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Bury the Bomb Before It Buries Us

By Jack A. Smith

October 24, 2014

A quarter century after the Cold War ended, the people of the world are now entering a dangerous era of improved and more accurate nuclear weapons and faster, more precise delivery systems at a time of growing antagonism between Washington and Moscow and potential antipathy between the U.S. and China.

All nine nuclear countries are upgrading their atomic weaponry, led by the United States and Russia – the two main nuclear states by far with 7,300 and 8,000 warheads of all kinds between them respectively, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). The actually deployed weapons, long-range and strategic, are 1,600 for Moscow and 2,100 for Washington. Most of the rest are in storage for future use, upgrading or are being dismantled.

Both the US and Russia have substantially reduced their nuclear stockpiles since the implosion of the Soviet Union, and in February 2011 both parties signed a New START (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty) with further reductions that must be implemented within seven years.

There is no reason, however, to believe the world is safer or soon to achieve the only dependable safeguard – total world nuclear disarmament.

The US and Russia are now each in the process of modernizing, improving and extending the longevity by decades of the three prongs of their nuclear war triad: strategic bombers, intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), and submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs).

Virtually every aspect of Washington's triad components are being updated or replaced, including improvements to the nuclear warheads and bombs, the accuracy, speed and payload of the missiles, the agility and power of the aircraft (including the addition of 80-100 new long-range penetrating bombers at a cost of \$550 million each), and complete modernization and expansion of the underwater fleet, adding 12 new ballistic missile submarines.

To facilitate this program, Washington is spending several billions of dollars just on upgrading or rebuilding major plants, laboratories and offices producing nuclear warheads. At least 40,000 people work in these plants. This includes the new "campus" of the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) in St. Louis that's bigger than the Pentagon and cost nearly \$700 million to build. (NNSA is a semiautonomous agency within the US Department of Energy that is mainly responsible for nuclear weapons until they are deployed by the Pentagon or returned for repair, updating and disassembly.)

There is a big difference between the nuclear improvement and modernization programs of the United States and Russia. The Obama Administration plans to greatly outspend Moscow in the modernization sweepstakes, more than two to one, with the hope of finally achieving nuclear supremacy over Russia.

The Soviet Union, which had been devastated in World War II while American territory and industry were untouched, managed to catch up with the US in nuclear power by the late 1950s and established nuclear equivalence, but at a cost in national treasure that contributed to its eventual implosion. Moscow will think thrice about trying to match Washington's reckless spending.

President Obama has committed the US to spend a staggering trillion dollars over 30 years to develop and possess a state of the art nuclear killing machine, not counting inevitably huge cost overruns that have yet to be calculated. As a first installment, the White House plans to invest nearly \$355 billion over the next 10 years in reconstructing its nuclear arsenal.

The program can only be intended to strengthen and prolong Washington's global military dominance – and thus its global hegemony and the rewards that accrue to the highest and mightiest – long into the future.

These long-term modernizations threaten the world's peoples. Given the increasing economic, political and military volatility of the global situation, the gradual decline of US influence coupled with its long-term stagnant economy, and the rise of alternative states including China, a major nuclear confrontation most certainly cannot be ruled out in future. Climate change, as it increases for a couple of decades, will contribute to international destabilization, compounding the existing contradictions that may lead to war.

Here is an account of Moscow's modernization, according to Hans M. Kristensen, director of the Nuclear Information Project at the Federation of American Scientists:

"Russia is in the middle of a significant nuclear modernization that marks its attempt to transition from Soviet-era nuclear force structure to something more modern, leaner, and cheaper to maintain....

"Information on Russian nuclear spending is scarce and contradictory. In 2011, Russian news media and analysts reported that Russia planned to spend \$70 billion on new strategic weapons through 2018. That sounds like a considerable amount, but only adds up to \$10 billion per year. That is close to what the US NNSA spends per year on weapons activities.

"Likewise, Russian media in 2012 reported that Russia planned to spend 101 billion rubles on nuclear weapons from 2013 through 2015. That also sounds like a very significant sum, but corresponds to only \$2.9 billion over three years. This does not appear to be the entire nuclear budget; it apparently covers only the "nuclear weapons complex." If that corresponds to the US nuclear complex – that is, NNSA facilities – then it would imply that Russia spends less than half of what the United States spends on nuclear weapons infrastructure....

"Russia's overall defense budget has increased. Over the next 10 years, the plan is to spend 19 trillion rubles (\$542 billion) on defense. That is less than the annual US defense budget. Of that amount, strategic nuclear forces are thought to account for about 10%, or \$54 billion in total over 10 years. It is unclear what categories are included, but it appears to be roughly 20% of the \$30 billion the United States is estimated to spend on its nuclear triad per year. The Russian economy seems ill equipped to support such investments in nuclear forces that will only constrain resources available for conventional forces."

