

The De-Alerting of Nuclear Weapons: The International Political Context

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"Every Second Counts: Gaining Time to Avert a Nuclear War "

Seminar Cosponsored by:
Swedish Peace and Arbitration Society
Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Swedish Institute of International Affairs

Stockholm, Sweden
10 October 1998

Introduction

Before I begin today, let me express my appreciation for this opportunity to address such a distinguished gathering of experts on this weighty subject -- the de-alerting of nuclear weapons. I also wish to acknowledge the consistent and dedicated activities of the three institutional cosponsors of this seminar on behalf of nuclear disarmament and other international security issues. I am happy and honored to be here.

As a further gesture of respect for the expertise that exists in this room, I will not presume to provide a lecture today about the intricate technical details of how nuclear weapons are taken off alert status, how various hypothetical agreements to achieve this aim would be credibly verified, or even the more vexing question of how non-governmental organizations should pursue their many interesting proposals.

Nor do I intend today to unveil a grand design whereby the United Nations might impose a specific solution to this problem. The UN role in disarmament is to assist member states in advancing the general purposes and principles of the Charter and to build a consensus in support of them -- not to operate either in the capacity of a national security agency or a verification agency.

The Bigger Picture

Despite these preliminary caveats, however, I would like to share my thoughts about the general problem that you have selected for this seminar.

I have been interested in this problem for many years and had the privilege of studying it in some detail while serving as a member of the Canberra Commission on the Elimination of Nuclear Weapons, which released its final report in August 1996. Though many members of this audience are no doubt aware of that study, they may not recall that the report's very first "recommended step" toward nuclear disarmament was described as "Taking nuclear forces off alert."

I must acknowledge here the significant contribution made by my fellow Canberra Commissioner, General Lee Butler, in the discussion that led to this recommendation.

The report specifically urged that "Nuclear-weapon states should take all nuclear forces off alert status and so reduce dramatically the chance of an accidental or unauthorized nuclear weapons launch." The report also identified several specific de-alerting initiatives as conducive to nuclear disarmament, including the physical separation of warheads from delivery vehicles, and the removal of all non-strategic nuclear weapons from deployed sites to a limited number of secure storage areas. I supported those ideas then and continue to support them now, though I would prefer today to emphasize another facet of the commission's work.

The major contribution of that report was not so much in its many details but in its articulation of a sentiment that is increasingly being expressed throughout the world today, namely, the finding that "immediate and determined efforts need to be made to rid the world of nuclear weapons and the threat they pose to it." I believe that the prospects for implementing specific de-alerting proposals are substantially dependent upon the extent that the world community is successful in forging a global consensus on the fundamental norm against the possession of all nuclear explosive devices.

In short, though we will not likely succeed in "de-alerting our way " to nuclear disarmament, the concept is now high on the international security agenda precisely because of the positive contributions it may offer as a stepping stone toward achieving this ultimate goal. And, furthermore, I suspect strongly that this achievement is due in no small degree to the hard work of activities like the Canberra Commission and the labors of organizations like those participating in this conference.

I certainly do not wish to discourage the exploration of de-alerting proposals, quite the contrary. The present nuclear stalemate has made de-alerting especially attractive to the disarmament community. Progress on this front would at least help in increasing the safety of nuclear stockpiles even if we are not getting rid of them at a rate most of humanity would wish.

But I do wish to draw attention to the broader point that fundamental norms like global nuclear disarmament are not self-sustaining. They do not issue from some invisible hand of history. They are advanced instead by unrelenting human perseverance. Given that the obstacles to eliminating such weapons are largely political in nature, and since the specific question I was asked to address today is why de-alerting proposals have yet to be fully implemented, I would like now to describe the boundaries of the current debate over this issue.

The Debate on De-Alerting

De-alerting has without question become a subject of political debate in many countries and clues about the reasons for the delay in implementing such proposals might well be found in the arguments of its critics. I am reminded of a statement reportedly made by Winston Churchill that "However absorbed a commander may be in the elaboration of his own thoughts, it is sometimes necessary to take the enemy into account." So what are these criticisms?

The most principal one appears to be that de-alerting would erode deterrence -- essentially, that since deterrence depends upon a country's ability to ensure swift retaliation, de-alerting not only delays retaliation but also creates enticing new targets, including the storage facilities for downloaded warheads or other critical components of de-alerted forces. Such claims are often linked with the assertion that de-alerting cannot be verified, due to persisting uncertainties over the exact size of operational and reserve nuclear forces.

Another argument is simply that de-alerting proposals fail to consider problems of political acceptability and implementation in the "real world." One such problem, some argue, is the spectre that de-alerting will unleash a destabilizing "regeneration-of-arms race" -- whereby each side in a nuclear deterrent relationship will compete to ensure that it will be able, if need be, to regenerate its forces faster than its adversary. Another problem concerns the alleged new dangers of sabotage or theft of warheads that have been removed from de-alerted forces and stored in central storage areas -- such warheads, some critics argue, would be safer to store with their delivery systems. Still other critics worry about calculating the full costs of de-alerting, both financially and strategically, to the extent that allies of nuclear states might begin to doubt the reliability of their proverbial nuclear umbrellas and consequently seek their own.

