Co-President

April 7, 2015

President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue
Washington, DC 20500

Mr. President,

Decades after the end of the Cold War, the United States and the Russian Federation still maintain large numbers of nuclear missiles on high alert, ready for launch on a few minutes notice. You were absolutely correct when you stated, during the 2008 campaign, that this situation “increases the risk of catastrophic accident or miscalculation,” and that the United States should “work with Russia to end such outdated Cold War policies in a mutual and verifiable way.” ***We strongly urge you to initiate actions to reduce the risks soon and certainly during your remaining time in office.***

We recognize that this is not a new issue. Thus far, all calls to remedy the situation have been blocked, apparently by military concerns about the necessity to retain a sufficient degree of readiness and, perhaps, the institutional inertia that meets any attempt to alter a long-established major policy. Recent developments, however, have highlighted the issue with increased urgency.

The deteriorating relations between Russia and NATO, and the increasing number of provocative military actions and threats, give a stark reminder of the dangers of miscalculation which accompany great power confrontations. It is sobering to recall that we have just observed the centennial of the First World War, in which great powers drifted and blundered into a conflict which left much of Europe in ruins.

The danger of accidental or unauthorized nuclear conflict is also increasing because of developments in cyber warfare and the risk of malicious hacking by rogue states or terrorist groups. A commander of U.S. Strategic Forces has testified before the Senate that he was “very concerned about the potential of a cyber-related attack on our nuclear command and control and on the weapons systems themselves.”¹ A head of the National Nuclear Security Administration has reported that NNSA’s computers are under “constant attack” by both foreign governments and “fairly sophisticated non-

¹ https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2013_04/Study-Sees-Cyber-Risk-for-US-Arsenal

state actors.”² A report by the Defense Science Board found that Department of Defense “red teams” have frequently been successful in penetrating military networks “using attack tools which can be downloaded from the internet.”³

Further, the entire nuclear non-proliferation regime is under increasing pressure from frustration among non-nuclear weapons states over the pace of nuclear disarmament, and specifically over the amount of progress made under the action plan adopted at the 2010 NPT Review Conference as well as the Thirteen Steps adopted by the 2000 NPT Review Conference, reaffirmed in 2010. Goals include diminishing the role of nuclear weapons in security policies and concrete agreed measures reducing the operational readiness of nuclear forces.⁴ In 2014 the UN General Assembly overwhelmingly adopted a resolution calling for the reduction of nuclear weapons alert levels, with the United States, Russia, United Kingdom and France casting the only negative votes.⁵ Lowering of alert levels would be a tangible step the U.S. and other nuclear powers could point to as evidence that a world safe from the nuclear threat is not just a distant mirage.

Progress on the lowering of alert levels could be made without the necessity for Congressional action, by staged unilateral initiatives with an expectation of reciprocity, by informal understanding, or by executive agreement. To the extent that technical or strategic issues might be perceived as obstacles to some elements of de-alerting, they should be the subject of expedited study in search of solutions. While consultations should not serve as a reason for delay on what is feasible to do now, U.S.-Russian discussions at an expert level and/or discussions within the P5 process would also help solve such issues. As the International Court of Justice concluded, Article VI of the Nonproliferation Treaty obliges the nuclear weapons states to not only pursue but also “bring to a conclusion” good faith negotiations for nuclear disarmament.⁶ Under this standard, the appropriate response to a technical obstacle is redoubled effort, not the declaration of an impasse.

In view of the publicly known instances in which human or computer error has already brought the world within a few minutes of accidental nuclear war,⁷ maintaining nuclear missiles in “launch on warning” mode subjects humanity and the planet to an intolerable level of danger – no less dangerous or intolerable because many have grown accustomed to it. ***We call on you to make reducing this danger a very high priority.***

² <http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2012/03/20/us-nukes-face-up-to-10-million-cyber-attacks-daily>

³ <http://www.acq.osd.mil/dsb/reports/ResilientMilitarySystems.CyberThreat.pdf>

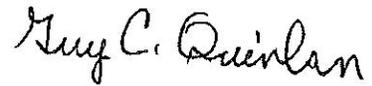
⁴ NPT/CONF.2000/28 (Parts I and II), pp. 14-15, <http://www.un.org/disarmament/WMD/Nuclear/2000-NPT/pdf/FD-Part1and2.pdf>; NPT/CONF.2010/50 (Vol. I), pp. 19, 21, [http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=NPT/CONF.2010/50%20\(VOL.I\)](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=NPT/CONF.2010/50%20(VOL.I))

⁵ A/RES/69/42, 2 December 2014, “Decreasing the operational readiness of nuclear weapons systems,” adopted by a vote of 166 to 4 with 11 abstentions.

⁶ International Court of Justice, *Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons*, General List No. 95, Advisory Opinion of 8 July 1996, Para. 105(2)F

⁷ See, e.g., Eric Schlosser, *Command and Control: Nuclear Weapons, the Damascus Accident, and the Illusion of Safety*, New York, the Penguin Press, 2013

Very truly yours,

Handwritten signature of Guy C. Quinlan in black ink.

Guy Quinlan, President

Handwritten signature of John Burroughs in black ink.

John Burroughs, Executive Director

cc:

Ambassador Susan Rice, National Security Advisor

Jon Wolfsthal, Senior Director for Arms Control and Nonproliferation,
National Security Council

Ben Rhodes, Deputy National Security Advisor

Rose Gottemoeller, Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security