At this rate US nuclear superiority seems assured, especially now that President Obama is seeking to destroy the Russian economy with heavy sanctions. This is in part Obama's riposte to Russia for re-incorporating Crimea back into Russia after 97% of the population voted to secede from Ukraine in a plebiscite last March following a Washington-backed coup that replaced the Russia-friendly elected president with a leader beholden to the US and European Union. The Obama Administration does not seem to care that these moves are pushing Russia toward China. (See article below: "The US, China, Russia & Eurasia.")

Kristensen reports, "Chinese nuclear forces are in the latter phase of a two-decade-long upgrade that includes deployment of new land-, sea-, and air-based nuclear delivery vehicles. This effort is occurring in parallel with a broader modernization of China's general military forces. Unlike the other nuclear members of the NPT, China is increasing the size of its nuclear arsenal, which is currently estimated to be around 250 warheads. Although China does not seem to plan a significant increase in the size of its nuclear forces, it is changing the composition of that force and putting more emphasis on mobile systems."

Judging by this report, and the fact that Beijing is at least two decades behind the US in military technology, it hardly seems possible for China to catch up with Washington given the Pentagon's nuclear modernization scheme, though that does not seem to be its intention.

None of the seven remaining nuclear states come anywhere close to the US and Russia in warheads and delivery systems, but even just one nuclear warhead is a terror weapon. According to the SIPRI Yearbook 2014: "Three of the remaining seven nuclear states are members of the Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). They include France, 300 warheads, 290 deployed; UK, 225 warheads, 160 deployed; China, 250, none deployed. The remaining four countries are in violation of the NPT. None of their warheads are deployed. They are: Pakistan, 100-120 warheads; India, 90-110; Israel 80 (though some other estimates are higher); North Korea, 6-8 at most. (India, Pakistan and Israel, never joined the NPT; North Korea was a member but quit.)

The huge enhancement program not only reverses President Obama's pledge as a candidate and several times afterward to work toward nuclear disarmament but also contradicts a major clause in the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty that directs the big nuclear weapons states in particular to eliminate existing weapons stockpiles. Here are two clauses that went into effect 44 years ago:

- NPT Article VI: "Each of the Parties to the Treaty undertakes to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament, and on a treaty on general and complete disarmament." The five treaty members with nuclear weapons do not believe this is a literal commitment. However, many of the 181 non-nuclear NPT treaty members, plus citizens of nuclear member countries view the clause after over four decades as a commitment to take relatively swift action. Commenting on the foot-dragging of the five nuclear NPT countries, SIPRI said they "appear determined to retain their nuclear arsenals indefinitely."

- NPT Article I: "Each nuclear-weapon State Party to the treaty undertakes not to transfer to any recipient whatsoever nuclear weapons or other explosive devices directly, or indirectly."

In addition to the nine "official" nuclear nations, five non-nuclear NATO members in Europe harbor US warheads and delivery systems. They are Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Turkey. Their military is trained in how to operate the systems. During peacetime the US is in charge. In the event of war the various countries would control and operate these systems, launching nuclear missiles and air attacks. The US, which has long violated NPT Article I by its exchanges with the UK, justifies wartime use by its five "non-nuclear" allies by arguing that war obviates the NPT treaty. Berlin, which stores 20 US strategic warheads, has asked Washington to remove them for many years, to no avail – one more proof NATO is America's Foreign Legion.

These five countries plus France and England function in effect as the Pentagon's front line nuclear base. Combined with US insistence on maintaining antiballistic missile (ABM) systems in the region – absurdly enough to protect Europe from an attack by Iranian missiles! – Washington appears to be lining up the chessboard for a win.

Russia views the US/European ABM systems as offensive, not defensive. Here's why: A first strike from a US/NATO attack would still leave Russia with the ability to launch a reduced number of retaliatory nuclear warheads, many of which would then be destroyed by the ABM shield, leaving Russia vulnerable to an annihilating second strike from the West.

The New START Treaty is significant but it still leaves sufficient weapons in the hands of the US, Russia, the five NPT members and four "non-nuclear" outliers to destroy the world and all its inhabitants several times over. The agreement became operative in February 2011 after it was approved by the US Senate 71-26 and by both houses of the Russian parliament.

To obtain enough Republican Senate votes to pass the treaty Obama cut a deal in December 2010 to expand the Pentagon's planned modernization of the "Nuclear Triad" – land, sea and air delivery of strategic nuclear weapons. The New York Times noted last month that before Obama's deal with the Republicans "the original idea was [a] modest rebuilding of the nation's crumbling nuclear complex."

