



De-Alerting Nuclear Weapons: Stepping Back From the Brink

*A Briefing Paper from
International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War*

The world can be made safer from nuclear catastrophe through an achievable step called "de-alerting."

De-alerting means taking steps that would lengthen the time required to ready nuclear weapons for combat. This gives decision-makers a cushion or safeguard against making irrevocable decisions regarding the use of nuclear weapons. Today, political leaders have only a matter of minutes to evaluate and respond to situations that might prompt their resort to nuclear arms, greatly increasing the risk of accidental or inadvertent nuclear war.

Frequently Asked Questions About De-Alerting

Why is it important to de-alert nuclear weapons?

The elimination of first strike threats and the possibility of large-scale nuclear war by accident or miscalculation are the most urgent reasons for de-alerting. The US and Russia each have thousands of nuclear weapons on hair-trigger alert. As Russia's nuclear infrastructure deteriorates, nuclear risks are rising.

De-alerting would also represent progress towards nuclear disarmament and hence to the fulfillment of Article VI of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which requires nations to negotiate disarmament. Indeed, at the recently concluded NPT Review Conference, the parties agreed that all nuclear weapon states should take "concrete agreed measures to further reduce the operational status of nuclear weapons systems." Such progress is especially important now since many non-nuclear countries doubt whether the nuclear weapon states intend to abide by Article VI. Failure to fulfill this and other disarmament commitments is corrosive to the effective functioning of the NPT.



US Strategic Air Command Headquarters at Offutt Air Force Base, Nebraska

What are some of the ways to de-alert nuclear weapons?

- Store warheads separately from their delivery systems. This requires secure storage areas and containers. Complete de-alerting of all warheads by this method may therefore take some time.
- Pin open the switches used to fire missile motors;
- Remove the pneumatic mechanisms that open missile silo covers;
- Remove the guidance systems of missiles;
- Block land-based missile silo covers;
- Remove the tritium bottles from warheads;
- Insert an explosion-neutralizing wire in the hollow core of the plutonium "pit." Such "pit stuffing," which can be made irreversible, makes it physically impossible for the weapons to explode.

What is the difference between de-alerting and nuclear arms reduction and disarmament? What are the connections between them?

De-alerting is a method for immediately reducing the nuclear danger that can occur even in the absence of reductions in the numbers of nuclear weapons. Unlike weapons that have been removed from an arsenal by an arms reduction or disarmament process, a de-alerted weapon can be re-introduced into an arsenal. Nevertheless, de-alerting would be a highly effective confidence-building measure that would allow arms reductions negotiations, on START III, for example, to proceed in an atmosphere more conducive to success.

As noted above, there are many ways to de-alert nuclear weapons. Those methods that make it most difficult to place a nuclear weapons back on alert, and those that are easiest to verify, are the most consistent with the goal of nuclear arms reductions because they make it less likely that the warhead can or will be used.

How long will it take to de-alert all weapons? What schedule should be used?

De-alerting measures can be carried out in days, weeks, or months, depending on the specific method used. The rapid deterioration of the Russian economy and the upcoming NPT Review Conference in the spring of 2000 indicate the strong desirability of initiating de-alerting immediately and completing one de-alerting measure on all nuclear weapons as soon as technically feasible.

Is de-alerting verifiable?

Some de-alerting measures are more verifiable than others. The most verifiable method is to store the warheads separately from the delivery vehicles under multilateral monitoring. Other measures, such as pinning open firing switches, are difficult to verify on a multilateral basis without very intrusive inspections that are unlikely to be agreed to in the near term. Verifying that submarine-launched missiles have been de-alerted is most difficult. The removal of tritium bottles from all their warheads would stabilize the de-alerting process by ensuring that the weapons are not used in a first strike.

What about the threat of terrorists using nuclear weapons if the nuclear weapons states take their weapons off alert?

Nuclear weapons are not useful either in deterring terrorist acts or retaliating against them. Even from a purely military point of view, they have no utility in preventing or punishing acts such as the Oklahoma City bombing or the bombings of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. In fact, some de-alerting measures can help reduce the danger of nuclear terrorism. Specifically, a de-alerting program of storing warheads apart from delivery vehicles can be carried out in conjunction with putting all nuclear weapons-usable materials under multilateral monitoring. This would greatly reduce the potential for nuclear black markets, nuclear proliferation, and nuclear terrorism.

How will de-alerting affect nuclear states such as India, Pakistan and Israel, which are not parties to the NPT?

De-alerting can be used to bring these countries into the nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation processes without legitimizing their arsenals. By inviting these three countries to participate in de-alerting, their warheads can eventually be brought into an international monitoring system, improving security regionally and globally. Successful de-alerting will pull these, and all other nations, back from the brink.

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