

# 2015 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons

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## Taking action on de-alerting at the 2015 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons

### Working paper submitted by Chile, Malaysia, New Zealand, Nigeria, Sweden and Switzerland (the De-alerting Group)

1. The De-alerting Group has been calling since 2007 for practical steps to address the significant number of nuclear weapons remaining on high alert and deems it essential for progress to be made on the issue at the 2015 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. A wide range of possible practical steps have been discussed by various experts and commissions, including technical measures to reduce readiness or storing warheads separately from the delivery system.

2. As outlined in greater detail in the previous working paper submitted by the Group ([NPT/CONF.2015/PCIII/WP.24](#)) and in the annex to the present working paper, the following points are central to understanding the urgent need for action on operational readiness at the 2015 Review Conference:

(a) Large parts of the worldwide nuclear arsenal are continuously maintained on high alert, ready for use within a matter of minutes, multiplying the risks posed by those weapons. The low levels of transparency notwithstanding, experts estimate that hundreds of missiles carrying roughly 1,800 warheads are ready to be launched at a moment's notice;

(b) Reducing the operational status of nuclear weapons is a recognized measure contributing to the process of nuclear disarmament. The 13 practical steps of 2000 called for concrete agreed measures to further reduce the operational status of nuclear weapons systems. Reducing the operational status of nuclear weapons systems is also part of action 5 of the 2010 action plan;

(c) Lowering alert levels is also a key element of nuclear risk reduction, given that high alert levels significantly multiply the risks posed by nuclear weapons. Some of the risks include inadvertent launches owing to technical failure or operator error, the possibility of misinterpretation of early warning data leading to intentional but erroneous launches, failures of and false reports by early warning



systems and the use of nuclear weapons by unauthorized actors such as rogue military units, terrorists or cyberattackers;

(d) De-alerting is also a core element of diminishing the role and significance of nuclear weapons in military and security concepts, doctrines and policies. As such, it is not only a disarmament measure but also a significant contribution to non-proliferation, given that continued emphasis on the importance of weapons on high alert could lead to false perceptions of nuclear weapons as desirable security instruments. Instead of continuing to emphasize the value of current launch postures, nuclear-weapon States should consider de-alerting as a strategic step in de-emphasizing the military role of nuclear weapons.

3. In the final document of the 2010 Review Conference, the nuclear-weapon States undertook to consider the legitimate interest of non-nuclear-weapon States in further reducing the operational status of nuclear weapons systems. In accordance with the reporting provisions for nuclear-weapon States set forth in action 5 of the 2010 action plan, some nuclear-weapon States included elements about operational readiness in their reports to the Preparatory Committee for the 2015 Review Conference at its third session. While such reports constitute a positive first step and some of the reported elements included worthwhile information about past efforts, the reports reinforced the conclusion that there has been no movement on lengthening launch decision times or decreasing operational readiness since the adoption of the 2010 action plan.

4. Since 2010, the focus on the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons has led to a widely shared understanding that the risks associated with nuclear weapons are higher than previously understood. This further underlines the unacceptable risks associated with high levels of alert.

5. In view of the above, the De-alerting Group proposes that the 2015 Review Conference, when taking stock of the implementation of action 5 of the 2010 action plan and of concrete agreed measures to further reduce the operational status of nuclear weapons systems, take the following steps:

(a) Recognize the link between high alert levels, associated risks and the catastrophic humanitarian consequences posed by nuclear weapons and also recognize that concrete agreed measures to reduce further the operational status of nuclear weapons systems will diminish risks and hence increase human and international security;

(b) Recognize that reductions in the operational status of nuclear weapons are key to disarmament and non-proliferation, in particular for further diminishing the role and significance of nuclear weapons in all military and security concepts, doctrines and policies;

(c) Reaffirm de-alerting as a pragmatic, interim and practical disarmament measure, pending the full implementation of article VI of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, as contained in the 13 practical steps of 2000 and the 2010 action plan and note the lack of progress in that regard since 2010.

6. When considering next steps for the full implementation of article VI and discussing how to further implement action 5 of the 2010 action plan, the 2015

Review Conference should agree on concrete efforts for the next review cycle, in particular urging nuclear-weapon States to constructively engage on the issue and:

(a) To take all steps to rapidly and comprehensively address the high risks relating to high alert levels, including by developing confidence-building measures and further measures contributing to the prevention of accidental, unauthorized, inadvertent and unintended launches;

(b) To take steps to rapidly reduce operational readiness (unilaterally, bilaterally or otherwise), including by making and implementing an inventory of options available for further reducing the operational readiness of all types of nuclear weapons on high alert and by implementing measures with regard to nuclear doctrines, postures and force structures to enable the reduction of the level of alert of nuclear weapons;

(c) To provide annual reports on the operational readiness of nuclear weapons during the 2015-2020 review cycle as part of a consolidated standardized reporting form and to issue a separate and comprehensive report to the Preparatory Committee for the 2020 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons on all steps taken to reduce operational readiness, enabling the 2020 Review Conference to consider appropriate follow-up action.

