

# 100 SECONDS TO MIDNIGHT

## *NUCLEAR RISK REDUCTION IN THE LIGHT OF COVID-19*

Paper of for the Abolition 2000 Webinar on July 30, 2020:  
**100 Seconds to Midnight: What does it mean? What can we do?**

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### **CONTENTS:**

1. [Summary of Recommendations](#)
2. [International/intergovernmental and parliamentary initiatives](#)
3. [Nuclear Threats in the Context of the Coronavirus Pandemic](#)
4. [100 Seconds to Midnight: The Nuclear Risk](#)
5. [Russia/USA/NATO dynamic: postures and practices](#)
6. [Nuclear risk reduction measures](#)

## SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS:

- ✓ Nuclear armed states, individually and meeting (virtually) at the 75th anniversary of the UN, should reaffirm that '**A Nuclear War Cannot be Won and Must Never be Fought**'. Such language should also be adopted in relevant resolutions of the UNSC, UNGA First Committee and included in any NPT Review Conference Outcome document.
- ✓ New START should be extended.
- ✓ Risk reduction measures including No First Use, De-Alerting, improved or resumed Mil to mil communications, implementation of JDEC, (Joint Data Exchange Centre) avoidance of provocative military exercises and postures, avoidance of provocative language.
- ✓ Urgent consideration of further arms control measures between the US and Russia, and of ways to widen arms control to include other parties.(without holding US-Russian agreement, or extension of New START hostage to what other parties may or may not want to do.
- ✓ Negotiation of additional NWFZs and adoption of all NWFZ protocols by the nuclear-armed states to further restrict the deployment and potential use of nuclear weapons, reduce nuclear risks and serve as stepping stones to a nuclear-weapon-free world;
- ✓ Signature and ratification of the Ban Treaty (TPNW) and movement toward a Nuclear Weapons Convention banning any use of nuclear weapons and providing a phased program for elimination.
- ✓ Such prohibition and elimination under effective international control to be seen as a pressing short-term existential priority not a far-off 'feelgood sometime' goal.

## INTERNATIONAL/INTERGOVERNMENTAL AND PARLIAMENTARY INITIATIVES:

The below are specific international/intergovernmental and legislative initiatives for nuclear risk-reduction, that require support or implementation:

- UN resolution introduced by the de-alerting group [A/73/60: Decreasing the Operational Readiness of Nuclear Weapons Systems](#) – needs to be reintroduced with additional support;
- The [Stepping stones platform](#) initiated by [Sweden and joined by 15 other countries at ministerial level](#). All NPT states parties should give support to the initiative (see Sweden's working paper to the NPT, [Unlocking disarmament diplomacy through a "stepping stone" approach](#);
- Resolutions adopted by the [Inter-Parliamentary Union](#) and the [Parliamentary Assembly of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe](#) advancing no-first-use, nuclear risk reduction, and phasing out the role of nuclear weapons in security doctrines.
- Draft resolutions introduced into the US Congress on [No-first use](#), de-alerting, [diplomacy v military attack](#), and on [restricting presidential authority to launch a nuclear war](#). We need to build support for these in the US, and push for similar action by legislators in other nuclear-armed states;

Members of [Parliamentarians for Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament](#) (PNND) were instrumental in the introduction, promotion and adoption of these initiatives. They now need to be taken into national parliaments for follow-up action; Hopefully some of those of you present here may be able to advance that.

A detailed list of measures that would make an (accidental or otherwise) apocalypse less likely is to be found on the website of the [Abolition 2000 working group on nuclear risk reduction](#).

## NUCLEAR THREATS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

This document was once a revised and updated version of a memo initially written for distribution in the General Assembly at the end of 2019, when coronavirus was no more than a rumor of something nasty and potentially dangerous taking place in Wuhan.

Since then, the coronavirus has spread to literally every country in the world and has displaced just about every other form of apocalypse. The coronavirus has also taken much of the authors attention.

In this context it is well to remember that:

--The coronavirus has a mortality ratio of somewhere between 1% and 0.1% depending on exactly how many people have infections that are asymptomatic and unrecorded. Assuming every person in the world ultimately becomes infected, and assuming the higher death rate of 1%, then a death count of 70 million would result. The 1918 Spanish Flu had a body – count of appx 50 million. The Black Death of 1348 with a mortality ratio approaching 50%, took away as many as a third of Europe's population in the middle ages and recurred with gradually decreasing intensity over 800 years. (Even a few weeks ago there were mini- outbreaks of plague in Inner Mongolia and Kazakhstan), making coronavirus only one of a number of possible pandemics, and by no means the worst possible.

