



# General Assembly

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## Open-ended Working Group taking forward multilateral nuclear disarmament negotiations<sup>1</sup>

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Item 5 of the agenda

**Taking forward multilateral nuclear disarmament negotiations**

### De-alerting

**Submitted by Chile, Malaysia, Nigeria, New Zealand, Sweden and  
Switzerland (the De-alerting Group)**

#### I. Background

1. Although the cold war ended more than two decades ago, nearly half of the Russian Federation and the United States of America strategic nuclear forces still remain on high alert. Nearly 1,800 warheads are ready for use within a matter of minutes.
2. Furthermore, some nuclear possessor States that have previously maintained their nuclear arsenals at a low level of readiness are now developing new types of nuclear weapons that may be set at higher alert levels.
3. Such postures are not only unnecessary, they are dangerous: high alert levels can lead to rushed decision-making. In relying on complicated early warning systems, these postures also increase the risk that an attack will be launched based on faulty information. Far from deterring nuclear war, these postures may precipitate it.
4. There are numerous documented incidents in which nuclear weapons were almost launched due to human or systems error, accident or misjudgment. These demonstrate that the inadvertent launch of nuclear weapons is not impossible and is, in fact, more likely than previously believed.
5. De-alerting, or the removal of nuclear weapons from high alert status, is an example of a “practical” or “pragmatic” nuclear disarmament step, agreed by the States Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, and was included in the “13 practical steps” contained in the final document of the 2000 Review Conference. It also figures prominently in action 5 of the 2010 Review Conference action plan. De-alerting has also been added to the agenda of the United Nations General Assembly through resolutions put forward by the “De-Alerting Group” on decreasing the operational readiness of nuclear

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<sup>1</sup> Established pursuant to resolution 70/33 of the General Assembly of the United Nations.



weapons systems, first introduced in 2007 (62/36; see also resolutions 63/41, 65/71, 67/46 and 69/42). In these resolutions the United Nations General Assembly calls for further practical steps to ensure that all nuclear weapons are removed from high alert status. The resolution has received increasing support.

6. This support reflects the recognition by the international community that a high state of launch-readiness of nuclear weapons represents a common danger to humanity. Were a nuclear exchange to occur using even a small percentage of the warheads currently on high alert, hundreds of millions of people could be injured or killed. The international community has repeatedly and overwhelmingly called upon the nuclear-weapon States to abandon such cold war postures.

## **II. Implications of high alert levels**

### **A. Risk dimension**

7. High alert levels significantly multiply the risks posed by nuclear weapons. For example:

- They increase the probability of an inadvertent launch owing to technical failure or operator error.
- They could also increase the risk of the use of nuclear weapons by unauthorized actors, such as rogue military units or terrorists, who may gain control of highly automated nuclear military command infrastructure using cyber-attacks.
- There are numerous instances of failures and false reports by early warning systems. Reliance on these systems for evidence of an incoming attack vastly increases the risk of an intentional, but erroneous launch.
- Maintaining nuclear forces on high alert, coupled with a doctrine that assumes an enemy's first strike will be catastrophic, decreases the time leaders believe they have available in a crisis to make a decision and could encourage a "use it or lose it" mindset, increasing the likelihood that nuclear weapons will be deployed.

8. High alert levels are based on a posture requiring the maintenance of "prompt launch" capability. This requires that a retaliatory nuclear strike be able to be launched upon receipt of warning of an impending nuclear attack. In theory, this would enable a massive, retaliatory nuclear strike to be launched while incoming missiles are still in flight (that is, before a detonation has been confirmed). Proponents of this posture argue that high alert levels guarantee a deterrent retaliatory capability.

9. Such an approach implicitly accepts that a decision maker would have only a few minutes to assess the plausibility, reliability and implications of a warning before deciding whether to authorise the use of nuclear weapons. Any decision would depend heavily on automated warning systems that are not infallible and that may be degraded by age or cyber-attack. In practice, the approach may lead to rushed decision-making, compromised by over-reliance on false data or inadequate consideration of the consequences of using nuclear weapons.

10. Increased international awareness of the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons, and the threat that they pose to the survival of humanity, has only served to highlight the unacceptability of these risks.

### **B. Disarmament and Non-proliferation dimension**

11. The maintenance of high alert levels negatively affects the process of nuclear disarmament. Specifically, high alert levels:

- Reinforce the perceived military value of nuclear weapons and imply a readiness to use nuclear weapons as a tool of war;
- Perpetuate outdated, cold war-era nuclear doctrines, and make deeper cuts in existing arsenals more difficult to achieve;
- Fuel nuclear force modernizations and vertical proliferation; and
- Contribute to a perception that nuclear weapons are necessary for security, thereby undermining broader disarmament and non-proliferation efforts.

### **C. Deterrence dimension**

12. Although our rejection of the doctrine of nuclear deterrence is total, it is worth noting that proponents of high alert levels claim that they are necessary to maintain the equilibrium of nuclear deterrence. Those claims have, however, been refuted by numerous experts, including former senior military officials, who have made the case that maintaining a retaliatory capability is possible with an arsenal on lower alert. In other words, if all United States of America and Russian Federation nuclear forces were de-alerted and one side suddenly attacked, the aggressor could not be confident in carrying out a “disarming first strike” because sufficient highly capable forces would survive the initial attack to launch a devastating retaliation. It is worth noting, in this context, that guidance issued by the United States Administration in June 2013 conceded that “the potential for a surprise, disarming nuclear attack is exceedingly remote”.

13. Experts have also dismissed claims that removing weapons from high alert is destabilizing noting that this argument overstates the risks of de-alerting, downplays its benefits and ignores the fact that current alert postures already include plans to increase operational readiness in a crisis. A de-alerted nuclear posture that still provides a sufficient retaliatory capability would give national leaders time to weigh their decisions carefully, rather than force them to choose within a matter of minutes from a menu of predesignated responses with catastrophic consequences.

## **III. De-alerting and the Open Ended Working Group taking Forward Multilateral Disarmament Negotiations**

14. Lowering alert levels would be a concrete measure that contributes to both disarmament and non-proliferation by helping to make nuclear weapons less desirable as security tools.

15. In recognizing the link between high alert levels and the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons, the De-alerting Group therefore proposes that the Open Ended Working Group should agree that the following be included in its report:

- Acknowledge that agreed concrete measures to reduce the operational status of nuclear weapons systems would increase human and international security and represent an interim step towards nuclear disarmament as well as an effective measure to mitigate some of the risks associated with nuclear weapons.
- Recommend that States possessing nuclear weapons share information on their alert status and plans for de-alerting within the context of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons review process or other multilateral body.
- Recommend that the United States of America and the Russian Federation conclude an agreement to eliminate launch-on-warning from their operational settings and carry out a phased stand down of high-alert strategic forces.

- Recommend that States possessing nuclear weapons, while moving towards a world free of nuclear weapons, develop and implement nuclear weapons policies that reduce and eliminate any dependence on early launch or launch on warning postures and refrain from increasing the alert levels of their nuclear forces.
  - Further recommend that all States possessing nuclear weapons begin developing a long-term formal agreement to lower the alert level of nuclear weapons, with all agreed steps to be measurable and carried out within an agreed timeframe.
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