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Nuclear Threats Rise in Concert With Trump's Ascension

Odds of war with Russia are rising

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Since the Cold War ended 25 years ago, Americans haven't thought much about nuclear war. That changed slightly in the recently concluded presidential campaign, but it needs to change dramatically, many experts say.

A growing cadre of security analysts says the risk that nuclear weapons might be used by nations or terrorist groups is increasing, and it may even be higher than it was in the Cold War.

The critics want to lessen the risk that America's nuclear weapons could be used rashly or inadvertently, due to system error, false warning or U.S. sensors or computers compromised by enemy action. For one thing, they say, it is past time to end the requirement that nuclear missiles must be ready to launch within minutes. And, they say, a planned \$1 trillion overhaul of America's nuclear arsenal is excessive.

But the odds appear slim that their calls will be heeded in Congress. In the wider world, rising tensions make it harder for leaders to take unilateral action that could increase stability, for fear they might be perceived as weak. Bilateral or multilateral agreements are hard to complete.

Donald Trump's election brings critics' nuclear fears to a boil. Hillary Clinton sought unsuccessfully to convince voters to keep Trump from the Oval Office in part to keep his volatile temperament away from the nuclear-launch codes. Now that Trump is about to take the helm, those worries will swell.

Trump appears open to a cozier relationship with Russian President Vladimir Putin. But it remains to be seen whether his approach will do anything to lessen the risks of conflict with a Russia that is dead set on using its military with growing brashness to defend its interests.

Even if a nuclear mistake is unlikely to happen in any given year, over decades the odds grow for it to happen at least once, the critics argue. What's more, they argue, even if the chances are low, the harm is intolerably high, so if the risk can be reduced without diminishing deterrence by taking certain steps, why not take them ?

"One false alarm in a century is one too many, because the consequences could be catastrophic, could be civilization-ending," says Bruce Blair, a former U.S. intercontinental missile launch control officer who is now a researcher at Princeton University.

The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists "Doomsday Clock," an attempt by experts to measure the threat of nuclear conflict, has been at three minutes to midnight since last year. It was that close to midnight only twice before : in 1984, at the height of the Cold War, and in 1949, when the Soviets tested their first atomic weapon. It was two minutes to midnight only once : in 1953, after the hydrogen bomb was developed by both superpowers.

The risks of nuclear war are rising mostly, but not only, because Putin has deployed his country's military, including its nuclear forces, with increasing aggression—from its proxy invasion of Ukraine to its buildup of forces in Syria.

To wit, Russian aircraft and ships are buzzing U.S. and NATO counterparts virtually every day somewhere around the world, U.S. officials say. The Russians recently moved nuclear-capable missiles near Poland and Lithuania. They have repeatedly conducted exercises involving nuclear forces, and America has too. They have broken the 1987 treaty on Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces by developing a new nuclear ground-launched cruise missile. They tauntingly sailed an aircraft carrier battle group through the English Channel last month. Russian media reported the nation conducts civil defense drills each October, the most recent of which was said to involve 40 million people.

Both Russia and the United States are engaging in cyber-espionage and sometimes cyberattacks, some of which could trigger physical outcomes — such as electrical outages — that in turn could be considered an act of war, some experts worry.

Russian military doctrine calls for using nuclear weapons as a means to essentially frighten an adversary into backing down from a conventional fight.

"The odds of war with Russia are rising," says Richard Shirreff, a retired British Army four-star general and a former deputy commander of NATO forces. "We must assume, given the way Russia integrates nuclear into every aspect of military doctrine, that this must include the risk of nuclear war."

It is not hard to imagine U.S. and Russian aircraft clashing, if only by accident, in the crowded skies over Syria — if not in the Baltics, the Arctic, the North Sea, the Aleutians or elsewhere.

Moscow's rhetoric, too, has waxed radioactive. Dimitry Kiselev, a Putin propagandist, recently warned of "nuclear consequences" in response to "impudent behavior."

All this may be Russia blustering and posturing in ways it sees as serving its interests. But it has already led to a pattern of escalation between nuclear Russia and nuclear America. For example, Russian actions in Ukraine were a response to NATO expansion, and those actions led the U.S. to "reassure" allies by deploying to the Black Sea warships bristling with Tomahawk missiles that could put Russian command-and-control, air-defense and early-warning facilities at risk, says Princeton's Blair.

Moscow in turn deployed attack submarines to the Black Sea to shadow U.S. ships, he says. Then American forces replied by sending P-8 sub-hunting planes.

“The current confrontation is steadily escalating, with definite nuclear implications,” Blair says.

Moscow is not Washington’s only nuclear worry. The naval and air forces of America and China, another nuclear power, are on the front lines of a dispute over China’s contested claims of sovereignty in the South China Sea. North Korea, meanwhile, steadily nears the capacity to one day — perhaps in Trump’s first term — threaten U.S. territory with missiles carrying nuclear warheads. Iran’s nuclear ambitions are bound for now by an internationally monitored agreement. Nuclear Israel stands ready to respond if Iran breaks out.

Then there is the problem of nuclear and radiological materials unsecured and sometimes traded on the black market. Enough highly enriched uranium and plutonium to build tens of thousands of nuclear bombs is spread across 24 countries, according to the Nuclear Threat Initiative, a group that monitors proliferation.

