

Nuclear risk reduction, transparency and disarmament negotiations

Backgrounder for the 25th Annual Session of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly

The Ukraine conflict and the deteriorating relationships between Russia & NATO/European Union have put a stop to the nuclear détente that developed at the end of the Cold War. This has also increased the level of **nuclear brinkmanship** in the European theatre, stimulated proposals for forward deployment of nuclear weapons, and elevated the risks of nuclear weapons use by accident or miscalculation.

There are 15,000 nuclear weapons remaining in the arsenals of the nuclear-armed States, the majority of them possessed by US and Russia. Nearly 1600 of these are primed and ready to be fired within minutes under launch-on-warning policies. In addition, both Russia and NATO retain the option of using nuclear weapons first in a conflict – increasing the tensions between these two military power blocs.

There have already been **at least 15 times** when a nuclear exchange nearly occurred through conflict escalation, miscommunications, and/or faulty information in the nuclear command and control systems.

Recent research indicates that there is an additional risk of cyberattack by a terrorist organisation or other third party on **nuclear command and control systems**, which could trigger an inadvertent nuclear exchange.

The Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, adopted by the USA and USSR in 1987, was a very important step in reducing nuclear dangers in Europe by eliminating a whole class of nuclear weapons that could reach their targets in a very short time and could have been used in war-fighting. Confidence in the INF Treaty has eroded recently with allegations that Russia is in violation by flight testing missiles that fall within the ranges prohibited by the Treaty.

On the other hand, Russia has continued to express opposition to US tactical nuclear weapons forward-deployed in NATO territories. Such deployment is not prohibited by the INF Treaty, but poses a threat from nuclear weapons within close range to Russia. There is a **lack of transparency and parliamentary oversight** of US nuclear weapons deployed in Europe. There is also a lack of transparency over deployment of Russian tactical weapons, including the possibility of their deployment in Kaliningrad.

The US and Russia agreed at the 2010 Review Conference of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) to accelerate nuclear disarmament steps, including those related to tactical nuclear weapons. However, the increased tensions

between Russia and the West have prevented progress on this, and even led to statements from both sides indicating consideration of possible deployment of nuclear weapons in additional territories in Europe.

This, along with differences over the proposal for a UN Conference to establish a Middle East Zone free from Nuclear Weapons and other Weapons of Mass Destruction, led to a **collapse of the NPT Review Conference** in May 2015.

In the meantime, there has been increased concern over the risks and consequences of the potential use of nuclear weapons. The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists in January 2016 moved the *Doomsday Clock* to **3 minutes to Midnight** – the closest it has been since the Cuban Missile Crisis.

The OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, in its Helsinki Declaration in 2015, supported a proposal for the United Nations to establish an Open Ended Working Group (OEWG) to consider multilateral nuclear disarmament options, and also to recommend measures to reduce nuclear risks and increase transparency.

The UN General Assembly responded by establishing such an OEWG. It has been deliberating in Geneva, open to the participation of all governments, as well as parliamentarians and civil society. Proposals to the OEWG which are gaining a lot of support include: de-alerting of all nuclear weapons systems, reinforcing non-nuclear approaches to addressing security issues, re-affirming the 72-year practice of the non-use of nuclear weapons, and **commencing multilateral negotiations in 2017** on legal measures to prohibit and eliminate nuclear weapons globally.

The UN General Assembly has also decided to hold a High Level Conference on Nuclear Disarmament in 2018 (most likely to be held in September). There is considerable support at the OEWG in Geneva for this conference to become a Summit with participation of governments at the highest level, and for the conference to pursue the adoption of measures discussed and negotiated in the OEWG. Such a Summit could build on the success of the Nuclear Security Summits which have fostered international cooperation to prevent nuclear proliferation and terrorist access to nuclear materials.

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