



# **US and Russian Nuclear Forces: Status and Trends in Light of the *Smaller and Safer* Article**

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# Overview

- The value of *Smaller and Safer*
- U.S.-Russian Nuclear Stockpiles
- Nuclear Posture Trends
- Obama Administration De-alerting Policy
- Nuclear Mission Trends

# Value of Smaller and Safer

## Smaller and Safer

A New Plan For Nuclear Postures

*Bruce Blair, Victor Esin, Matthew McKinzie,  
Valery Yarynich, and Pavel Zolotarev*

On April 8, sitting beside each other in Prague Castle, U.S. President Barack Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev signed the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START). Just two days earlier, the Obama administration had issued its Nuclear Posture Review, only the third such comprehensive assessment of the United States' nuclear strategy. And in May, as a gesture of openness at the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty Review Conference in New York, the U.S. government took the remarkable step of making public the size of its nuclear stockpile, which as of September 2009 totaled 5,113 warheads.

For proponents of eliminating nuclear weapons, these events elicited both a nod and a sigh. On the one hand, they repre-

sented renewed engagement by Washington and Moscow on arms control, a step toward, as the treaty put it, "the historic goal of freeing humanity from the nuclear threat." On the other hand, they stopped short of fundamentally changing the Cold War face of deterrence.

The New START agreement did not reduce the amount of "overkill" in either country's arsenal. Nor did it alter another important characteristic of the U.S. and Russian nuclear arsenals: their launch-ready alert postures. The two countries' nuclear command, control, and communication systems, and sizable portions of their weapon systems, will still be poised for "launch on warning"—ready to execute a mass firing of missiles before the quickest

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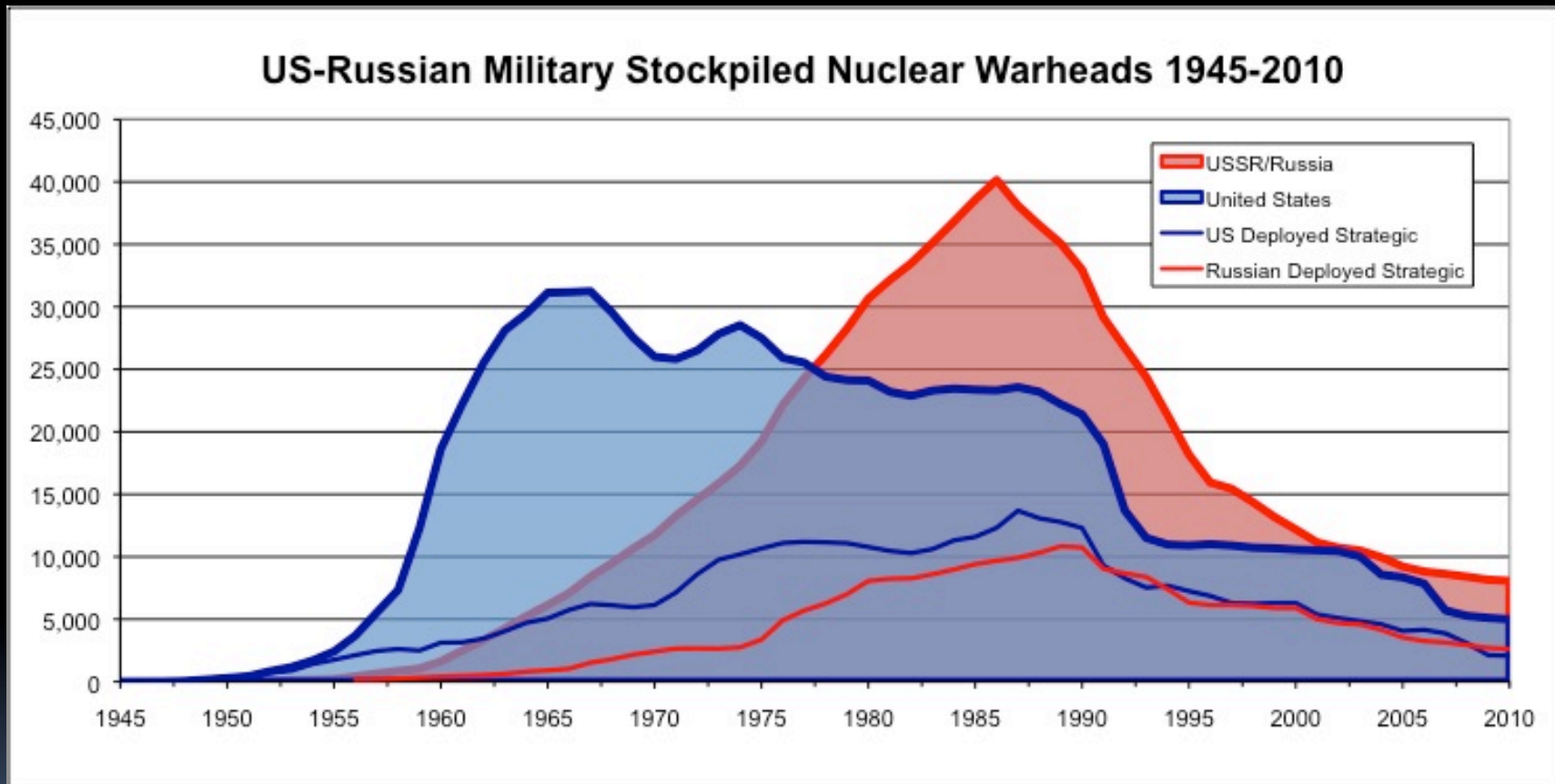
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- Challenges core argument against de-alerting...  
“The NPR considered the possibility of reducing alert rates for ICBMs and at-sea rates of SSBNs, and concluded that such steps could reduce crisis stability by giving an adversary the incentive to attack before “re-alerting” was complete.”

