

# Reducing the Risk of Nuclear Use by Increasing Leadership Decision Time

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**T**oday, U.S. and Russian ballistic missiles armed with nuclear warheads deployed on prompt launch can be fired and hit their targets within minutes. Once fired, a nuclear ballistic missile cannot be recalled before it reaches its target. Leaders may have only minutes between warning of an attack and nuclear detonations on their territory aimed at eliminating their capacity to respond. This puts enormous pressure on leaders to maintain “launch on warning/launch under attack” options, which—when mutual tensions persist or in a crisis—increases the risk that a decision to use nuclear weapons will be made in haste after a false warning and multiplies the risk of an accidental, mistaken, or unauthorized launch, where millions could be killed in minutes.

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Increasing decision time for leaders as an organizing principle has the potential to drive government policy in a number of related security baskets involving nuclear-armed states. It is central to the U.S.-Russia relationship, but also central in the NATO-Russia context and in Washington’s relations with other countries (e.g., China). It also can be used to engage other states with nuclear weapons (e.g., India, Pakistan). There are at least five steps that can and should be proposed now by the Biden administration to increase leadership decision time, working with Russia and other nations:

- 1. Crisis Management Dialogue**—Leaders in the Euro-Atlantic region should direct their respective governments to renew dialogue on crisis management—both bilaterally and multilaterally, through, for example, the NATO-Russia Council or through a separate working group. The risks of mutual misunderstandings and unintended signals that stem from an absence of dialogue relating to crisis management are real. They could lead to a dangerous escalation, beginning on one end of the spectrum

with the possibility of a conventional military incident leading to conventional war and, on the other, the potential for nuclear threats, or even nuclear use. Initiatives to restart crisis management dialogue between the United States, NATO, and Russia, including military commanders, would increase transparency and trust between militaries and increase decision time for leaders.<sup>1</sup>

2. **“Failsafe Reviews”**—With the United States out front, all states with nuclear weapons should commit to conduct internal reviews of their nuclear command-and-control systems, including “failsafe” steps to strengthen safeguards against cyber threats and unauthorized, inadvertent, or accidental use of a nuclear weapon. These reviews should also include options for increasing warning and decision time for leaders, both unilaterally and in concert.<sup>2</sup> The U.S. review should examine post-launch destruct devices on U.S. nuclear weapons and other measures to reduce the risk of nuclear war.
3. **Cyber “Rules of the Road”**—The Biden administration should launch a new dialogue leading to the establishment of cyber “rules of the road.” The risk of any one incident or set of circumstances leading to nuclear escalation in a crisis is greatly exacerbated by new hybrid threats, such as cyber risks to early warning and command-and-control systems. Cyber threats can emerge at any point during a crisis and trigger misunderstandings and unintended signals—magnified by the difficulties in attribution and real-time attack assessment—that could precipitate war. Initiatives to establish rules of the road or redlines precluding cyberattacks on nuclear facilities, nuclear command-and-control structures, or early warning systems would reduce fears of being blinded in the early stages of a crisis or conflict and help increase leadership decision time.<sup>3</sup>
4. **Removing Nuclear Weapons from Prompt-Launch Status**—U.S. and Russian strategic nuclear forces remain postured to enable each side to promptly destroy the other. Even under the latest strategic nuclear arms accord, both countries maintain hundreds of land-based and sea-based ballistic missiles deployed with nuclear warheads ready for prompt launch and capable of hitting their targets in less than 30 minutes. Because their fixed location makes them vulnerable—requiring a decision within minutes whether to “use them or lose them” after receiving warning of an attack, real or false—land-based ICBMs in silos are particularly destabilizing (mobile warheads at sea and to a lesser extent on land are more likely to survive a surprise attack and thus be available for retaliation). The United States should work with other nuclear weapon states, beginning with Russia, to set the goal of removing all nuclear weapons from prompt-launch status globally over the next decade. Working first with Russia to take nuclear missiles off prompt-launch status—with a priority on silo-based ICBMs—would increase time for U.S. and Russian leaders to assess their options and make a more considered decision in response to a suspected or actual attack.<sup>4</sup> This change would significantly reduce the risk of an accidental, mistaken, or unauthorized launch of a nuclear ballistic missile, and it would set an example for all states with nuclear weapons. Ideally, this could be extended to China (which, according to the head of U.S. Strategic Command, is “developing a dedicated nuclear command-and-control capability that includes launch under warning and launch under attack”),<sup>5</sup> and then to India and Pakistan.<sup>6</sup>
5. **Intermediate-Range Missiles**—The United States, in consultation with its allies, and Russia should work together to return to a ban on the deployment of U.S. and Russian land-based intermediate-range missiles in the Euro-Atlantic region and, when possible, more broadly, given that the constraints of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty—designed to prevent such deployments—are no longer binding. With the redeployment of INF-range missiles in Europe, leaders could once again become consumed with fears of a short-warning nuclear attack that could decapitate a nation’s command and control, fears that would greatly reduce decision time and increase the risk of false warnings.