Then comes the argument that de-alerting is just the wrong solution to the legitimate problem of accidental or unauthorized launches -- the solution these critics propose is either missile defense or expanded cooperation on command, control, and communications systems.

According to my brief informal survey, these represent a fair sampling of the leading arguments against de-alerting. These are views that are being expressed in the media and in legislative assemblies. These are the views that critics are using in their attempt to frame the boundaries of the debate over de-alerting today. So structured, this debate has yet to yield

the broad political consensus needed both to negotiate and to implement key de-alerting proposals, at least with respect to many of the countries that possess such weapons. It is always difficult even in the best of circumstances to explain a negative, especially in the realm of security policy. Yet it is probably fair to say that the way this debate has been structured explains as well as any other single factor the reluctance of certain of these countries to respond with greater alacrity to what most of us here today regard as a rational course of action.

There is a double irony in this debate. First, many of these claims I have surveyed have very legitimate rebuttals. The logic of nuclear deterrence which may have applied during the Cold War appears today to many responsible observers as an anachronism. After all, the circumstances of bipolar nuclear deterrence are quite different from contemporary security concerns. While the nuclear disarmament efforts remain stalled, we are also facing the drift toward an increasingly nuclear-armed multipolar world in which the old doctrine of deterrence appears especially inappropriate, even dangerous.

As for the criticisms about the difficulties of implementing de-alerting proposals, of course there are challenges ahead. But many of such problems are appropriate subjects for diplomatic negotiation, while others will simply take time to resolve, such as the difficult task of verifying the de-alerted status of weapons on submarines. And though nobody can possibly guarantee absolutely that countries will not compete to improve their capabilities to regenerate their de-alerted arsenals, diplomatic understandings can substantially reduce such risks to manageable levels.

Is it possible for one to claim that there will never ever be a threat of sabotage or theft of nuclear materials or even weapons themselves? Of course not, but here too there are several steps that countries can take to alleviate this threat, particularly with respect to the transport and storage of dismantled nuclear materials. Two nuclear-armed former adversaries are already collaborating today on measures to reduce such threats by improving physical security measures.

As for those critics who emphasize the costs of de-alerting, I can only note that such commentators are rather late in entering this debate. According to the Brookings Institution, one nuclear power alone spent almost \$5.5 trillion on building up and maintaining its nuclear weapons arsenal, which only begs the question, where were such fiscally conscious critics then? Or perhaps was there no transparency -- that essential tenet of good governance that is so readily prescribed for all?

The cost and technical efficiency issues also do not serve the critics well with respect to their advocacy of missile defense, which despite the expenditure of additional hundreds of billions of dollars worldwide has still not produced a system that can handle a strategic missile attack. I need not mention the effect of implementing such a policy recommendation upon the fate of

the ABM Treaty, the START process, and arguably the NPT itself.

The second irony is the extent to which the critics of de-alerting have apparently succeeded in preventing a consensus B at least at the level of state policy B of the issue of nuclear disarmament. In some official circles it is simply an issue that is beyond the boundary of acceptable public discourse, let alone implementation any time soon. I cannot explain how this debate came to be structured so narrowly, but can only marvel at the powers of persisting habits in government even when both evidence and reason indicate the need for new approaches.

The late US historian, Barbara Tuchman, once termed this general phenomenon "the march of folly" -- a governmental trait that she traced virtually back to the origin of the nation state itself. Her finding is especially troubling in an age of hydrogen bombs ready to launch on warning, first-use doctrines, persisting worries of "loose nukes," and ever-growing stockpiles of weapons-usable nuclear materials.

The Future of De-Alerting

This brings us to a difficult point in my discussion today, where do we go from here, and more specifically, what role is there if any for the United Nations to play?

It is clearly not for the UN to determine the national security policies of its member states. The specific decisions on de-alerting will therefore remain matters within the sovereign domain of the countries possessing such weapons. Nevertheless, the world community has a legitimate and compelling interest in all activities relating to the development, possession, testing, or proliferation of such weapons.

Accordingly, the UN does have important roles to play, particularly as a forum for deliberating all aspects of nuclear disarmament, including de-alerting. It is apparent from many of the statements made in the opening days of the 53rd Session of the General Assembly that member states are already recognizing the constructive contributions the UN can make in the months and years ahead on all transnational security issues -- that is, issues touching upon the security of all the peoples of the United Nations.

We will see that as more and more proposals are generated in the fields of non-proliferation, arms control, and disarmament, the greater will be the need for a global institutional forum both to debate such proposals and, ultimately, to coordinate their implementation. There is no institution that rivals the global scope, universality, tradition in handling multilateral issues, and legitimacy as the United Nations. Every country, after all, has an interest in efforts to reduce the risk of nuclear war and to prevent an accidental or unauthorized launch of nuclear weapons. And proposals for de-alerting have already been raised in the United Nations B for example in the Preparatory Committee meetings on the NPT and in ongoing deliberations over

the Eight-Nation Declaration.