*Nuclear Posture Review Report, 2010, p. 26.*

- ... by demonstrating that even at force levels much lower than today (500 warheads), an adversary at comparable force levels could not hope to “win” with a first strike
- Undermines secrecy sanctuary enjoyed by war planners by presenting public with methodology for examining issue and questioning claims

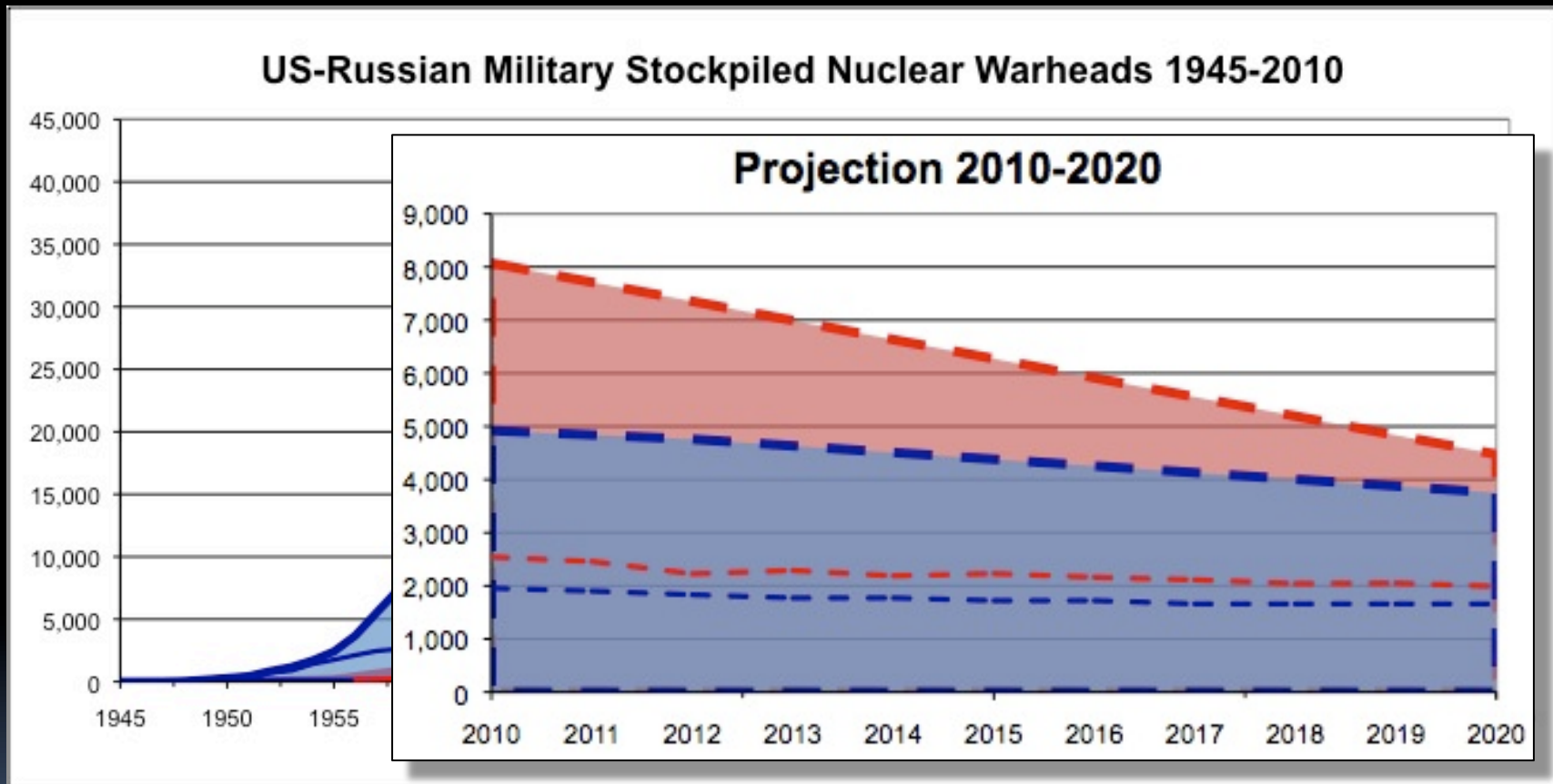
# US and Russian Nuclear Stockpiles



Russia: 12,000 warheads (8,000 stockpile, 4,600 deployed (2,600 strategic, 2,000 tactical))

United States: 9,000 warheads (5,000 stockpile, 2,400 deployed (1,900 strategic, 500 tactical))

# US and Russian Nuclear Stockpiles



Projection for 2020 includes expected U.S. and Russian stockpile and force structure reductions. Still far from 500 warhead level examined in Smaller and Safer article.

