

“An Accidental Nuclear War between the U.S. and Russia is Possible”. Nuclear Holocaust in Just 30 Minutes – Former US Navy Advisor

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Global Research, December 13, 2015

[RT](#) 7 December 2015

Region: [Russia and FSU](#), [USA](#)

Theme: [Militarization and WMD](#)

In-depth Report: [Nuclear War](#)

The Nuclear End of the World never happened. When the Cold War finally ended, the whole world sighed in relief as the threat of total annihilation seemingly passed. And yet, 25 years later, both the US and Russia once again are pumping up their nuclear arsenal, and the Doomsday Clock shows it's just three minutes before midnight. Is nuclear destruction looming once again over humankind? And, even if no state is actually ready to press the button – could Atomic Armageddon happen by accident? We ask these and many other questions to a specialist on nuclear technology, a professor from MIT and a former adviser to the US Chief of Naval Operations. Dr. Theodore Postol is on Sophie&Co.

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Sophie Shevardnadze: *Dr. Theodore Postol, former advisor to the U.S. Chief of Naval Operations, a professor at MIT, nuclear technology expert, welcome to the show, it's great to have you with us – so, Ted, President Obama came into the White House calling for “Global Zero” – now, there are plans to spend a trillion dollars on an overall of entire nuclear arsenal. Why is this happening?*

Dr. Theodore Postol: I think this is a consequence of the domestic politics. You can never understand the foreign policy of a country without understanding its domestic situation, and in this case, the domestic politics has caused Mr. Obama to decide – frankly, I think, incorrectly – that he has to modernize the U.S. arsenal in order to avoid being criticized for not being concerned about the defence of the country.

SS: *Now, do you believe the U.S. is readying its nuclear forces for direct confrontation with Russia? Do you think nuclear war is possible now? At any scenario, do you see that?*

Dr.TP: I do think that an accidental nuclear war between the U.S. and Russia is possible. I don't know how likely it is – anyone who says they know how likely it is, has no idea what they're talking about, so... But, I think any possibility is too high, and in that sense, I do think we are in danger. I think the current political confrontation between Russia and the West and, particularly, the U.S. is potentially dangerous too. Both sides are very aware of the catastrophic consequence of nuclear weapons being used by one or the other, so I think both will be very cautious – but I think the danger does exist, yes.

SS: *But, nuclear weapons have worked as a deterrent against war with the risks, like you say, “way too high” for all sides involved. Has the mutually assured destruction doctrine being forgotten? Has the defenition been changed, maybe?*

Dr.TP: No, I don't think the definition has changed, and certainly, the reality has not changed, and I think, an understanding of the reality is very important if you're not going to make a mistake that leads to nuclear use – on either side. I believe, from what I've seen on both sides, that the concern about the potential for the complete destruction of each country and the world is still very high. The problem is that as long as forces are on alert, at a high level, there's always the possibility of a series of unexpected accidents that could lead to nuclear exchange, and I think, that's the real danger.

SS: What happens, hypothetically, if there is a nuclear war? Will a doctrine like a mutual destruction doctrine ever work again?

Dr.TP: I think, anybody who is rational and understands pretty much, in a dim way, the consequences of nuclear weapons, would not rationally use nuclear weapons. The problem is that if you have a crisis situation when one or both sides have no understanding of what is actually happening on the other side, and people are exhausted because it was going on over time, and somebody makes a bad decision with incomplete information, which is almost certainly what happens in the real world – information is never complete – you could have a massive use of nuclear weapons, and that, of course, would end civilization as we know it and might, although we can't be sure, but might actually end human life on the planet.

SS: You know, you've mentioned earlier that the nuclear war as it is, is unlikely, but there's always a threat of an accident. And I've spoken to many political leaders, newsmakers like Noam Chomsky, Mikhail Gorbachev, and they also agree that nuclear war is something nobody's willing to risk right now, but there is a danger of an accident involving nuclear weapons. What kind of accident can occur?

Dr.TP: I can give you a concrete example, and then expand on it. In 1955 there was, what's called a "sounding rocket" launched off an island that is on off the NW coast of Norway. Now, this "sounding rocket" was different from other "sounding rockets" that had been launched at that time. It went to much higher altitudes than had previously occurred, and it passed through the radar search-fan of an early warning radar at Olenegorsk in Russia, and set off an alarm that led to Yeltsin at that time being brought into the command loop.

Now, I do not believe that Russia or the Russian military forces were put on high alert or would have done anything that could have led to an accident at that time, but if you had an accident like this which occurred for example, during the crisis between Russia and the U.S., where both sides had been at loggerheads for quite a while and both sides were exhausted, very concerned about military action happening – it could have led to an alert and possibly even a launch of Russian or U.S. forces. So, there's a concrete situation where an accident that really, must be looked at as benign, given the circumstance under which it occurred, could have been fatal under different circumstances. Now, the likelihood of something like that happening is low, because you need this accident to occur at the time of extreme crisis and you need the overlap, but the consequences, of course, would be horrendous.