--**A limited or regional nuclear war** would have a prompt body count at least in the tens of millions and according to some estimates of up to 250 million,(A DoD estimate some years ago on an India-Pak war assuming city-busting, and consonant with more recent modeling using up to 100 warheads), with delayed effects of up to a billion deaths from famine worldwide, caused by a 'nuclear winter lite'.

--**Global thermonuclear war** could have a prompt body count **as high as up to a billion in less than 90 minutes**, (depending on targeting details and precisely how many warheads. This assumes 1000 cities of a million each are targeted, giving an immediate prompt body-count of a billion) - followed by a decade of starvation and temperatures lower than those of the last ice-age. It would be a global catastrophe that would end the world as we know it.

Prof. Louis Beres notes in *The Atom and the Virus* that:

*“Americans may too easily forget, in the midst of a biological plague, that assorted “ordinary” geopolitical threats have not thereby gone away. In this regard, multiple risks of nuclear war with several adversarial nations have actually been growing. Here, too, grievously fearful developments are largely attributable to an incompetent and indifferent American president.”*

*“Prima facie, the prognoses are plain. Going forward with Donald J. Trump, the United States could only anticipate the utterly worst forms of catastrophic convergence. Without hyperbole, should this president somehow remain in office, America’s plausible future could include variously intersecting and steadily escalating existential harms.”*

<https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2020/07/02/the-atom-and-the-virus-a-progressively-lethal-convergence-for-the-united-states/>

The coronavirus is certainly the most serious event we are likely to see in our lifetimes (unless indeed nuclear war DOES take place), but it is still not in quite the same league as global thermonuclear war. Indeed it is not

even the most serious pandemic that could take place. This does not for a moment diminish the gravity of the pandemic crisis that confronts us, or the utter folly of those who (still) think that the virus is some kind of hoax, or who think nothing particular need be done about it. The current coronavirus reality is bad enough. What the Bulletin and others here now contemplate is however much much worse. We hope that what we contemplate here remains theoretical. We must work to ensure it remains so.

--Both Russia and the US insist that in the depths of the pandemic, their nuclear forces remain alert and ready for nuclear war at any time, and at a moment's notice. The resources devoted to preparing for the apocalypse remain undiminished. Instruments of universal annihilation continue to receive orders of magnitude more resources than vaccines or ICUs. Surely this is an order of priorities that is utterly perverse.

Wilfred Wan has noted in a brief for the ELN (European Leadership Network) that:

*"...Maintaining deterrence postures has emerged as a key security challenge in the era of COVID-19. In recent weeks, officials in more than one nuclear-armed State have reassured their publics about the viability of their nuclear arsenals. A spokesperson for the UK Royal Navy noted "all required outputs are being maintained" at Faslane, home to Britain's deterrent, following reports of personnel self-isolating. French submarine crews may not even be informed of the COVID-19 situation, according to their Naval spokesperson. The US Air Force Chief of Staff claimed in a press briefing no change to their nuclear deterrence operations. Similarly, the head of US Strategic Command stressed the pandemic had "no impact to our ability to accomplish our (deterrence) mission."*

<https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/commentary/nuclear-risks-are-laid-bare-by-covid-19/>

In late May, well into the pandemic, the Trump administration's special envoy for arms control bragged before a Congressional committee that:

*"The President has made clear that we have a tried and true practice here," ... "We know how to win these races and we know how to spend the adversary into oblivion."*

There is, tragically, incomprehensibly, no sign here of the coronavirus edging out spending on nuclear weapons. Trump himself had said earlier:

*"Let it be an arms race. We will outmatch them at every pass and outlast them all."*

<https://artvoice.com/2020/06/15/let-them-eat-weapons-and-nuclear-bombs-trumps-bizarre-arms-race/>

In recent (1 July 2020) US Congressional developments, the Senate Armed Services Committee has suggested that the Pentagon's Nuclear Weapons Council be given much more direct control over US nuclear weapons budgets, making it unlikely that budgets that did **not** prioritize nuclear weapons modernization would even be formulated let alone adopted. This again, sadly, hardly suggests that money is likely to be moved from nuclear weapons into fighting coronavirus, but rather the contrary. In the light of the virus one would have to say these spending priorities are simply lunatic.

