

June 21, 2016

President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave. NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Obama,

We are writing to ask you to take steps to reduce the risk that nuclear weapons will be used.

Both the United States and Russia keep many hundreds of nuclear missiles on high alert so they can be launched within minutes, in response to a warning of an incoming attack.

You rightly noted during your 2008 presidential campaign: “[K]eeping nuclear weapons ready to launch on a moment’s notice is a dangerous relic of the Cold War. Such policies increase the risk of catastrophic accidents or miscalculation.” After your election, you called for taking “our nuclear weapons off hair-trigger alert.”

Numerous incidents of technical failures, human errors and misinterpretations of data have demonstrated that missile warning and launch systems—like all systems—are fallible. While safeguards can reduce the frequency of system failures, they cannot eliminate them.

By keeping missiles on high alert, such a failure could be catastrophic. This policy increases the risk that one or more nuclear-armed missiles could be launched accidentally, without authorization, or by mistake in response to a false warning of an incoming attack. A launch could, in turn, trigger a retaliatory nuclear attack.

Even if the probability of such a launch is small, the overall risk—the probability multiplied by the magnitude of the destruction—is unacceptably high.

Land-based nuclear missiles on high alert present the greatest risk of mistaken launch. National leaders would have only a short amount of time—perhaps 10 minutes—to assess a warning and make a launch decision before these missiles could be destroyed by an incoming attack.

Current tensions between the United States and Russia further increase the risk that nuclear-armed missiles could be launched in response to a false warning.

In 1991, President George H.W. Bush took one leg of the U.S. nuclear triad—bombers—off high alert. The time is right to remove a second leg—land-based missiles—from high alert. This would still leave many hundreds of submarine-based warheads on alert—many more than necessary to maintain a reliable and credible deterrent.

We urge you to take U.S. land-based missiles off hair-trigger alert and to remove from U.S. war plans the option of launching these weapons on warning. The United States should encourage

Russia to follow suit, but it should not wait to act. Taking these steps would have profound security benefits for all Americans by reducing the risk of nuclear disaster.

Respectfully,

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