

Removing the nuclear hair-trigger: A priority for the NATO–Russia Joint Council

Nicola Butler

Basic Notes, June 1997



British American Security
Information Council

Removing nuclear weapons from hair-trigger alert should be addressed by the new NATO-Russia Joint Council when it meets in the next few weeks, according to NATO sources. Following the NATO-Russia summit in Paris, May 27, NATO spokesperson Jamie Shea told reporters that the question of nuclear safety was one which NATO hopes to take up with Russia at the Joint Council.

Russian President Yeltsin's comments at the Paris summit, on de-alerting nuclear forces by removing warheads from missiles targeted at NATO countries, were largely downplayed by United States and Russian spokespeople.

However, according to a French government spokesperson, President Chirac told his Cabinet on May 28: "The unexpected and entirely positive promise made by the Russian president concerning Russia's nuclear warheads went beyond what was reported by the press and some commentators".

The French understood that Yeltsin's pledge would be fulfilled in three stages. Initially, the missiles' targeting mechanisms would be deprogrammed. Immediately afterwards, the warheads would be separated from their missiles. The final stage, at a time yet to be decided, would be the destruction of the warheads.

Currently the US and the UK each have bilateral agreements with Russia on detargeting nuclear weapons. President Clinton misleadingly states these detargeting agreements mean "for the first time since the dawn of the nuclear age, there are no Russian missiles pointed at America's children". However, the Russians could retarget their missiles on US and European cities in seconds. In the event of an accidental launch, missiles would immediately revert to their primary wartime targets, which could be Washington, London or Paris.

Despite the detargeting agreements, there has also been "no significant change" in the alert status of US intercontinental and submarine launched ballistic missiles since the end of the Cold War, according to US Secretary of Defense Cohen. Russia's response to continuing high levels of alert for US and NATO nuclear forces increases the danger of an accidental nuclear launch. In the early 1990s, Russia adopted NATO's policy of retaining the option of first use of its nuclear weapons. This policy was recently reiterated in Russia's new military doctrine.

In the 1980s NATO countries argued that the first use option was necessary in response to superior Soviet conventional forces. Now Russia mirrors that position, planning to compensate for conventional inferiority and crumbling armed forces with nuclear weapons. Russian strategists believe that they could be forced to initiate the use of tactical nuclear weapons during a regional crisis involving NATO or China.

Moreover, Russia is responding to the short flight times and high accuracy of US and British Trident D5 submarine launched ballistic missiles, by increasing its reliance on strategies such as "launch on warning". It plans to launch strategic missiles after an enemy attack is detected, but before the incoming enemy missiles arrive. The potential for accidents is obvious. A strategic alert of Russia's "launch on warning" forces was triggered in 1995 by the firing of a Norwegian scientific rocket. Recent reports indicate that deteriorating Russian command-control systems may have caused more incidents when missiles were switched to "combat mode".

The NATO-Russia Founding Act, agreed in Paris, includes "arms control and nuclear safety issues across the full spectrum" as an area for "consultation and cooperation" between NATO and Russia. President Clinton should take the initiative at the first Joint Council meeting to agree a package of measures between NATO and Russia to reduce the alert status of nuclear weapons. Only then can he ensure that his claim that Russian missiles are no longer pointed at American children is more than just meaningless rhetoric.