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Still on Catastrophe's Edge

by Robert McNamara and Helen Caldicott

As we continue to grapple with the United States' vulnerability to terrorist attack, we fail to recognize the most serious danger, one that is overlooked by politicians and emergency management agencies alike. Thousands of Russian nuclear warheads are targeted on the U.S.

How can this be, after the end of the Cold War nearly 15 years ago? Unfortunately, the targeting strategy of Russia and the United States has changed little, despite a profound change in relations between these two nations.

Most people believe that the threat of nuclear attack — whether by accident, human fallibility or malfeasance — has disappeared. Yet a January 2002 document from the U.S. Foreign Military Studies Office, titled "Prototypes for Targeting America, a Soviet Military Assessment," states that New York City, for example, is the single most important target in the Atlantic region after major military installations.

A U.S. Office of Technology Assessment report, commissioned in the 1980s, is still relevant. It estimated that Soviet nuclear war plans had two one-megaton bombs aimed at each of three airports that serve New York, one aimed at each of the major bridges, two at Wall Street and two at each of four oil refineries. The major rail centers and power stations were also targeted, along with the port facilities.

It's also instructive that a recent Federal Emergency Management Agency report on nuclear-attack preparedness contains a map that depicts New York City obliterated by nuclear blasts and the resulting firestorms and fallout. Millions of people would die instantly. Survivors would perish shortly thereafter from burns and exposure to radiation.

And New York would not be the only devastated city. According to a report on nuclear war planning by the National Resources Defense Council, Russia aims most of its 8,200 nuclear warheads at the U.S., and the U.S. maintains 7,000 offensive strategic warheads in its arsenal, most of which are targeted on Russian missile silos and command centers. Each of these warheads has roughly 20 times the destructive power of the bomb dropped on Hiroshima.

Of the 7,000 U.S. nuclear warheads, 2,500 are maintained on hair-trigger alert, ready for launching. In order to effectively retaliate, the commander of the Strategic Air Command has only three minutes to decide if a nuclear attack warning is valid. He has 10 minutes to find the president for a 30-second briefing on attack options. And the president has three minutes to decide whether to launch the warheads and at which targets, according to the Center for Defense Information. Once launched, the missiles would reach their Russian targets in 15 to 30 minutes.

A nearly identical situation prevails in Russia, except there the early warning system is decaying rapidly. As always, the early warning systems of both countries register alarms daily, triggered by wildfires, satellite launchings and solar reflections off clouds or oceans. A more immediate concern is the difficulty of guaranteeing protection of computerized early warning systems and command centers against terrorists or hackers.

The two nuclear superpowers still own 96% of the global nuclear arsenal of 30,000 nuclear weapons. It is clear that their nuclear planning and ongoing targeting are the major threats to national security.

The Senate and House armed services committees and foreign relations committees must address these ongoing and unresolved threats to the people of the U.S. and, indeed, the planet.

Russia and the U.S. are now self-described allies in their fight against global terrorism. Their first duty in this effort should be immediate and rapid bilateral nuclear disarmament, accompanied by the other six nuclear nations (France, Britain, China, India, Pakistan and Israel), along with U.N. Security Council action to ensure that no other nations — particularly Iran and North Korea — acquire nuclear weapons.

According to Mohamed ElBaradei, director of the International Atomic Energy Agency, a clear road map for nuclear disarmament should be established. Time is not on our side.

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