SS: Now, Ted, tell me something. Explain to an amateur, to me, how does one launch a nuclear weapon? Is it as easy as pressing a button? How long does it take for a nuclear missile to reach its target?

Dr.TP: Well, typically what the U.S. and Russia have are several kinds of what are called "ballistic missiles" – they, in the case of both Russia and the U.S. we have land-based

ballistic missiles which are in fortified underground missile silos, so they are protected to some extent from nuclear attack, or on submarines, in the holds of submarines. The ballistic missile could be fired, basically, within 50 or 60 seconds, more or less, after alert being given to the operators. The warning could take minutes to occur – that is, the Russian government or the American government, could believe that an attack is underway, they could assess the situation, and then, collect information and then make a decision whether or not to launch.

That could take 10 or 15 minutes. In the case of actually launching a rocket, that would take 40-60 seconds, more or less, depending on procedures – which are easily changed. The rocket will then ignite, it would fly out of its silo or its launch hall in the submarine, it would typically undergo powered flight for about... between 150 and 300 seconds, depending on whether or not the rocket is what's called a "solid-propellant" or "liquid propellant", so in one case 5 minutes, in other case, maybe, 2,5 minutes – and then it would release warheads. The warheads would float in the near vacuum of space under the influence of gravity and momentum, and in about 20-28 minutes would arrive at their targets, re-enter the atmosphere and explode. So the world could be, basically, finished off in anywhere from half hour to an hour upon the arrival of these warheads. People who think about these things generally expect – nobody really knows what to expect – but if you have a massive exchange, most nuclear warheads would be delivered in a very short time, probably within half hour or an hour interval.

SS: Now, the bombs that Russia and the U.S. have in their arsenal right now – they are 100 times more powerful than the ones that were used in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. How devastating would be the aftermath of the nuclear explosion be today?

Dr.TP: They are more than 100 times more powerful. Typical warhead from a Russian missile like what we call the SS-18, the one of these warheads – this rocket can carry up to 10 warheads – one of these warheads, detonated over New York city, for example – one! – would essentially destroy all of Manhattan, most of Staten Island, probably all of it, basically. Large parts of New Jersey to the west. basically, the borough of Brooklyn and most of Queens and the Bronx out to a range range of, maybe, anywhere from, I'd say, 10 kilometers range from the central area where it exploded. If you had a similar warhead from the U.S. over Moscow, it would destroy, again, most of the city. It would, again, destroy a 150 square kilometers of the city easily and that's only one warhead. There would be many warheads targeted on each of these great cities by the other side.

SS: Now, you wrote that there's a lack of quality stuff in the American nuclear forces. Are you saying nuclear arsenal is not being looked after properly, or is it safe?

Dr.TP: I think, there are very serious problems with the nuclear arsenal at the current time. Basically, what is going on is there is a catastrophic falling of morale among the troops. This is not hard to understand, and, in fact, to some degree... well, to high level, predictable. The reason is that the nuclear forces had an enormously high status in American military organisation for a long time. At the end of the Cold War, there was a giant change in the status accorded to the U.S. military forces that were doing nuclear weapons control.

The net result of that is that younger officers who are seeking advancement in their career and who are more talented and more upwardly mobile, more promotable, did not want to choose to go into the nuclear forces. So, the net result was you got people of less capability

and less motivation populating the forces. This has been a real problem. A second aspect of this problem is that the interest in the American Pentagon in maintaining the current forces at a proper level has not been as high as it should've been. So, modernisation does not take place when it should. Let me give you an example. If you have computers that are extremely old – in our case, these computers are, in some cases, 40 or 50 years old, which is a very long time in computer technology. Now, the advantage of the older computers is that you know what you have. The problem with newer computers is that there's more... when you're moving over to a newer system there's always a danger created by moving over to a newer system, because things are unpredictable on some level.

SS: Is that why you guys are sticking to the old computers?

Dr.TP: I can't explain why that's happening. I think, it would be very wise to actually modernise these systems. They are modernizing them in some ways, but they're modernizing them in ways that are in my view not helpful. Let me give you an example: they modify the computer navigation system on our Minuteman Intercontinental ballistic missiles, so that we can the targets that we shoot at more rapidly and hold more targets, be able to select targets in Russia or other places more quickly, and select more targets. Well, that's only useful if you're planning to fight and win a nuclear war. If you think that by moving the targets on one missile to take advantage of some damage you've already done somewhere else, like you would your artillery in a conventional war – if you think that is a good idea, the way it looks to other people – for example, Russian military planners – it looks like you're trying to prepare to fight and win a nuclear war against Russia.

SS: Is it even possible to win a nuclear war? Is there such thing as winning a nuclear war?

