

Ukraine Crisis Escalates, as Experts Warn of Thermonuclear War

by Jeffrey Steinberg

Jan. 25—A trio of experts, including two former U.S. Senators, have published grave warnings about the growing danger of thermonuclear war as the Ukraine crisis deepens, and both Russia and the United States modernize their strategic nuclear triad under conditions of great tension.

Ted Postol, a well-known nuclear expert, published a warning in today's *Boston Globe* under the headline "How a nuclear near-miss in '95 would be a disaster today." The article cited a 1995 missile test by Norway that the Russians detected as a possible U.S. launch of a high-altitude nuclear detonation intended to blind Russian defenses to a possible U.S. thermonuclear first strike. Postol noted that, fortunately, in 1995, relations between Washington and Moscow were on a positive enough footing that the Russians took a second look before deciding whether to launch a second strike, which would be the standard response to a genuine thermonuclear threat. At that time, there were gaps in Russia's radar detection system, which was a factor in the near-miss.

Postol noted, "Had the false alert of 1995 occurred instead during a political crisis, Russian nuclear forces might have been launched. American early warning systems would have immediately detected the launch, and this might then have led to the immediate launch of U.S. forces in response to the Russian launch."

Postol added that, in 1995, Russian military commanders and political leaders took a cautious approach. Not so now. "In the different political circumstances of 2015, the same cautious assessment of the rocket's trajectory by Russia's political and military leaders might not be possible. Russia has annexed Crimea, interfered in eastern Ukraine, and embarked on a major modernization of its conventional forces. The United States and NATO have responded with sanctions, which, together with the precipitous fall in the price of oil, are destabilizing the Russian economy and threatening President Vladimir Putin's popularity."

Postol then warned that, "On top of this, the relentless modernization of U.S. nuclear forces continues unabated. The current situation has become so dire that only four days ago the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* decreased the time to Armageddon on their doomsday clock from five minutes to three minutes."

Postol concluded that the United States must curb any foolish decisions that could provoke a showdown. He recommended that NATO take a cautious approach to building up military force, drawing a line between deterrence and provocation. "Second, the United States should rein in its senseless and dangerous nuclear force modernization efforts. This program creates the appearance that the United States is prepared to fight and win a nuclear war with Russia. The nuclear deterrent on hand, with minor modifications, is already more than enough." Postol concluded by calling for the U.S. and European nations to share with Russia the specialized satellite sensor technologies that will "correct this dangerous shortfall [in Russia's early warning system] by equaling the nuclear playing field."

A Nuclear Rift

Postol's warnings were echoed by former U.S. Senators Sam Nunn (D-Ga.) and Richard Lugar (R-Ind.), who penned a joint op-ed in today's Sunday *Washington Post* under the headline, "A Nuclear Rift Worth Fixing." The two Senators authored the 1991 Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction Act, which has provided American funds to assist Russia in dismantling and securing its nuclear arsenal and stockpiles of enriched uranium and plutonium for the past 24 years. In December, the U.S. Congress de-funded the program, and in response, Russia, as it had warned, cut off most nuclear security cooperation with the United States. Nunn and Lugar warned that this is a dangerous situation.

"The world's two largest nuclear powers repeatedly

set aside their political differences to cooperate on nuclear security to ensure that terrorists would not be able to detonate a nuclear bomb in New York, Moscow, Paris, Tel Aviv, or elsewhere. Unfortunately, this common-sense cooperation has become the latest casualty of the spiraling crisis in relations among the United States, Europe, and Russia.”

After documenting the tremendous accomplishments of the Nunn-Lugar program, the authors called for a new approach—“a real nuclear security partnership guided by the principle of reciprocity and mutual interest.”

They concluded: “Failing to cooperate in this area is a ‘lose-lose’ proposition that would damage the vital interests of both nations and vastly increase the risk of nuclear terrorism.”

NATO Commander Calls for Talks

These experts demanding a de-escalation from the drive for war were joined last week by an unlikely voice. Gen. Philip Breedlove (USAF), the Commander-in-Chief of NATO, who has been in the forefront of threats against Russia since taking office last year, announced he would seek to resume the dialogue with Russian Armed Forces Chief of Staff Gen. Gennady Gerasimov.

Breedlove reflected growing concern at the Pentagon that the breakdown of serious military-to-military channels between NATO and Russia posed a grave threat of a miscalculation that could trigger a thermo-nuclear war.

Speaking at a news conference in Brussels on Jan. 22, Breedlove said, “We have talked an awful lot about how we re-establish [communication] and the fact that the communication with our senior military interlocutors in Russia is important. We are going to re-establish that, we have talked among several of us senior military leaders how we will do that.”

Last April, Russia recalled its chief military representative to NATO for consultations, after NATO had suspended military and civilian cooperation with Russia over Ukraine. Russian Deputy Defense Minister Anatoli Antonov explained at the time: “The policy of artificially creating tension isn’t our choice. Nevertheless, we don’t see any chance of continuing military cooperation with NATO in usual course.”

Pentagon sources confirm that today there is a shared sense of urgency to resume face-to-face talks with top Russian military leaders on what one official

called a “non-political basis.” Given the frosty relations between Presidents Barack Obama and Vladimir Putin, the political dialogue between Washington and Moscow is handled at the official level exclusively by Secretary of State John Kerry and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.

Although Kerry and Lavrov have a close working relationship, neither of them is the ultimate decision-maker, and they do not deal with strategic military matters in their dialogue.

There is a clear lack of understanding between top American and Russian military officials about the intentions behind the accelerating buildup of new generations of strategic forces.

And while the U.S. has accused Russia of violating some nuclear arms control treaties, the Pentagon is going ahead with the development and deployment of a new generation of tactical nuclear weapons to be forward-based in Europe. The modernization of these battle weapons includes increased accuracy, lethality, and range, making them potentially intermediate range nuclear weapons that could be used against Russia from longer distances.

The Pentagon is contemplating how fast to accelerate its nuclear triad modernization program, which has a price-tag of \$1 trillion. Due to the Congressional budget sequestration deadlock, the Pentagon has been slow to move on the nuclear modernization, but now the Navy is prepared to accelerate the building of a new generation of Ohio-class submarines that carry America’s submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) with nuclear warheads.

Russia has fielded three new-generation submarines from their SLBM program, and they are being deployed in the Black Sea region, which borders on some of NATO’s Eastern European member states, as well as NATO member Turkey.

It is in this context that the Breedlove announcement is to be seen as an effort to reach an understanding with the Russian Armed Forces command to reduce the risk of nuclear armageddon.

The fact that the response time for a decision to launch a full retaliatory thermonuclear strike, upon identification of a launch, is now reduced to three minutes, means that thermonuclear war must be prevented at all costs. Under the increasing tensions cited by these experts, as well as by Lyndon LaRouche, and others, there is no guarantee that the systems are now in place to stop it.