<https://www.defensenews.com/smr/nuclear-arsenal/2020/06/30/pentagon-to-increase-control-over-nuclear-weapons-funding-under-senate-proposal/>

It has been suggested by ICAN in a report entitled 'Enough is enough' that

*"total nuclear spending among the U.S., France and U.K. in a single year could cover all their respective shortfalls in "ICU beds, annual salaries for doctors and nurses, and ventilators ... and [they would] still have just enormous amounts of money left over."*

<https://truthout.org/articles/trump-boosts-nuclear-weapons-spending-fueling-a-new-arms-race/>

[https://www.icanw.org/report\\_73\\_billion\\_nuclear\\_weapons\\_spending\\_2020](https://www.icanw.org/report_73_billion_nuclear_weapons_spending_2020)

According to Pifer, writing in May 2020:

*“The Pentagon’s funding request for fiscal year 2021 includes \$4.4 billion for the new Columbia-class ballistic missile submarine that will replace Ohio-class submarines, which will begin to be retired at the end of the decade; \$1.2 billion for the life extension program for the Trident II submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM); \$1.5 billion for the Ground Based Strategic Deterrent, an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) to replace the Minuteman III ICBM; \$2.8 billion for the B-21 stealth bomber that will replace the B-1 and B-2 bombers; \$500 million for the Long-Range Standoff Missile that will arm B-52 and B-21 bombers; and \$7 billion for nuclear command, control and communications systems.”*

<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/05/18/how-covid-19-might-affect-us-nuclear-weapons-and-planning/>

--The US and China are indulging in an increasingly vituperative blame – game, in which the imperative of cooperation to eliminate the virus has no purchase at all, while mutual recrimination and polarization seems to be exacerbated rather than diminished by the need to do so. The greater the objective need to cooperation, the less cooperation is to be had, it seems.

If anything the likelihood of nuclear war during or after the COVID-19 pandemic seems to be increased rather than decreased. This must be astonishingly and incomprehensibly bad news.

**100 minutes to 'Midnight' remains the closest the clock has ever been.** However we parse the last minutes before midnight, the take – home message here is that **global nuclear destruction, pandemic or no pandemic, remains very much on the cards, and indeed is more likely to take place than it has ever been.** The Pandemic takes our mind off the awful possibility for a while, only to leave us where we started – the single most potent threat to all the technostucture we call or miscall 'civilization', and the single most potent, most immediate, threat to ourselves as a species remains what it has been since the '60's – nuclear war. Prior to the pandemic we were 'sleepwalking toward the apocalypse' in a manner reminiscent of the situation prior to WW-I. We are now stumbling toward it blindfolded and in a corona-induced fever.

Where we are now is just about the worst place to be with it, yet there are still – and always will be – practical things that can be done to diminish the likelihood of catastrophe, until the four minute warning appears as an SMS or a tweet on our smart phone – if they are operating at the time. Yet with the pandemic we are not even paying attention. Inasmuch as the pandemic takes our eyes off the ball on the possibility of global nuclear war, that risk increases. Inasmuch as it also increases polarization between eg, the US and Russia and China, it objectively increases that risk. Yet it doesn't have to be so. What both the pandemic AND nuclear disarmament and risk reduction demand from us is a little cooperation and above all plain old-fashioned commonsense.

**Whatever we think about the 100 seconds to midnight, the priority must be to eliminate the possibility of a catastrophe of which the COVID 19 threat is a mere shadow.** Practical options exist. They aren't even that hard to do. (much easier than devising a COVID19 vaccine). But they do require our sustained attention.

## 100 SECONDS TO MIDNIGHT: THE NUCLEAR RISK

The [hands of the Iconic 'Doomsday Clock'](#) now stand at an unprecedented [100 seconds to Midnight](#). The coronavirus may have taken our attention off those hands, but there has been no reason to move them back

since the pandemic began. As noted above, the pandemic may in fact make things worse.

Throughout 2018 and 2019, the Doomsday Clock hands had been at 2 minutes to Midnight, the equal-closest to midnight that they have ever been.