Dr.TP: Of course, it's not possible to win a nuclear war. There's no outcome that you can predict associated with the facts of nuclear weapons that would lead to any definition that is at all meaningful of "winning" a nuclear war. The problem is, if you have another adversary, you're a military person, you're evaluating the actions of the other adversary, and you see the adversary doing things that look like they believe that they can fight and win, it makes you concerned, it raises concerns that they might actually believe that, or, in a crisis, they might actually exercise options created by these technical changes. So, it's a dangerous, double-edged sword.

SS: Russia recently announced 40 new ballistic missiles to boost its military arsenal. NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg called the move "unjustified, destabilizing and dangerous". Now, in light of this American nuclear rearmament we were talking about – do you think it's unjustified?

Dr.TP: I think it's unjustified from a technical point of view. From a political point of view, I have no real judgement, but I can see how the political leadership in Russia believes that it has to respond to what it sees as America's continued encroachment and planning to intimidate. Whether that's the intent of the U.S. or not – I have no way of knowing. But I can understand why they think that such an action makes sense. From a purely technical point of view, it in no way enhances Russia's security – and it could detract from it, because of an American overreaction.

SS: Also, remember NATO's plans for a missile defence shield in Europe, they were also supported by the U.S. and its allies. It was supposed to be protection against possible Iran nuclear program. Now, a deal with Iran is in place, a deal that, as you say, has

unprecedented verification measures. Why is NATO still going forward with these plans?

Dr.TP: I'm not a total... I'm more of a technical than a political person, but I don't want to make fake claims, I am unsophisticated politically...

SS: *Sure, but you surely have your opinions and observations on that – I mean, it's a huge topic...*

Dr.TP: I think it's going forward because the leadership of the U.S. has domestic – again, I want to underscore this, domestic political, not international, political commitments to doing missile defence. The Congress is deeply committed to it. I think, the big defence companies that do the work wanted to keep their contracts and the American Congress is strongly influenced by the ability of these companies to influence elections through their money. I think the President has not behaved...has not shown leadership in this particular area. He has backed away from his original scepticism, which was well-justified, about the value of these missile defences in terms of their technical capability, and...

SS: *Okay, but, as you say, domestic policies usually play out, internally, they play out to be foreign policies. In this case, does Russia have evidence to believe it's not a security threat for it?*

Dr.TP: I would that the Russian military, the informed military, the technically well-informed military, have to understand that the American missile defence is not viable – that's to say, it does not have any capability. However, I want to underscore – however, they cannot treat this missile defence as if it has no capability. This is because they do not know what will happen next. The U.S. has vast industrial power, vast wealth. It has shown that it is more than able to engage in irrational military activities, and the Russian military cannot be assured that the U.S. won't make some kinds of changes in some unforeseen future scenario to this missile defence. So you can have a missile defence, like the Americans have, which technically speaking is a joke – I want to underscore it, it's a technical joke in terms of what it can do – but, the Russian military has almost no choice but to treat it as if it is a serious concern. So you get the worst of both worlds. Even from an American point of view – a missile defence that doesn't work, but is treated by the Russian side as if it works.

SS: *Ted we have time for just one more question...*

Dr.TP: Is that too convoluted?

SS: *No, it sounds pretty simple to me. I don't know why people up there don't understand it.*

Dr.TP: Okay.

SS: *Now, states that embark on a nuclear weapons program, they actually do it because they feel it's the only way to ensure their security. Can you say they are wrong? I mean – look at Libya, it gave up its nuclear weapons, and in the end, it was little to stop a NATO bombing campaign in 2011. We just have one more minute left for this question.*

Dr.TP: I think it's a double-edged sword, and it depends on who you are and your circumstances. Unfortunately, and I'm not comfortable saying this, I want to be clear, this is not a comfortable thing to say, if I were in a situation of some nuclear states, I would not give up my nuclear weapons. In the case of other nuclear states, I think not only it is a good idea to give up your nuclear weapons, but in fact you shouldn't get them. Let me give you

an example. If I were Japanese I would not want to have nuclear weapons. The reason is, I'm under the protection of the U.S., and if I get nuclear weapons, it will cause to be a target of the Chinese, it will cause the South Koreans to become extremely concerned, to the point that they might react in a bad way, and my overall security situation would be worse. But, if I'm alone, and I think I need nuclear weapons, for example, if I'm Russia, and the Americans have a nuclear monopoly – I would want nuclear weapons, because I'm not dependant on another nuclear power to offset the American threat. So, it's a political judgement, not a technical one.

SS: Thanks, Ted. Unfortunately that's all the time that we have, but thanks a lot for this very interesting and sometimes scary insight into the world of nuclear power game.

We were talking to Theodore Postol, former advisor to the U.S. Chief of Naval operations, professor of technology and international security at MIT, nuclear expert. We were talking on the current state of nuclear arsenals across the world and the ominous possibility of a nuclear catastrophe. That's it for this edition of Sophie&Co, I will see you next time.

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