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U.S. keeps guard up against Russia

Pentagon may aim more missiles at Moscow

By Ian Hoffman - STAFF WRITER
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The Pentagon is weighing the prospect of keeping multiple nuclear warheads on its land-based ballistic missiles, a reversal of a decade-long move toward aiming fewer nuclear weapons at Russia.

Strategic-force planners are looking at preserving as many as 800 warheads on the nation's 500 Minuteman III intercontinental ballistic missiles, up from earlier plans for one warhead per missile.

The heavy Minuteman missiles, based in Wyoming, Montana and North Dakota, carry warheads designed by University of California scientists as "hard-target killers" for destroying concrete missile silos. They chiefly are aimed over the North Pole at Russian ICBM sites.

Researcher Hans Kristensen, a weapons consultant for the Natural Resources Defense Council, said the notion of keeping 800 warheads on the Minuteman missiles is puzzling, given the thaw in U.S.-Russian relations.

But it could reflect the Air Force's desire to reinforce targeting of Russia's most threatening multi-warhead missiles, SS-18s and SS-19s. They were to have been scrapped under an early 1990s arms-reduction treaty that also committed the United States to single-warhead missiles.

"It's tit-for-tat nuclear planning, where Russia is on the other side of the nuclear crosshairs. One would hope we had gotten beyond that now," said Kristensen, who unearthed the proposal in Air Force statements last year.

"It seems like we're continuing to fight yesterday's battles," said Victoria Samson, a research analyst at the Center for Defense Information in Washington.

Pentagon officials confirmed the idea is under consideration as part of a larger study of U.S. strategic forces, covering sub-launched missiles, bombs and cruise-missile warheads, as well as missile defenses.

That assessment is aimed partly at finding the proper mix of U.S. strategic forces to meet the May 2002 Moscow Treaty. In that pact, President Bush and Russian President Vladimir Putin pledged to reduce their "operationally deployed" strategic arsenals to 1,700-2,200 weapons by the end of 2012.

The treaty replaced an earlier agreement known as START II, originally proposed by President George H.W. Bush. In 1991, close on the heels of the START treaty, the elder Bush suggested a new agreement to reduce nuclear tensions between the superpowers by scrapping or converting all multi-warhead, land-based ICBMs to single warheads, a process known as downloading.

"This step would eliminate the most unstable part of our nuclear arsenals," he said.

In negotiating that treaty, the United States and Russia agreed that keeping large forces of multiple, retargetable warheads or MIRVs on vulnerable, ground-based missiles was destabilizing.

The destructive power invested in a missile -- and the ease of destroying it in a fixed silo -- underscored the use-it-or-lose-it logic of nuclear confrontation and, the argument went, tempted each side to consider a disarming first strike.

The U.S. Senate ratified the treaty in 1996, but it bogged down in the Russian Duma for the next four years. Russian lawmakers criticized the treaty as lopsided in its emphasis on reducing land-based nuclear forces, where Russia deployed the largest portion of its strategic arsenal. The treaty did not require conversion of multiwarhead missiles on submarines, leaving the most invulnerable U.S. nuclear forces untouched.

When the Duma ratified START II in 2000, Moscow insisted on a variety of new arms-control measures, including promises that the United States would not withdraw from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty. President Bush pulled out of the treaty on June 13 so the United States could deploy missile defenses. The next day, Russia's foreign ministry declared START II dead.

That frees Russia to preserve its SS-18 and SS-19 missiles, aimed chiefly at the United States, and the United States to keep multiple warheads on at least some of its Minuteman missiles.

"According to the war we're looking at that, we're looking at eventually ... 500 missiles that could be uploaded to as many as 800 warheads," Gen. Robert Smolen, the Air Force director of nuclear and counterproliferation, told Air Force Magazine last July. "So somewhere in that mix of 500 is 800. And it could be one on some, two one another, three on another."

Anthony Cordesman, a military analyst and senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, said the reasons for keeping 800 warheads are difficult to understand "unless there's some clear pattern of force modernization in China or

something else we haven't heard of. It's a very substantial force-mix change if it's taking place."

The Pentagon could chose to retain 500 warheads on the Minuteman missiles and hold 300 ready to upload on short notice. But if all 800 are kept on the missiles, the Bush administration will be forced to sacrifice 300 other, generally more versatile nuclear weapons in order to stay under the Moscow Treaty's cap of 2,200.

Last week, administration officials continued their upbeat assessment of the new U.S. relationship with Russia in congressional testimony.

A. Elizabeth Jones, assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian affairs, told lawmakers that the two nations "have become strong allies in the global war on terrorism."

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