The United Nations will also continue its longstanding efforts to realize the global nuclear disarmament objectives that are at the heart of the NPT and that derive from the purposes and principles of the Charter itself. I believe that de-alerting proposals are useful insofar as they work to permit further progress on nuclear disarmament. The goal, we must remember, is the elimination of all nuclear weapons, not their perpetuation forever as a special prerogative of certain countries. But protecting this goal will not be easy, even in the midst of the debate over de-alerting.

Avoiding Two Mirages of Disarmament

One of the most problematic de-alerting proposals concerns a scheme to make "virtual nuclear arsenals" a goal of policy. Under this proposal, existing stockpiles would simply be broken down in accordance with various procedures of deactivation, de-alerting, or temporary dismantlement, while each country engaging in such activities would preserve its ability to reassemble rapidly the parts for use at any time. Up to now our goal -- or so I had understood it described in existing treaties -- was to create a world in which no country possessed nuclear explosive devices. I think this is still a desirable goal but the question is, how can the very notion of a virtual nuclear arsenal comport with the disarmament obligations found in the NPT?

If henceforth only assembled nuclear weapons will be illegitimate to possess, shall all countries not have a legitimate right to obtain their own virtual nuclear arsenals? Or, instead, are proponents of this idea prepared to argue that the world should, once again, be divided up into an "Upstairs, Downstairs" arrangement, a world with one class of countries that may possess virtual nuclear arsenals and a second class of countries which may not? If the ultimate goal is to delegitimize possession of nuclear weapons, I am not at all convinced how it serves the collective interest to legitimize their possession in disassembled form by some countries.

A contrary view can be found in the Eight-Nation Declaration. This initiative -- which enjoys Sweden's active participation -- makes explicit reference to global nuclear disarmament as the goal and identifies de-alerting as one important step along the way to achieving that goal. This is precisely the way this issue should, in my opinion, be addressed.

There is another mirage, however, that merits some attention and that is the mirage of "managed proliferation." To many commentators today, nonproliferation and disarmament are anachronisms but if countries are going to seek bombs, so the argument goes, then it must surely be in the collective interest of some or all countries to assist this process along, or at least to ensure the construction of reliable weapons or secure second-strike capabilities. Though such arguments are themselves anachronisms -- insofar as they appeared decades ago -- they are reappearing at what appears to be an increasing frequency in recent years.

To the extent that de-alerting might someday come to reflect such an approach B for example by replacing disarmament with a new goal of merely perpetuating nuclear arsenals indefinitely in a safer condition, I believe such proposals may offer less than meets the eye. This is especially true with respect to their value in advancing the goals of global nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation. De-alerting must never become a slave to the fantasy of *pax atomica*.

The Purpose of De-Alerting

The great Athenian lawmaker, Solon, once reportedly said: "Look to the end, no matter what it is you are considering." That is good advice to advocates of all arms control and non-proliferation measures. It also inspires us to ask several specific questions about where are going with respect to de-alerting and, more broadly, nuclear disarmament.

Is the end of de-alerting to be found in making nuclear deterrence safe for the world? Is the end in altering the underlying conditions that inspire nation states to seek such weapons in the first place? Or is the end in eliminating the weapons that possess the capability of annihilating most of humanity? These are important questions that one would be well advised to consider in the course of developing all such proposals.

Other important questions about de-alerting relate less to ends than to the legitimate means of pursuing this goal. Is there any price that should not be paid for de-alerting? If the price for mobilizing a coalition of sufficient strength to implement significant de-alerting initiatives must be paid in the form of the deployment of strategic national missile defense systems by any of the parties to the ABM Treaty B does the end justify such means?

And what if the price demanded by opponents of de-alerting is the conduct of periodic nuclear tests to provide the necessary reassurance of the reliability of de-alerted stockpiles? My point is simply to encourage the architects of tomorrow's de-alerting initiatives to ensure that the ends and means contained in their recommendations serve to advance the goal of global nuclear disarmament.

I also hope that you will give some consideration to including in your deliberations some attention to the roles to be played by the United Nations in the realm of nuclear disarmament, and to the continuing validity and wisdom of the goal of nuclear disarmament itself. Only if the world community can keep its attention focused on some stable long-term objectives, will it stand any hope of serving the principles and purposes of the peoples of the United Nations.

In a recent address on 6 October commemorating the 50th anniversary of establishment of UN peacekeeping operations, the Secretary-General observed that "It was an attempt to confront and defeat the worst in man with the best in man; to counter violence with tolerance, might with moderation, and war with peace." I cannot think of a better spirit with which to carry on our deliberations today and in future gatherings on issues facing the peoples of the United

Nations.

Once again, I wish to thank my hosts for this opportunity to speak today and I wish you all good fortune on the work that remains ahead.