Only in 1953-54, immediately after the US and the USSR tested their first hydrogen bombs, (and with active US planning for pre-emptive nuclear strikes on the USSR) were the hands of the Doomsday Clock as close as even 2 minutes, which has always been regarded as 'closest ever'. Even in the eventful and perilous year of 1983, a year in which the world nearly ended not once but twice, (On September 26<sup>th</sup>, and over the ensuing November with the Able Archer exercises) – the Doomsday Clock hands were at 3 minutes to midnight. One can argue that with the benefit of hindsight they should have been at least at 2 mins. But this is hindsight.

**What the Bulletin, with its Nobel – heavy board of advisers is telling us, is that the risk of a (probably but not definitely accidental) nuclear apocalypse is greater now than at any other time including the depths of the cold war.**

The Bulletin itself is very much conscious of this, noting that:

*“To say the world is nearer to doomsday today than during the Cold War—when the United States and Soviet Union had tens of thousands more nuclear weapons than they now possess—is to make a profound assertion that demands serious explanation. After much deliberation, the members of the Science and Security Board have concluded that the complex technological threats the world faces are at least as dangerous today as they were last year and the year before, when we set the Clock at two minutes to midnight (as close as it had ever been, and the same setting that was announced in 1953, after the United States and the Soviet Union tested their first thermonuclear weapons).”*[emphasis mine]

Astonishingly, some commentators have attempted to ridicule and marginalize the clock. This reflects, I think, on the ignorance and prejudice of those who make the comment and not on the clock.

Contrary to what is implied by these critics, the clock hands are set after prolonged discussion amongst some of the world's best qualified if not THE best qualified people to form judgements about the likelihood of nuclear war and the severity of climate change. These judgements may not be absolutely perfect and some of them (eg, three minutes in 1983) might have been tweaked with hindsight, but they are made soberly and carefully by people who spend their lives thinking about these issues. No better judgement, no more reliable evaluation of the global nuclear security situation, exists. The clock remains a reliable indicator of the reality of global peril that policymakers should not ignore.

In this case the clock hands were unveiled by someone who will be very well known to anyone who has spent much time in the UN, namely former UN Secy-General Ban Ki Moon. Extended commentary was given by another figure well known in the UN, namely Mary Robinson, former President of Ireland and undersecretary-general for human rights. Detailed commentary by members of a board of experts who are well-known names in nuclear policy analysis and global risk analysis more broadly.

Anyone who watches nuclear weapons matters at all carefully will know what impelled the wise heads who advise on the position of the hands of the Doomsday Clock to place them, soberly and reluctantly, where they have – at the most alarming setting ever.

Obvious factors – observable whether or not you are on the doomsday clocks 'inner circle' – are:

- The once more deteriorating situation with the DPRK
- The continued instability and confrontation between India and Pakistan
- The jettisoning of the INF by the US, and the melting away of the entire existing arms control and risk reduction framework
- The US hostility to New START and to any extension of the New START treaty (a matter requiring merely a signature, and no negotiation whatsoever)
- Russia's deployment of exotic new weapon systems (that may or may not actually work), but which demonstrate a continued strong commitment to an upgraded nuclear arsenal.
- Occasional alarming quasi-'theological' statements to the effect that if buttons get pushed and billions are incinerated then Orthodox Russians will 'all go to heaven' while Americans 'will just kark it', a mirror-imaging of language often coming from the US Christian right in the 1980s, in which 'the righteous will be raptured to heaven'. [[Putin and the Apocalypse](#), Jan 24 2019]

## RUSSIA/USA/NATO DYNAMIC: POSTURES AND PRACTICES

During the October 2018 Valdai Discussion Club, Putin's rhetoric became even more dramatic. "Russia would be the victim," and "the aggressor should know that revenge is inevitable." While nuclear war would be a "world catastrophe," he said, at least Russians would "go to heaven," as "martyrs," whereas, lacking any "time to repent," the aggressors "would just croak." While all of this is tied up with ultranationalist Russian orthodoxy, the mirror-imaging with conservative evangelical US Christian 'theologising' is striking. Proclaiming that 'the righteous will be raptured to heaven' is no longer a US monopoly.

**When apocalyptic theology is translated into actual real world nuclear posture it is likely to become self-fulfilling.** Talking about the apocalypse, especially loose talk or talk that seems to accept or welcome it, in the 'right' quarters, may bring that apocalypse closer.

--A final factor in all of this has been the increasing propensity of NATO and Russia to hold monster military exercises (sometimes at the same time, mirror-imaged across Baltic borders), with nuclear-capable forces. The next batch of such exercises were scheduled for May 2020. The Russians remarked that these coming exercises 'cannot go without a response'. These exercises were scaled down due to the Coronavirus pandemic, but not altogether cancelled as they should have been.

