

Preparatory Committee for the 2020 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons

12 April 2019

Original: English

Third session

New York, 29 April–10 May 2019

Taking action on de-alerting

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

1. Since 2007, the De-Alerting Group has been calling for practical steps to address the number of nuclear weapons remaining on high alert. 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. Maintaining nuclear weapons systems at a high level of readiness is unnecessary and significantly multiplies the risk of the unintentional or accidental use of such weapons, which would have catastrophic humanitarian consequences.

2. The De-Alerting Group calls for further practical steps to be taken at the 2020 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons to decrease the operational readiness of nuclear weapons systems, with a view to ensuring that all nuclear weapons are removed from high-alert status. This would constitute a risk reduction measure and contribute to the process of nuclear disarmament as well as the maintenance of international peace and security.

3. The following timeline recalls past consideration of this issue at previous Review Conferences:

(a) In 2000, the 13 practical steps called for “concrete agreed measures to further reduce the operational status of nuclear weapons systems”;

(b) In 2010, action 5 of the action plan included reducing the operational status of nuclear weapons systems. In the final document of the 2010 Review Conference, the nuclear-weapon States agreed to promptly engage with a view to, inter alia, considering the legitimate interest of non-nuclear-weapon States in further reducing the operational status of nuclear weapons systems in ways that promote international stability and security;

(c) 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.



4. A wide range of possible practical steps to de-alert launch-ready forces have been discussed by various experts and commissions, including technical measures to reduce readiness and storing warheads separately from the delivery system.

5. Reports produced ahead of the 2015 Review Conference and developments publicly reported since then have 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. Numerous experts have also made the case that maintaining a retaliatory capacity is possible with an arsenal that is removed from alert status and have dismissed the argument that removing weapons from high alert is destabilizing.

6. The previous working papers submitted by the De-Alerting Group ([NPT/CONF.2015/PC.III/WP.24](#) and [NPT/CONF.2015/WP.21](#)) explain in detail how:

(a) Keeping nuclear weapons on high alert significantly multiplies their risks. Some of these risks include inadvertent launches owing to technical failure or operator error, the possibility of misinterpreting 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;

(b) High alert levels are incompatible with the commitments entered into by all States parties to the Treaty to reduce the role of nuclear weapons and take concrete steps towards their eventual elimination.

7. De-alerting is 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.

8. In view of the above, the De-Alerting Group proposes that the 2020 Review Conference, when taking stock 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.

9. When considering next steps for the full implementation of article VI, the 2020 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 significant 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 regular reports on the operational readiness of nuclear weapons during the 2020–2025 review cycle as part of a consolidated standardized reporting form and to issue a separate and comprehensive report to the Preparatory Committee for the 2025 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 2025 Review Conference to consider appropriate follow-up action.