On Aug. 27, the Congressional Research Service document on the treaty included this brief description:

"New START provides the parties with seven years to reduce their forces, and will remain in force for a total of 10 years. It limits each side to no more than 800 deployed and non-deployed land-based intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) and submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) launchers and deployed and non-deployed heavy bombers equipped to carry nuclear armaments. Within that total, each side can retain no more than 700 deployed ICBMs, deployed SLBMs, and deployed heavy bombers equipped to carry nuclear armaments. The treaty also limits each side to no more than 1,550 deployed warheads; those are the actual number of warheads on deployed [on intercontinental land based ballistic missiles] ICBMs and [submarine launched] SLBMs, and one warhead for each deployed heavy bomber.

Don't be misled by the one-warhead-one-bomber ratio. One strategic warhead can kill millions and there are many bombers capable of making multiple round trips. In addition the Pentagon can field thousands of planes with non-nuclear missiles and bombs. It is also in the final stages of perfecting new supersonic missiles that can deliver powerful warheads launched from the US to accurately reach a specific target in China within one hour.

The president claims to be disarming by reducing some long range SLBM-ICBMs while not only upgrading the kill power and accuracy of the many remaining missiles but improving the delivery systems. In addition it's all supposed to be operative for another 20 to 40 years. Further, it must be understood that while the US government's official nuclear stance toward Russia and China is "maintaining strategic stability," Washington's understanding of "stability" undoubtedly implies superiority.

The Arms Control Association says these upgraded "systems are in many cases being completely rebuilt with essentially all new parts." This effort includes:

"Modernized strategic delivery systems: US nuclear delivery systems are undergoing continual modernization, including complete rebuilds of the Minuteman III ICBM and Trident

II SLBM. The service lives of Trident Ohio-class ballistic missile submarines are being extended. Additionally, a new submarine, the SSBNX, which will replace the existing Ohio-class ballistic missile submarines, is undergoing development and is expected to cost about \$100

billion, according to the Congressional Budget Office. The B-2 strategic bomber, a relatively new system, is being upgraded, as is the B-52H bomber. The Air Force is also planning a new Long Range Bomber and a new cruise missile to replace the Air-Launched Cruise Missile (ALCM)."

The US government has long spoken of its nuclear forces as a "deterrent" to another nation contemplating a nuclear attack, but actually America's use of nuclear weapons is fairly open ended, including first strike under certain conditions. Some have interpreted the 2010 Nuclear Posture Review as indicating that the US has finally adopted a no-first-use policy after years of claiming it "reserves the right to use" nuclear weapons first. But this does not appear to be the case.

The Defense Department issued a report last year, "on behalf of the President... on Nuclear Employment Strategy of the United States in accordance with Section 491 of 10 U.S.C." This report included the following paragraph: "The 2010 Nuclear Posture Review established the Administration's goal to set conditions that would allow the US to safely adopt a policy of making deterrence of nuclear attack the soul purpose of US nuclear weapons. Although we cannot adopt such a policy today, the new guidance reiterates the intention to work towards that goal over time." Actually both the US and Russia maintain the right to first strike if they believe (whether it's true or not) they are under attack.

Most Americans had no knowledge whatsoever of the dangerous deal that made New START possible. Arms control and disarmament groups in the US have been monitoring and criticizing the aspects of what they knew about program almost from the beginning – but few others outside Congress, arms specialists and dedicated news readers seem to have been aware.

Public information about Obama's entire nuclear weapons commitment was revealed piecemeal until Sept. 21 this year when the New York Times published an extraordinary 2,600-word front-page article by William J. Broad and David E. Sanger that disclosed the entire program.

"This expansion," they wrote, "comes under a president who campaigned for 'a nuclear-free world' and made disarmament a main goal of American defense policy. The original idea was that modest rebuilding of the nation's crumbling nuclear complex would speed arms refurbishment, raising confidence in the arsenal's reliability and paving the way for new treaties that would significantly cut the number of warheads. Instead, because of political deals and geopolitical crises, the Obama administration is engaging in extensive atomic rebuilding while getting only modest arms reductions in return...."

"Supporters of arms control, as well as some of President Obama's closest advisers, say their hopes for the president's vision have turned to baffled disappointment as the modernization of nuclear capabilities has become an end unto itself. 'A lot of it is hard to explain,' said Sam Nunn, the former senator whose writings on nuclear disarmament deeply influenced Mr. Obama. 'The president's vision was a significant change in direction. But the process has preserved the status quo.'"

In a statement Sept. 22, the day after the New York Times article when the entire picture became news, leaders and experts from seven national nongovernmental organizations charged that "that current plans for maintaining and upgrading the US nuclear arsenal over the next decade and beyond exceed reasonable deterrence requirements as set out by the President in June 2013, are unaffordable, and unless they are significantly adjusted, the nuclear force modernization plan will also deplete resources from higher priority budget needs." The groups included Union of Concerned Scientists, Federation of American Scientists, Arms Control Association, Council for a Livable World, and Women's Action for New Directions.