During a set of such exercises some years ago, in which US/NATO and Russian forces, both nuclear-capable, mirror-imaged each other's force postures across Baltic state borders, a US general was asked 'what happens if something goes wrong'. 'I don't even want to think about that' he said. Perry, Nunn and Schultz noted in the WSJ that:

*"...Since the crises broke out in Ukraine and Syria in the past few years, U.S. and Russian forces have again been operating in proximity, increasing the risk that an act of aggression, followed by an accident or miscalculation, will lead to catastrophe."*

The shifting of US – owned 'tactical' nuclear weapons, currently stationed in Germany, to Poland, actively discussed by the Trump administration – nominated ambassador to Poland, would lower the trip-point for nuclear war.

According to Russian foreign minister Lavrov:

*"This would be a direct violation of the Founding Act on Mutual Relations between Russia and NATO, in which NATO undertook not to place nuclear weapons in the territory of new members of the North Atlantic Alliance, either at that moment or in the future...I doubt that these mechanisms will be implemented in practical terms."*

While according to Foreign Ministry spokes Maria Zakharova:

*"We hope that Washington and Warsaw recognise the dangerous nature of such statements, which exacerbate an already difficult period of relations between Russia and NATO, and threaten the very basis of European security, weakened as a result of unilateral steps by the United States, first and foremost through their exit from the INF Treaty."*

<https://sputniknews.com/world/202005191079353167-redeployment-of-us-nukes-from-germany-to-poland-would-complicate-russia-nato-ties-moscow-warns/>

My own/PND's letter to the Polish government urging that B61 Tactical nukes NOT be permitted in Poland is at: <http://www.pndnsw.org.au/component/content/article/438-us-b-61-tactical-nuclear-weapons-in-poland-a-really-really-bad-idea.html>

Once again, one is breathless at the sheer irrationality of even allowing such DE-stabilizing steps to be discussed.

The proclivity of large arsenals and attendant operational doctrines to produce escalation in a European/East European context with Poland and/or the Baltic states as tripwire was vividly recounted by the commander of U.S. Strategic Command in July 2018. Speaking to a sizable audience, General John Hyten described a "big exercise" that his command conducted that February.

According to Hyten:

*"I just want you to ask in your own head, how do you think it ends? It ends the same way every time. It does. It ends bad. . . . Meaning it ends with global nuclear war,"*

<https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/02/11/toward-accountable-nuclear-deterrents-how-much-is-too-much-pub-80987>

NATO armed forces conducted a number of exercises with potentially nuclear-capable forces in 2019. These included STRATCOM's 'Global Lightning' exercise in March, which was in turn part of a mind-numbing series of exercises: USEUCOM's Exercise Austere Challenge, US Cyber Command's Exercise Cyber Lightning, North American Aerospace Defense Command and US Northern Command's Exercise Vigilant Shield, US Transportation Command's Exercise Turbo Challenge, the Joint Chiefs of Staff Exercise Positive Response, and the United Kingdom's Exercise Joint Venture (US Strategic Command 2019a).

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00963402.2019.1701286>

In September 2019, US B2 bombers operated for the first time above the arctic circle, and landed in Iceland.

In October 2019, a series of STRATCOM exercises included B52 bomber operations as near as 300km from Russia's Kola Peninsula naval base, and an exercise in which Polish F-16s escorted B52s in what looked like a simulated bombing of Kaliningrad. In other exercises round the same time, long range bombers took off from

the US in simulated long range strikes against Russia. ICBM and SSBN forces were also said to have been exercised in 'new and challenging ways', and operations that have 'not been done since the Cold War ended'. [Op Cit]

Still more worrying is an exercise that defense secretary Esper was involved in just days before writing this (24 Feb 2020, updated July 2020).

*"The scenario included a European contingency where you're conducting a war with Russia and Russia decides to use a low-yield, limited nuclear weapon against a site on NATO territory," "During the course of the exercise, we simulated responding with a nuclear weapon," "They played out that game and the secretary got a good understanding for how that went,"*

[<https://www.defenseone.com/politics/2020/02/esper-plays-nuclear-war-russia-nukes-europe-us-fires-back/163268/>]

A senior defense official said, speaking on the condition of anonymity to discuss classified military drills. Since the eruption of the COVID pandemic, large – scale ground exercises have been halted. Nonetheless, active planning for the apocalypse (IE for a NATO-Russia clash that will turn nuclear) continues. Desktop exercises and simulations of course continue unabated by COVID-19.