## Annex

### Implications of high alert levels

#### Risk dimension

1. High alert levels and their related nuclear posture are based on the maintenance of prompt launch capabilities. Such a posture requires that a nuclear retaliatory strike be able to be launched upon receiving a warning of an incoming strategic nuclear attack. In practice, this means that a massive, retaliatory nuclear strike is able to be launched while incoming missiles are still in the air (i.e. before a detonation has occurred). Proponents of a nuclear posture based on high alert levels argue that this is necessary because it guarantees a retaliatory deterrent capability (but, as outlined below, maintaining such capability is possible with de-alerted forces).
2. Such an approach implies that a decision maker would have only a few minutes to assess the plausibility, reliability and accuracy of a warning in order to decide whether to order a nuclear retaliatory strike. It depends heavily on automated warning systems that are not infallible. In practice, it may lead to rushed nuclear decision-making that could be compromised by reliance on false data or by the insufficient time provided for consultations regarding the possible use of nuclear weapons.
3. Such alert levels significantly multiply the risks posed by nuclear weapons. For example:
  - (a) High alert levels increase the probability of an inadvertent launch owing to technical failure or operator error;
  - (b) Reliance on early warning systems for evidence of an incoming attack vastly increases the consequences of any misinterpretation of early warning data leading to an intentional but erroneous launch. There are numerous past examples of failures and false reports in such early warning systems;<sup>a</sup>
  - (c) The maintenance of nuclear forces on a high level of alert, coupled with the attendant doctrine that overemphasizes the risks of a decapitating first strike, greatly decreases the decision-making time available to national leaders in the event of a nuclear crisis and could create a “use it or lose it” mindset that reinforces the likely use of nuclear weapons.
4. High alert levels also increase the risk of the use of nuclear weapons by unauthorized actors such as rogue military units or terrorists. In this regard, newly emerging types of risk (i.e. relating to cyberattacks aimed at the highly automated nuclear military command infrastructure) could further heighten the threat.
5. The recent international focus on the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons, and the threat that the destructive capacity of nuclear weapons poses to the survival of humanity, has served only to highlight the unacceptability of those risks.

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<sup>a</sup> See, for example, Patricia Lewis and others, *Too Close for Comfort: Cases of Near Nuclear Use and Options for Policy* (London, Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2014) and Eric Schlosser, *Command and Control: Nuclear Weapons, the Damascus Accident, and the Illusion of Safety* (New York, Penguin, 2013).

**Disarmament dimension**

6. The maintenance of high alert levels has a negative impact on the process of nuclear disarmament. High alert levels are incompatible with the commitments entered into by all States parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons to reduce the role of nuclear weapons and to take concrete steps towards their eventual elimination. Specifically, high alert levels:

(a) Reinforce the perceived military value of nuclear weapons and imply a readiness to use nuclear weapons as a war-fighting tool;

(b) Perpetuate outdated, cold war-era nuclear doctrines, making deeper cuts in existing arsenals more difficult to achieve;

(c) Fuel excessive and expensive nuclear force requirements and modernizations.

**Deterrence dimension**

7. Proponents of high alert levels claim that they are necessary from the point of view of maintaining stable nuclear deterrence. Those claims have, however, been refuted by numerous experts, including former senior military officials, who have made the case that maintaining a retaliatory capability (in other words, maintaining credible nuclear deterrence by ensuring that an adversary's surprise first strike would not go unpunished), is possible with an arsenal that is removed from alert. Even if all intercontinental ballistic missiles were removed from high alert, the presence of ballistic missile submarines at sea in a de-alerted State would still provide more than sufficient retaliatory capability to deter a nuclear attack. In other words, if all United States and Russian nuclear forces were de-alerted and one side secretly re-alerted, the aggressor could not be confident of carrying out a disarming first strike because a sufficient number of highly capable forces would survive the initial attack and could launch a devastating retaliation. It bears noting in this context that United States presidential guidance issued in June 2013 concedes that "the potential for a surprise, disarming nuclear attack is exceedingly remote".

8. Experts have also dismissed the argument that removing weapons from high alert is destabilizing (because it could lead to a "re-alerting race") as a "straw man" argument that overplays the risks of de-alerting, downplays the benefits and ignores the fact that current alert postures already include plans to increase operational readiness and alert rates in a crisis. A de-alerted nuclear posture that still provides sufficient retaliatory capability would give national leaders time to weigh their decisions carefully, rather than being forced to choose within a matter of minutes from a list of predesignated responses with catastrophic consequences.