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The new nuclear arms race

By Katrina vanden Heuvel

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On a frigid day in February 1994, William Perry was sworn in as President Bill Clinton's secretary of defense. Perry would take over at the Pentagon during one of the most fluid times in geopolitical history — between the end of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. During his time in office, Perry was one of the architects of a strategy he called “preventive defense,” the goal of which was to reduce global threats rather than just contain them. The greatest threat of all was nuclear, as fears spread about such weapons falling into rogue hands.

Two decades later, Perry has written a new book, “My Journey at the Nuclear Brink,” in which he offers a dire warning: “Far from continuing the nuclear disarmament that has been underway for the last two decades, we are starting a new nuclear arms race.”

This is not hyperbole. The United States and Russia are acting with increasing belligerence toward each other while actively pursuing monstrous weapons. As Joe Cirincione described in the Huffington Post, the Pentagon plans to spend \$1 trillion over 30 years on “an entire new generation of nuclear bombs, bombers, missiles and submarines,” including a dozen submarines carrying more than 1,000 warheads, capable of decimating any country anywhere. In the meantime, President Obama has ordered 200 new nuclear bombs deployed in Europe.

Russia has been at least as aggressive. As Cirincione described, Russian state media recently revealed plans for a new kind of a weapon — a hydrogen bomb torpedo — that can traverse 6,000 miles of ocean just as a missile would in the sky. On impact, the bomb would create a “radioactive tsunami,” designed to kill millions along a country’s coast.

This escalation has been a long time coming, and the U.S. owns much of the blame for the way it has accelerated. During the Clinton administration, the United States pushed hard to expand NATO, breaking a critical promise to Russia not to threaten its sphere of influence. Perry, who played a lead role in this effort, has since acknowledged its folly. “That was the first move down the slippery slope,” he said at an event hosted by the Defense Writers’ Group. “It’s as much our fault as it is the fault of the Russians, at least originally. And it began when I was secretary.”

During the George W. Bush administration, there were more missteps, especially the U.S. walking away from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, causing irreparable harm to the countries’ fragile relationship. And during the Obama administration, the president seems to have gone out of his way to denigrate Russian President Vladimir Putin, publicly describing him as “like a bored child in the back of the classroom.” The Obama administration sent arms into Ukraine, reminiscent of Cold War proxy wars that the United States fought on nearly every continent. This time, the game is even more dangerous, playing out on Russia’s border instead of thousands of miles away. And though we are more than a quarter century removed from the fall of the Berlin Wall, the United States still has nuclear weapons pointed at Russia on hair-trigger alert, sending a daily signal of aggression.

As Perry noted, one of the great dangers of nuclear proliferation is accidental war. This is not paranoia. In May 2013, the Air Force suspended 17 officers from controlling nuclear weapons after an inspection found a “breakdown in overall discipline.” Seven months later, an Air Force general who oversaw bases with 450 ICBM missiles was fired for what The Washington Post described as a “drunken Moscow bender.” The next month, 34 nuclear officers were caught cheating on their proficiency exams. According to ABC News, investigators learned about the scandal during “another investigation that has already implicated 11 junior officers in using illegal recreational drugs.”

But the increased tension between the U.S. and Russia will have dire global consequences even if neither side launches a weapon. Defeating the Islamic State is likely impossible without Russia as part of a broad coalition. Not only does Russia bring advanced military capabilities and general resources to the fight, it also brings intelligence, diplomatic and political ties in the Middle East that the United States simply does not have. And beyond the fight against the Islamic State, there are a number of vital geopolitical issues where a partnership with Russia can be profoundly powerful. Without Russia, the United States would never have reached a nuclear deal with Iran. Without Russia, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad would still have chemical weapons.

“In a strange turn of history,” Obama said during a 2009 speech in Prague, “the threat of global nuclear war has gone down, but the risk of a nuclear attack has gone up.” In yet a stranger turn of history, it is the United States that is contributing to the increased risk of both. Whether Hillary Clinton would follow a similar path remains to be seen. On the campaign trail in 2015, the former secretary of state’s comments have not been encouraging. The day after Russia started

bombing Islamic State targets in Syria, for example, she called for a no-fly zone, a policy that would not just risk confrontation with the Russians, it would require it.

In that same speech in Prague, Obama criticized those who viewed nuclear proliferation as an inevitability. “Such fatalism is a deadly adversary,” he said, “for if we believe that the spread of nuclear weapons is inevitable, then in some way we are admitting to ourselves that the use of nuclear weapons is inevitable.” In his final year in office, may he remember his own words. And in the years to come, may we all.