According to Peter Kuznick of American University's Nuclear studies Institute:

*"Over the years, they simulated this kind of a limited nuclear war. What usually happens is that it escalates out of control. There is almost no scenario in which a limited nuclear war ends after each side shoots off one nuclear weapon. A much more likely scenario is that it continues to escalate and then we are all finished."*

Russian senator Pushkov commented on Twitter (translation is surely bad):

*"What to believe: the promises of the United States to place nuclear missiles in Europe or simulate a nuclear strike on Russia during the exercise, U.S. Department of defense, which suggests the presence of such missiles on the continent? You should not believe the assurances and the military plans of the Pentagon."*

In Senate armed services committee testimony in the week of Feb 25<sup>th</sup>, 2020, USAF General Tod Wolters, Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, was asked his views on No First Use. Wolters reply was picked up by the Russians, who reacted with alarm.

*"What are your views, Sir," Senator Fischer asked, "of adopting a so-called no-first-use policy. Do you believe that that would strengthen deterrence?"*

General Wolters' response was straight to the point. ***"Senator, I'm a fan of flexible first use policy."***

Journalist Denis Bedoya noted that:

*"Under any circumstance, the public embrace of a "flexible first strike" policy regarding nuclear weapons employment by the Supreme Allied Commander in Europe should generate widespread attention. When seen in the context of the recent deployment by the US of a low-yield nuclear warhead on submarine-launched ballistic missiles carried onboard a Trident submarine, however, Wolters' statement is downright explosive. Add to the mix the fact the US recently carried out a war-game where the US Secretary of Defense practiced the procedures for launching this very same "low yield" weapon against a Russian*

*target during simulated combat between Russia and NATO in Europe, and the reaction should be off the charts. And yet there has been deafening silence from both the European and US press on this topic.”*

<https://infosurhoy.com/top-stories/the-threat-of-a-nuclear-war-between-the-us-and-russia-is-now-at-its-greatest-since-1983/>

Indeed so!

Walters statement WAS picked up by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, who said:

*“We note with concern that Washington’s new doctrinal guidelines considerably lower the threshold of nuclear weapons use.”* Lavrov added that this doctrine had to be viewed in the light “...of the persistent deployment of US nuclear weapons on the territory of some NATO allies and the continued practice of the so-called joint nuclear missions.” [Op Cit]

Lavrov suggested – as we do – that the US and Russia work together to reaffirm the Reagan-Gorbachev declaration that **'A Nuclear War Cannot be Won and must never be fought'**. [Op Cit] Lavrov repeated this suggestion more recently, (July 10), saying it would be raised in the Security Council. Lavrov noted that:

*“We are particularly concerned about the Americans’ refusal to reaffirm the fundamental principle that there can be no winners in a nuclear war, and, consequently, it must never be unleashed,” he said. “Of course, we will promote this subject— the inadmissibility of a nuclear war, the impossibility to win it — in the context of the upcoming summit of the five [permanent Security Council members — as well.”* [TASS]

<https://tass.com/politics/1176931>

Russia released its nuclear deterrence policy – or at least some of it – earlier in July, entitled “Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence,”. Two additional scenarios contained in the newly – released 2020 policy include “arrival [of] reliable data on a launch of ballistic missiles attacking the territory of the Russian Federation and/or its allies” or an “attack by [an] adversary against critical governmental or military sites of the Russian Federation, disruption of which would undermine nuclear forces response actions.” The goal of Russian deterrence is to “to prevent aggression against the Russian Federation and/or its allies.” <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2020-07/news/russia-releases-nuclear-deterrence-policy>

One can surely at least understand Russia being jumpy, and the frustration Lavrov expresses in the UNSG in July at the US failure to reaffirm the Reagan-Gorbachev declaration. One can understand its challenging US and NATO forces especially when close to its own borders or to its own strategic forces. However as we've seen, Russia has done more than its share of dangerous chest- thumping. The potential for miscalculation and escalation is surely terrifying. One can hardly blame the Bulletin for thinking that the end – or at least the RISK of the end – is closer than we'd like it to be and as close or closer than we ever want it to be. Once more, the virus has done nothing to diminish the force of these considerations and much to sharpen them.

