

Robert McNamara Says NYC Still No. 1 Russian Nuclear Target

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The threat of devastating nuclear attack by Russia against the United States has not diminished, warns former Sec. of Defense Robert McNamara.

Writing in Monday's Los Angeles Times, McNamara and co-author Helen Caldicott claim that the threat of a nuclear catastrophe remains real, "whether by accident, human fallibility or malfeasance."

The Soviet Union collapsed on itself and the divide between Eastern communism and Western democracy disintegrated more than 13 years ago.

Because of that, the nightmare scenario is not on the minds of many Americans today.

Missiles Still Pointed at New York, Cities

Nevertheless, the threat remains serious, McNamara and Caldicott argue, because, despite the end of the Cold War in the early 1990's, thousands of Russian nuclear warheads are still pointed at the U.S. targeting many civilian population centers.



McNamara, defense secretary to presidents Kennedy and Johnson, U.S. and Caldicott, a pediatrician and head of the Nuclear Policy Research Institute, say that Russian nuclear targeting strategies haven't changed much — and certainly not enough to reflect the thaw in relations between both nations.

The pair also cite a January 2002 document from the U.S. Foreign Military Studies Office at Fort Leavenworth, Kan., titled, "Prototypes for Targeting America, a Soviet Military Assessment."

The study reports that New York City is the single most important target after military installations on the U.S. Atlantic coast.



In addition, a report commissioned in the 1980s by the U.S. Office of Technology Assessment is still as relevant today.

It said Soviet nuclear war plans called for aiming two one-megaton bombs at each of the following: The three airports serving NYC; Wall Street; each major bridge; all major rail centers; all power stations; four NYC-area oil refineries; and the NYC port facilities.

Also, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, in a recent report on nuclear-attack preparedness, featured a map showing an obliterated New York City from nuclear blasts and the resultant firestorms and fallout.

It predicted millions of people would instantly perish, while most survivors would die shortly thereafter from radiation burns and exposure.

Russia, Leading Nuclear Superpower



Russia, despite press reports to the contrary, remains a nuclear superpower, arguably the greatest nuclear superpower.

Between Moscow and Washington, the two governments can lay claim to 96 percent of the world's 30,000 nuclear weapons.

In Russia, says the National Resources Defense Council, most of the 8,200 nuclear warheads are pointing at American cities and defense sites.

In return, most of the United States' 7,000 warheads are targeting Russian missile silos and command centers.

Russia continues to lead the U.S. in smaller tactical nuclear warheads. The U.S. destroyed most of its tactical nuclear arsenal during the 1990s.

Of the 7,000 warheads in the U.S. arsenal, 2,500 are maintained on a 24-hour ready alert status, and can be launched within moments.

And, the commander of the Strategic Air Command has only about three minutes to decide if a nuclear attack warning is real or not. Then he has 10 minutes to find the president and give him a 30-second attack briefing, including options.

After that, the president has three minutes to decide whether or not to retaliate and if so, which targets will be hit. Once they were launched, U.S. missiles would reach their Russian targets in about 15 to 30 minutes.

The situation is relatively similar in Russia, with the exception that Moscow's early warning system is rapidly aging.

According to the McNamara and Caldicott, the systems of both countries sound alarms daily, in response to wildfires, satellite launchings and solar reflections off clouds or oceans.

But as the Russian system continues to decay, it may be more difficult for Moscow to determine whether alerts are real or not.

That's dangerous, argue experts, because it may mean in the future, Russian commanders and leaders may have to rely more on human judgment—a concept much less reliable than computerized early warning systems that operate without emotion.

Russia Continues Missile Build-up

Perhaps worse, as Russia's overall military structure continues to suffer from a lack of funding and crumbles, Moscow continues to pour scarce military funding into more nuclear weapons.

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov told reporters Monday Moscow will test its mobile version of the Topol-M intercontinental ballistic missile once more before it is put into service.

The missile, which will form the backbone of Russia's nuclear defenses, is 47 tons, will carry one warhead, and has an estimated range of 6,900 miles. Ground-based Topol-M rockets are already in use; the mobile version could be operational by 2006.



The last test of the mobile missile came earlier this month, Ivanov said. It traveled its maximum distance before hitting a target on the Kamchatka peninsula.

In addition, according to Agence France Presse, the U.S. has hinted it may use a loophole to get out of a treaty signed with Russia in 2002, which mandates both countries slash their nuclear arsenals by two-thirds over a decade.

Give Them Up

The liberal leaning McNamara and Caldicott say the best strategy now is to simply abandon nuclear weapons altogether.

They say Russia and the U.S. are now allied in the global fight against terrorism.

As such, "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)," followed by U.N. Security Council action "to ensure no other nations, particularly Iran and North Korea, acquire nuclear weapons."

"Time is not on our side," they wrote.