

Lunchtime Briefing

*Decreasing the Operational Readiness of Nuclear Weapons Systems
in the U.S.-Russia Context: Reframing the Issue*

Introductory Statement

by

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15 October 2009

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. It is a great honor for me to be with you today to address this important subject of decreasing the operational readiness of nuclear weapons.

I especially wish to thank Dr. W. Pal Sidhu of the EastWest Institute and Dr. Christian Schoenenberger of the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs for inviting me to speak on this issue, as well as for their joint efforts in organizing this event today.

My role in this briefing will be limited to the privilege of serving as its moderator, though I would like to say a few words at the outset on the importance I attach to this issue.

The dangers of accidental nuclear war have been with us for decades and have inspired many efforts to reduce the operational readiness of nuclear weapons. These dangers have even been the subject of motion pictures and novels, including *Dr. Strangelove* and *On the Beach*. An English Professor, Dr. Paul Brians of Washington State University, maintains a web site of nuclear-war fiction that has about 1,400 novels, short stories, and plays on this theme.¹ We are fortunate indeed—some say quite lucky—that these are works of fiction and not documentaries of actual tragic events.

Virtually everybody, of course, agrees that good luck is an unacceptable basis for maintaining international peace and security, especially when the subject pertains to the possible use of the world's deadliest weaponry. This recognition has inspired numerous initiatives, ranging from global nuclear disarmament, to partial measures that focus more on reducing the risk of use—including measures like de-alerting, de-targeting, and demating of nuclear weapons—measures that together aim at reducing the operational readiness of such weapons.

There is significant, and I believe growing, international interest in eliminating the possibility that the world's nuclear weapons could be deployed in just minutes—in short, to remove nuclear weapons from what is commonly called “hair-trigger” alert. Much of this interest comes from individuals and groups in civil society. But it is also high on the agenda in several parts of the multilateral UN disarmament machinery, where this goal is pursued by many governments.

In December of last year, the 63rd session of the UN General Assembly adopted Resolution 63/41, entitled “Decreasing the operational readiness of nuclear weapons systems,” addressing this very issue. However, many nuclear weapons in the United States and Russia reportedly remain on high alert, though there is some uncertainty exactly how many, and how many other countries might have such postures, given the very limited transparency on nuclear arsenals worldwide.

I also note that the item “Concrete agreed measures to further reduce the operational status of nuclear weapons systems” was specifically included in the 13 steps for nuclear

¹ <http://www.wsu.edu/~brians/nuclear/>.

disarmament in the Final Document of the 2000 NPT Review Conference.

Clearly the time has come to fulfil this goal. During the Cold War, both Russia and the United States considered a “launch on warning” capability to be a key aspect of the deterrence strategy. Yet it has now been eighteen years since the end of the Cold War. The world has changed and so should the strategies and doctrines of nuclear weapons. Let us put this concept to rest with other relics of the Cold War as we move forward toward a world free of nuclear weapons—a world that maintains and strengthens security without the threat or use of nuclear weapons, or even the risk of use of such weapons—a world, in short, no longer under the cloud of mutual assured destruction.

This is, I believe, the best frame of reference for addressing the subject of reducing the operational status of nuclear weapons. I do not view this as an end in itself, but as a key stepping stone to the larger goal of global nuclear disarmament—a goal once routinely dismissed as utopian and impractical, but that is finally getting the serious attention it deserves both here at the UN and among the states possessing such weapons.

This year has been one of the most notable for disarmament at the UN in many decades—and the year is not yet over. Some of the inspiration for this new momentum has come from enlightened statements by key leaders, especially Presidents Obama and Medvedev, as their countries continue their efforts to conclude a new treaty to reduce their nuclear arsenals. The Security Council’s historic summit on nuclear disarmament last September was another positive step forward.

Yet civil society has made its own important contributions to keeping nuclear disarmament as a high priority. Occasionally, we have also seen hybrid initiatives, involving the cooperation of groups in civil society with national governments. I view today’s event, organized jointly by The EastWest Institute and the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, as a good example of this type of work. It is quite clear that both types of efforts will be needed to strengthen the political will needed to reduce the operational readiness of these weapons, until the weapons themselves can be eliminated—which is the most reliable way to ensure against the use of such weapons.

The incisive report that brings us here—“De-alerting: Decreasing the Operational Readiness of Nuclear Weapons Systems in the U.S.-Russia Context”—deserves close attention, especially its conclusion, which approaches de-alerting in the context of further irreversible and deeper cuts in the US and Russian strategic nuclear arsenals.

Please allow me to thank the EastWest Institute and the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs once again for their efforts on this great cause. Genuine progress in disarmament is unthinkable without such dedicated efforts by governments and civil society worldwide. On behalf of the United Nations, I thank you for your commitment. Let us together move forward with the work of fulfilling the Charter’s great goal of saving succeeding generations from the scourge of war, by reducing and eliminating the means to wage such wars. Together, let us work to make this goal a reality.