# Nuclear Posture Trends

With New START treaty limit of 1,550 deployed strategic warheads and 700 deployed strategic delivery vehicles (SDVs) by 2017-2018 and no sub-limits or limits on non-deployed weapons, there is little constraint on planned force structures:

## Russia

- Fewer SDVs with high warhead load
- Less than 400 SDVs
- Fewer ICBMs with more warheads
- Low SSBN tempo, shrinking force
- Same bomber force
- Limited upload capacity

Estimated warheads on alert:

2010: ~1,000

2020: ~500

## United States

- More SDVs with lower warhead load
- More than 700 SDVs
- More ICBMs with fewer warheads
- High SSBN tempo, stable force
- Reduced bomber force
- Significant upload capacity (SSBN)

Estimated warheads on alert:

2010: ~800

2020: ~580

# Obama Administration De-alerting Policy

## Before Election:

“We'll work with Russia to take U.S. and Russian ballistic missiles off hair-trigger alert, and to dramatically reduce the stockpiles of our nuclear weapons and material.”

*Chicago Speech, October 2007*

Obama Will Work with Russia to Take Nuclear Weapons off Hair-Trigger Alert: The United States and Russia have thousands of nuclear weapons on hair-trigger alert. Barack Obama believes that we should take our nuclear weapons off hair-trigger alert – something that George W. Bush promised to do when he was campaigning for president in 2000. Maintaining this Cold War stance today is unnecessary and increases the risk of an accidental or unauthorized nuclear launch. As president, Obama will work with Russia to find common ground and bring significantly more weapons off hair-trigger alert.

*Barack Obama on Defense Issues, 2008*

## After Election:

“work with Russia to take U.S. and Russian ballistic missiles off hair trigger alert...”

*White House web site, February 2009*

“.....”

*Prague Speech, April 2010*

“The NPR considered the possibility of reducing alert rates for ICBMs and at-sea rates of SSBNs, and concluded that such steps could reduce crisis stability by giving an adversary the incentive to attack before “re-alerting” was complete.”

“Maintain the current alert posture of U.S. strategic forces: U.S. nuclear-capable heavy bombers off full-time alert, nearly all ICBMs on alert, and a significant number of SSBNs at sea at any given time.”

*Nuclear Posture Review Report, April 2010*

# Obama Administration De-alerting Policy

## **Instead of de-alerting, NPR decided to:**

- Continue the practice of “open-ocean targeting” of all ICBMs and SLBMs so that, in the highly unlikely event of an unauthorized or accidental launch, the missile would land in the open ocean. The United States will ask Russia to re-confirm its commitment to this practice.
- Make new investments in the U.S. command and control system to maximize Presidential decision time in a nuclear crisis.
- Explore new modes of ICBM basing that could enhance survivability and further reduce any incentives for prompt launch. Such an assessment will be part of the Department of Defense’s study of possible replacements for the current ICBM force.

Russia has not shown interest in de-alerting.



# Nuclear Mission Trends

How are the nuclear missions of the United States and Russia evolving?

## Russia

- New military doctrine maintains and modernizes Cold War-like force; not clear if role is reduced or increased
- Appeals less counterforce focused: “evasive” planning in light of US offensive and defensive capabilities
- Preemptive use language toned down but probably remains in secret version
- US seen as yard stick: strategic parity essential but unattainable
- Nuclear weapons compensate for conventional decline
- China a growing contingency

## United States

- NPR protects Cold War-like force structure and does not reduce role
- Offensive counterforce-countervalue planning with broad target base and numerous strike options
- Bush-era preemption toned down; Global Strike merged with strategic war plan (OPLAN 8010)
- Russia seen as yard stick; but strict parity no longer important
- China a growing contingency
- Regional adversaries included

Goal: reduce role and salience of nuclear weapons. Transition from dynamic counterforce planning to relaxed minimal deterrence posture

# Conclusions

- *Smaller and Safer* provides essential tool for public debate to understand and question claims made by those who argue that de-alerting is impossible and dangerous
- It seems clear that even the force levels under New START treaty are significantly in excess of security needs
- Despite progress in reducing Cold War nuclear force levels, U.S. and Russia still retain basic Cold War posture and policies
- United Nations must keep pushing for progress on further nuclear disarmament and lowering of alert levels for nuclear forces

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