One of history's lessons is how quickly nations can move from peace to horrific conflict. In the aftermath, many have looked back and wondered how it could have happened and how it happened so quickly. A new strategy for reducing the risk of nuclear use by increasing decision time for leaders can reduce the chances of conflict and catastrophe.

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#### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> See the Statement by the Euro-Atlantic Security Leadership Group, "Support for Crisis Management Dialogue and Strategic Stability in the Euro-Atlantic Region," February 2019. Available at: [https://media.nti.org/documents/EASLG\\_Statement\\_Crisis\\_Management\\_FINAL.pdf](https://media.nti.org/documents/EASLG_Statement_Crisis_Management_FINAL.pdf).
- <sup>2</sup> For a fuller discussion of failsafe reviews, see Ernest J. Moniz and Sam Nunn, "Sleepwalking toward the Nuclear Precipice," December 15, 2020. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-12-15/sleepwalking-toward-nuclear-precipice>.
- <sup>3</sup> See the Statement by the Euro-Atlantic Security Leadership Group, "Support for Cooperation among Governments to Address Cyber Threats to Nuclear Weapons Systems," February 2019. Available at: [https://media.nti.org/documents/EASLG\\_Statement\\_Cyber\\_Threats\\_FINAL.pdf](https://media.nti.org/documents/EASLG_Statement_Cyber_Threats_FINAL.pdf).
- <sup>4</sup> To address Russian concerns that the United States would be left with an advantage if only ICBMs were removed from prompt-launch status, the United States and Russia could agree to a reciprocal confidence-building measure to commit to keeping ballistic missile submarines farther from their targets (either at the edge of their range or just outside it). Former U.S. Secretary of Defense William Perry has advocated retiring U.S. ICBMs, arguing they have "no logical role in a U.S. sole-purpose, deterrence-only policy." ("Whatever You Think Ails This Nation, a New Generation of ICBMs Is Not the Answer," *Washington Post*, November 17, 2020. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/11/17/how-biden-administration-could-create-win-win-situation-nuclear-policy/>). See also Richard A. Clarke and Steve Andreasen, "Missiles and Warheads in Holes in the Ground Are No Way to Deter Nuclear War Now," *Los Angeles Times*, April 19, 2021. Available at: <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2021-04-19/nuclear-arsenal-icbm-triad-joe-biden-ground-based-missiles>.
- <sup>5</sup> U.S. Strategic Command and U.S. Space Command, Senate Armed Services Committee testimony, April 21, 2021. Available at: <https://www.stratcom.mil/Media/Speeches/Article/2580698/us-strategic-command-and-us-space-command-sasc-testimony/>.
- <sup>6</sup> For a fuller discussion of removing nuclear weapons from prompt-launch status, see NTI, "Building Mutual Security in the Euro-Atlantic Region," 2013. Available at: [https://media.nti.org/pdfs/BMS\\_Long\\_Report\\_FINAL.pdf](https://media.nti.org/pdfs/BMS_Long_Report_FINAL.pdf).