The Bulletin noted, in its statement on 100 seconds to Midnight, that:

*“In the nuclear realm, national leaders have ended or undermined several major arms control treaties and negotiations during the last year, creating an environment conducive to a renewed nuclear arms race, to the proliferation of nuclear weapons, and to lowered barriers to nuclear war. Political conflicts regarding nuclear programs in Iran and North Korea remain unresolved and are, if anything, worsening. US-Russia cooperation on arms control and disarmament is all but nonexistent.”*

*"...The world is sleepwalking its way through a newly unstable nuclear landscape. The arms control boundaries that have helped prevent nuclear catastrophe for the last half century are being steadily dismantled."*

*"...The demise of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty became official in 2019, and, as predicted, the United States and Russia have begun a new competition to develop and deploy weapons the treaty had long banned. Meanwhile, the United States continues to suggest that it will not extend New START, the agreement that limits US and Russian deployed strategic nuclear weapons and delivery systems, and that it may withdraw from the Open Skies Treaty, which provides aerial overflights to build confidence and transparency around the world. Russia, meanwhile, continues to support an extension of New START."*

Since these statements from BAS, the US has effectively walked out of the Open skies Treaty and the demise of New START without extension seems all but certain. The US continues to show no interest in extension, and to use China's nuclear arsenal (less than a tenth of US and Russian arsenals) as an argument not to act to extend NEW START even by 5 years.

Schultz and Perry had already remarked back in April 2019, that:

*"The U.S., its allies and Russia are caught in a dangerous policy paralysis that could lead—most likely by mistake or miscalculation—to a military confrontation and potentially the use of nuclear weapons for the first time in nearly 74 years. A bold policy shift is needed to support a strategic re-engagement with Russia and walk back from this perilous precipice. Otherwise, our nations may soon be entrenched in a nuclear standoff more precarious, disorienting and economically costly than the Cold War."*

Retired NATO military chief Stavridis had noted in 2019 that:

*"We are in danger of stumbling backward into a Cold War that is to no one's advantage," he said in an email exchange. "Without steady, political-level engagement between the defense establishments, the risk of a true new Cold War rises steadily."*

The bottom – line in all of this however, is an increasing carelessness about nuclear weapons, and an increasing willingness to at least contemplate their use – a willingness that finds material expression in the deployment of the latest 'mini' 'tactical' nuclear weapon , the W76-2 – on the USS Tennessee. The deployment of any kind of 'tactical' nuke (of any size) on an SLBM makes no sense whatsoever, and serves to blur the line between 'war-fighting' (which still makes some kind of warped sense), and a spasm of city-destruction that as we have seen could involve prompt casualties as high as a billion.

## NUCLEAR RISK-REDUCTION MEASURES

The recognition that the hands are as close as they now are – the recognition that the risk of an (accidental or otherwise) apocalypse is **AS GREAT AS IT HAS EVER BEEN, EVER**, – surely demands attention and action from the Governments of the world, whether assembled as UNGA (esp First Ct-tee) or as the 2020 NPT Review Conference, or the UNSC. This obviously applies in spades to the nuclear weapons states and especially to the US and Russia, with over 90% of the world's nuclear warheads.

**This placement of the clock hands says business as usual is not an option.**

Above all it shows the critical importance of the elimination of nuclear weapons.

However a large number of less-than-revolutionary, commonsense, even 'boring', immediate-term actions can 'take the apocalypse off the agenda', while paving the way to global zero. These measures are hardly revolutionary, yet they may make all the difference to prospects for human survival. (These are also set out at the beginning of this document)

I shall focus on those that make an immediate-term reduction in the likelihood of an apocalypse. Most if not all of them will be familiar to NPT and UNGA delegates, if less familiar to global publics.

**(a)**The General Assembly (If it sits in the foreseeable future) and the 2020 NPT Rev-con (should it ever take place) could include (for example in a chairpersons summary), language that:

--Recognizes the unprecedented risk that the clock hands symbolize.

--Reaffirms the Reagan-Gorbachev declaration of 1987-88, that '**A Nuclear War Cannot be Won and must never be Fought**' - In fact, the GA and the NPT Revconf are not the only UN venues that could do this, and the unavailability of the NPT revconf due to the virus, as well as the likely unavailability of the GA First Committee in October doubtless played into Lavrov's decision to raise the matter at the UNSC this month.(July 2020)

**(b)** NEW START should be renewed and extended. Putin has already many times urged the US to do just that. All that is required is the stroke of a Trumpian pen. The use of China as an excuse is incomprehensible. Yet, astonishingly, incomprehensibly, there seems to be no interest in the Trump administration in extending New START.

