

Editorial

During the past few months, it has become abundantly clear that the nuclear clock is still ticking, and that we are losing a great part of the gains which were made with the ending of the Cold War.

The ratification of the Putin doctrine in Russia has already been the subject of extended commentary in our pages, but we make no apology for returning to the issue now that the definitive version has become available, complete with official imprimatur.

However, our troubles never come in single spies, always in whole battalions. On June 12th, the *New York Times* gave us a horrifying story from Bruce Blair. It concerned the impact of targeting policy on the size of the American arsenal of strategic nukes.

‘Top American military officers’, says Blair, ‘insist that current nuclear policy prevents them from shrinking our arsenal to fewer than 2,000 to 2,500 strategic weapons . . . The reason for their position is a matter of simple arithmetic, buried in the nation’s strategic war plan and ultimately linked to presidential guidance.’

It is not the done thing to discuss nuclear targeting in public, but the Strategic Air Command is responsible for an overall targeting plan, and Bruce Blair has maintained a careful watch on this.

‘The strategic war plan consists of a very long list of targets in Russia and a shorter list of targets in China. The Pentagon says the United States must be able to destroy these targets to meet current presidential guidance on nuclear war planning, a directive issued in late 1997 to get the number of warheads down from even higher levels required in earlier plans.’

Since the conclusion of the Start II Treaty in 1993, the target list has grown longer, contrary to every expectation that it might shrink. During the last five years it has stretched by 20 per cent. Three former Republics of the Soviet Union, Belarus, Ukraine and Kazakhstan, were eliminated from the strategic plan in 1997, but the Pentagon has nonetheless actually enlarged its targeting roster from 2,500 in 1995 to 3,000 today.

Bruce Blair tells us that there are some 2,260 allegedly vital Russian targets on this list, and that only 1,100 of these involve nuclear weapons sites. He estimates that American nukes are aimed at 500 ‘conventional’ (military installations) targets, 160 leadership targets and 500 arms factories.

He may or may not be right in his view that the Russian army is on the verge of disintegration, that the military command centres are practically devoid of leadership, and that the weapons factories are ‘crumbling’, producing ‘almost no armaments last year’. If this were so, then the targeting policy would be even more irrational. But supposing that he is wrong, this kind of targeting surely demonstrates that the Cold War still lives as far as the Pentagon is concerned.

As the *New York Times* article insists, this level of potential damage was

determined 'historically'. It implies the destruction of 80 per cent of the targeted areas. This implies that the Strategic Command needs to be able to guarantee accurate strikes by almost 1,800 warheads on their designated targets.

'Virtually all of our missiles on land are ready for launch in two minutes, and those on four submarines, two in the Atlantic and two in the Pacific, are ready to launch on 15 minutes' notice, officers say. The land-based missiles must leave the ground fast enough to be sure of being in the air before Russian missiles can destroy them.'

In order to be sure of efficient delivery of these 1,800 warheads, the available arsenal must be much larger, to allow for maintenance needs.

Not all these missiles are destined for Russia. The 1997 presidential guidance induced the Pentagon to restore China to the frame, after a twenty year period of uncertainty. Bruce Blair offers a daunting calculation:

'For China, we now have two so-called limited attack options, involving a handful of nuclear weapons on submarines and bombers, for striking nuclear targets, leadership sites and critical industries. Compare this with scores of limited attack options against Russia, each using from a handful of weapons to more than 100, as well as a few major attack options, the smallest of which would send more than 1,000 strategic warheads to attack Russia's nuclear complex.

'There are also many hundreds of secondary targets in China, Iran, Iraq and North Korea that have weapons assigned to them, though not on immediate alert, further driving up the size of the arsenal.'

Somewhat wryly, the *New York Times* reminds us that Vice President Gore recently claimed that Russia and China were America's vital partners, not enemies. If 'partners' tie down a minimum of two and a half thousand strategic warheads, what, we might ask, might real enemies require in destructive force?

Bruce Blair would like the American presidential guidance to be modified, and the numbers of warheads to be reduced, so that 'deterrence would remain robust' with very much smaller arsenals, on lower levels of alert. But the present nuclear impasse confronts the administration after a decade of hot pursuit of disarmament, in the absence of Cold War, with a Russian Government almost pathetically keen to reach accommodation with its American 'partner'. Today it is at least possible that the new Russian Government will prove less pliable than its predecessor, and that tensions between the United States, Russia and China are about to rise, since the Americans appear to have learnt nothing from their systematic overreach during the post-Cold War interregnum. It also seems not impossible that tension might be about to increase between the United States and Europe. How many new targets will that imply?

These are uncertain areas. What is becoming transparently plain is that the missing dimension in this present strategic balance is a strong and resourceful international peace movement. Unless we can bring this into being, it seems rather unlikely that the new Millennium will last very long.

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