May 18, 2015

The Honorable John Kerry  
Secretary of State  
U.S. Department of State  
2201 C Street NW  
Washington, DC 20520

The Honorable Ashton Carter  
Secretary of Defense  
1400 Defense Pentagon  
Washington, DC 20301-1400

Dear Secretary Kerry and Secretary Carter,

We are seeking clarification on what steps the Obama administration has taken to reduce the operational readiness of U.S. nuclear forces.

In Secretary Kerry’s address to the 2015 Review Conference for the Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons on April 27, he stated that “We have reduced the alert status of our nuclear arsenal...”

This topic was also addressed in the “2015 U.S. National Report to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference: Nuclear Force Policy and Posture,” which was made public on May 5. That report states:

- Major steps have been taken to reduce the operational readiness of our nuclear forces:
  - We converted all U.S. ICBMs to carry a single warhead, making these systems less attractive targets and lowering incentives for others to launch a nuclear first strike.
  - All U.S. ICBMs and SLBMs are targeted on open oceans.
  - All nuclear-capable bombers and dual-capable aircraft are no longer on day-to-day alert.
  - We reduced the number of nuclear submarines at sea and the number of warheads carried on each remaining deployed submarine.

As you know, most of these steps were undertaken by previous administrations. President George H.W. Bush removed nuclear-capable bombers from alert, and President Bill Clinton negotiated the agreement with Russia to not target nuclear missiles at each other. President George W. Bush reduced the number of nuclear-armed submarines from 18 to 14.

This administration has finished downloading ICBMs to carry single warheads, which reduced the number of deployed ICBM warheads from 550 in 2009 to 450 today. While this step has reduced the overall number of nuclear weapons on high alert, our understanding is that the remaining ICBMs are kept at the same alert level they were during the Cold War, ready to be launched in minutes. Is this true?
To comply with the New START agreement, the administration is also reducing the number of missile tubes on its nuclear submarines from 24 to 20. Again, this will reduce the number of weapons on high alert. Will it have any effect on the alert level of the remaining SLBMs?

Has the administration taken any other steps to reduce the operational readiness of U.S. nuclear-armed missiles?

Finally, according to the 2013 Report on Nuclear Employment Strategy of the United States, the Obama administration’s new nuclear policy guidance directed DoD “to examine further options to reduce the role of (sic) Launch Under Attack plays in U.S. planning, while retaining the ability to Launch Under Attack if directed.” What options has the DOD examined? Which of these has it adopted?

Replies can be directed to Lisbeth Gronlund, Union of Concerned Scientists, 2 Brattle Square, Cambridge MA 02138-3780, or lgronlund@ucsusa.org.

Sincerely,

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