(c) A series of risk reduction measures should be implemented. These include:

--No First Use (NFU)

--Lowering of operational readiness of nuclear weapons systems/increased presidential decision-making time.(De-alerting, close to the hearts of the late Bruce Blair, Col Valery Yarynich and of course myself, and promoted in the GA by the De-alerting Group whose persistent efforts and reiterated de-alerting resolutions I gratefully acknowledge)

--Improved or restored mil-to-mil communication

--Implementation of the 1998 (and multiple times reaffirmed) US-Russian agreement to establish a joint data exchange centre (JDEC).

--Avoidance of massive military exercises of a potentially provocative nature especially with nuclear-capable forces and especially where these may be 'mirrored' on the other side of the border. The exercises planned for May in Poland should have been cancelled completely, though they were downsized considerably.

--Avoidance of language or statements that might cause opposite numbers to assume that the apocalypse is being seriously contemplated and/or prepared for. Statements that in the event of the unthinkable the 'righteous' (Russian orthodox or US protestant) will be 'raptured to heaven', if made by senior policymakers,

are decidedly unhelpful, indicating a willingness to countenance universal destruction – omnicide. So are more 'secular' statements or 'warnings' that 'we have powerful nuclear forces', or that this or that action will be met with a 'befitting response'. (India and Pakistan)

This kind of language serves merely to up the ante. De-escalation starts first of all with talk, and proceeds to weapons posture. (Whatever happened to 'thou shalt not kill'?)

This is not an exhaustive list, and these measures do **not** substitute for the ultimate nuclear safety measure, namely abolition. However some of them may make the difference between civilization abruptly ending, or **not** ending in the next couple of decades.(or the immediate – term).

The COVID-19 crisis has if anything, sharpened rather than blunted, the considerations that led the Bulletin to set its hands at an unprecedented 100 seconds to figurative 'midnight'.

Wilfred Wan notes that the stresses of the pandemic may well introduce new risks or intensify existing ones:

*“...There should be concern that shifting resources from tasks seen as inessential now could have safety implications down the line. Technical malfunction and human fallibility have featured across the known history of nuclear weapons programs, resulting in false alarms, accidents, and near misses. The US program, about which there exists the most declassified information, experienced a number of ‘broken arrow’ incidents during the Cold War such as missile explosions, aircraft collisions, and even the inadvertent release of nuclear weapons. The longer pandemic-containing measures are in force, the more the militaries of nuclear-armed States will face tough operational choices—choices that bear on nuclear risk.”*

<https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/commentary/nuclear-risks-are-laid-bare-by-covid-19/>

In an often incomprehensible essay (also quoted from previously) whose opaque language I otherwise do not much admire, Prof. Rene Beres notes that:

*“...In the final analysis, as Nietzsche himself acknowledges, chaos is an intra-personal condition before it can ever become an international one. This means that the core problem of chaos must be “solved” at the behavioral level before it can be solved in any larger arenas of nuclear strategy, international relations or international law. On this irremediably central understanding, one now made substantially more urgent by global pandemic, it would be worthwhile for engaged strategists to heed and assess the thoughtful words of Trappist monk and 20th-century thinker Thomas Merton, not because they could have any immediate “practical” value, but because they can serve as a long-term reminder of what is ultimately being asked of us all:*

*'When there is a deep, simple, all-embracing love of man, of the created world of living and inanimate things, then there will be respect for life, for freedom, for truth, for justice, and there will be humble love of God. But where there is no love of man, no love of life, then make all the laws you want, all the edicts and treaties, issue all the anathemas, set up all the safeguards and inspections, fill the air with spying satellites, and hang cameras on the moon. As long as you see your fellow man as a being essentially to be feared, mistrusted, hated and destroyed, there cannot be peace on earth.'*”

<https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2020/07/02/the-atom-and-the-virus-a-progressively-lethal-convergence-for-the-united-states/>

What we call 'civilization' is in danger. In its passing, it will take much of the biosphere with it. **The danger is great and immediate and demands action from every UN member state.**

As some of you are delegates to the upcoming/postponed/maybe cancelled/maybe happening 2020 NPT Review Conference and to the General Assembly the responsibility is yours.

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