South Asia’s nuclear powers, India and Pakistan, are not threats to the United States, but as the only two atomic nations to regularly have gone to war with one another, their atomic rivalry poses a risk to the planet.

Casualties from a “limited” nuclear exchange between those countries would exceed 2 billion people, by one estimate, mainly from starvation, as the soot kicked up by atomic explosions would cause cooling and reduced precipitation.

A larger U.S.-Russian war would have worse consequences.

Trump may want to threaten or even use military force in the early days of his administration to demonstrate his toughness to potential adversaries. It’s not known how he would respond in a high-pressure situation involving the possible use of nuclear weapons.

Experts are putting forth a number of proposals to reduce the risks. A key issue is the requirement U.S. military forces to be ready — within 12 minutes of perceiving the homeland is under attack — to launch some 600-plus nuclear warheads should the president decide to do so, and to unleash them within about five minutes of getting the order. Russia has a similar launch-on-warning posture.

Because American ground-based missiles and command-and-control facilities are most vulnerable, there is a particularly strong imperative to “use or lose” them if a country thinks an enemy attack is en route, critics say.

The worry is that the tight timeline and the vulnerability of ground systems would add to the pressure in a crisis, and a president might choose to fire the weapons on mistaken warning of an enemy attack — a decision he or she might not make if more time to process the information was built into the system.

U.S. forces have mistakenly thought they were under attack before. In 1979 it was a training tape that was mistaken as a real attack. In 1980, a failed computer chip was to blame. These alarms were revealed as false in time. But if electronic communications were compromised or human beings didn’t act wisely, things might have gone worse, critics say. The tenser the situation, the more likely military personnel are to give credence to indications of attack.

The Russians have also had several near-misses where they mistook innocuous events as nuclear assaults and, thankfully, were able to recognize it in time.

Military advances can lead to confusion in a nuclear scenario, some analysts worry. Cyberattacks could potentially disable or overtake nuclear command systems or early warning radars and networks. A strike on a surveillance or missile-tracking satellite could leave leaders operating at least

partially in the dark. Missile defenses could diminish a nation's deterrent. Increasingly long-range weapons such as conventional cruise missiles could take out nuclear command facilities or silos without crossing the threshold of using atomic weapons.

A better system would build in some delays, the critics argue. That could be accomplished, for example, by eliminating the requirement for prompt launch or mandating a one-day waiting period or decoupling the warheads from the missiles, as many other nuclear nations do.

There is no need to rush to decide to launch nuclear weapons during a crisis, critics say. Even if the United States withstood a massive nuclear attack and lost its ground missiles and bombers, the virtually invulnerable U.S. ballistic missile submarine fleet still has sufficient firepower to respond by essentially destroying an enemy's country, some experts say.

Conservatives argue that de-alerting nuclear missiles could actually result in heightening tensions. Once the missiles have been taken off alert, any move to put them back on alert could be perceived as escalating a crisis, they say.

Supporters of de-alerting respond that there would be no need to re-alert, because enough firepower exists on subs to obviate the need for doing so.

Eliminating the need to be able to fire nuclear missiles within minutes could have budgetary consequences, too. It could lessen the requirement for having so many nuclear submarines at sea at all times and ready to hit targets.

"This conversation is only going to get louder as the costs grow ever more punishing," Kingston Reif, a nuclear expert with the Arms Control Association, told CQ Roll Call.

When Obama was running for office, he called for taking U.S. nuclear weapons off their high state of alert. So did George W. Bush, when he was a candidate. But neither man followed through as president.

The critics have called for the United States to announce that it will not be the first nation to use nuclear weapons in a future conflict. Obama has rejected calling for such a change.

The man Trump has chosen for his Defense secretary, retired Marine Corps Gen. James Mattis, is among those asking hard questions.

"Is it time to reduce the triad to a diad, removing the land-based missiles? This would reduce the false alarm danger," Mattis asked a Senate committee last year.

Hawks will push back hard. The roughly 430 ground-based intercontinental ballistic missiles, or ICBMs, are stationed in 165 launch facilities scattered across 14,000 square miles in the northern Great Plains. The senators representing North Dakota, Wyoming and Montana wrote President Barack Obama on Oct. 25 urging his support for funding a new missile. They did not address de-alerting, but they said the ICBM fleet is necessary because their dispersal complicates an adversary's war plans.

"We must make sure our military forces have the tools they need to perform their job," [Steve Daines](#), a Republican member of the Senate Defense Appropriations Subcommittee who represents Montana, told Roll Call. "We know our enemies aren't waiting around to make it a fair fight."

The prospect of a Trump presidency has also led many critics to begin questioning whether one man, the commander in chief, should have sole authority to wage nuclear war. After all, they say, a congressional declaration is required, in theory at least, to engage in conventional conflict.

Two Democrats — Rep. [Ted Lieu](#) of California and Sen. [Edward J. Markey](#) of Massachusetts — have

introduced legislation that would prohibit the president from launching a first-strike nuclear attack without a congressional declaration of war that expressly authorizes such an attack.

“I believe the current nuclear launch approval process, which gives the decision to potentially end civilization as we know it to a single individual, is flatly unconstitutional,” Lieu said.

Likewise, Sen. [Dianne Feinstein](#) of California, the top Democrat on both the Intelligence Committee and Appropriations panel that oversees nuclear weapons, told CQ Roll Call in July she has begun to think about the need for such a change.