Last March, when the administration put forward details of its budget for fiscal year 2015, which started Oct. 1, containing initial funding for the improvement and modernization program, the organization Nuclear Watch (New Mexico) declared:

"Contrary to President Obama's rhetoric about a future world free of nuclear weapons, most famously expressed in his April 2009 speech in Prague, the president asks for a 7% increase for nuclear weapons research and production programs under the Department of Energy's semiautonomous National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA). NNSA's 'Total Weapons Activities' are slated to rise to \$8.3 billion in FY 2015, and to an astounding \$9.7 billion by FY 2019, 24% above fiscal year 2014. Obama's budget request sets a new record for DOE nuclear weapons spending, even exceeding the Cold War high point in 1985 under President Reagan's military buildup.... While rebuilding nuclear weapons at exorbitant expense, the Obama Administration proposes to slash dismantlement of existing weapons] by nearly half, from an already paltry \$54.2 million to \$30 million."

Commenting on the entire program, Angela Canterbury, executive director for Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, declared: "The current plan is geared towards building more nuclear weapons that we don't need and can't afford. We need to scrap it and the nuclear weapons we don't need. We need to put into place a far more affordable plan to meet the President's goals to make us safer."

The Homeland Security Newswire wrote Aug. 6: "The Obama administration is allocating more resources toward refurbishing and modernizing current nuclear weapons than advancing nuclear nonproliferation programs. A new analysis of nuclear security spending published by Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government notes that the administration's 2015 budget reduces funding for the Energy Department's nuclear nonproliferation programs by \$399 million, while increasing spending on its nuclear weapons programs by \$655 million. For fiscal 2014, Congress approved \$1.95 billion for NNSA to spend on nonproliferation programs. The White House fiscal 2015 budget proposed a 20% reduction."

The sheer cost of the modernization is raising eyebrows in Washington, even among those who agree with the program, and there are strong hints some of the cost may be cut in FY2016. Adding to fiscal concerns, the Government Accountability Office asserted recently that the planned nuclear arsenal will cost tens of billions of dollars more than the Obama Administration initially indicated, not counting overruns.

The breakthrough Times article noted: "The looming crackup between trillion-dollar plans and tight budgets is starting to get Washington's attention. Modernization delays are multiplying and cost estimates are rising. Panels of experts are bluntly describing the current path as unacceptable. A new generation of missiles, bombers and submarines 'is unaffordable,' a bipartisan, independent panel commissioned by Congress and the Defense Department declared in July." Some reductions in cost seem probable, but an extremely expensive nuclear modernization program will continue.

Many constituencies welcomed Barack Obama when he entered the White House in January 2009. Among those with high hopes were tens of millions of people the world over who believed his rhetoric about ending the nuclear danger. They were disappointed, as were so many others. Hans Kristensen summed up the situation well:

"The Obama administration entered office with a strong arms control and disarmament agenda, but despite efforts by some officials and agencies to reduce the number and role of nuclear weapons, the administration may ironically end up being remembered more for its commitment to prolonging and modernizing the traditional nuclear arsenal."

The good news is that a Review Conference of the Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) will be held at the United Nations in New York in April and May 2015 and mass demonstrations opposed to nuclear weapons are being planned by a large international coalition of NGOs, peace groups and many others. (The Activist Newsletter will supply all the details when available.)

According to a co-convenor of the project, Jackie Cabasso of the Western States Legal Foundation: "The nuclear powers have refused to honor their legal and moral obligation to begin negotiations to ban and completely eliminate their nuclear arsenals. As we have seen at the United Nations High-Level Meeting for Disarmament and at the Oslo and Nayarit Conferences on the Human Consequences of Nuclear Weapons, the overwhelming majority of the world's governments demand the implementation of the NPT. We are working with partner organizations in the US and other nations to mobilize international actions to bring popular pressure to bear on the 2015 Review Conference."

Judith LeBlanc of Peace Action, also a CO-convenor, reported that "Plans include a major international peace conference and march to the United Nations on the eve of the Review Conference, the presentation of millions of petition signatures to the Review Conference urging the abolition of nuclear weapons, creative nonviolent protests in New York and in national capitals around the world, and student and youth organizing campaigns."

The economic and political problems in American society and the world today may well be conducive to the building of a mass international antinuclear movement with staying power and strategy and tactics commensurate to the struggle without being co-opted. If so there is a chance for nuclear Disarmament.

It certainly won't do to depend on Obama in his last two years. And whoever replaces him in the 2016 elections, Republican or Democrat, is hardly going to do anything about nuclear

disarmament. But a strong antinuclear movement can continue to grow under such circumstances.

The leftist Professor István Mészáros, the Hungarian philosopher, identified what must be done: "The uncomfortable truth of the matter is that if there is no future for a radical mass movement in our time, there can be no future for humanity itself." Clearly, any progress on these fronts will derive from popular, prolonged radical mass struggle.