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## **Pentagon needs to rethink non-nuclear warhead**

**By Martin Schram**

**June 1, 2006**

The capital cognoscenti are weighing in, pro and con, over a seemingly ideal Pentagon non-nuclear weapon plan that has this one minor flaw: By firing to prevent a nuclear terrorist attack, the U.S. might plunge the planet into the worst of unintended consequences — an accidental nuclear exchange.

That is why, before Congress rushes to vote, one more voice must be heard: A chilling warning from a Pakistani general who once explained to me just how he or any other well-intentioned general might inadvertently fire the first nuclear weapon — and ignite a nuclear war — all due to a misunderstanding.

The words of retired Brig. Gen. Feroz Khan, spoken three years ago (in an interview I conducted for a PBS documentary series and book, both titled "Avoiding Armageddon") must be carefully considered today because they not only warn of what can go wrong — but point to a common-sense solution.

The Pentagon has asked Congress to approve a five-year, half-billion dollar plan to put non-nuclear warheads on two of a Trident submarine's Trident II missiles — while the sub's other missiles still carry nuclear payloads. The idea is that this is the best — perhaps the only — way of striking with a non-nuclear warhead when time is urgent. For example, if U.S. intelligence gets word that al-Qaida has a nuclear bomb and is about to move it from a place where it can be targeted to someplace where it might not be detected again until it strikes America's homeland.

Advocates say only the submarine-launched missiles hold the potential to be close enough to targets to strike in less than one hour.

Critics caution that the world's other nuclear nations (Russia most likely, China possibly) have sufficient technology to see that a nuclear-capable missile has been launched from a nuclear-armed Trident submarine. They might believe a U.S. nuclear first strike is under way, even though it is a non-nuclear warhead.

Three years ago, Khan explained how "the danger of inadvertence" can occur in "the fog of war" — and cautioned generals such as himself to make a tragic decision. (Khan was a former battlefield commander and Pakistani director of arms control and disarmament.)

"Once ... the fog of war sets in, ..." said Khan. "You have deceptions. You have misperceptions. You have communications breakdowns.

"Some of the weapon systems that are 'nuclear-capable' warheads may not be carrying our nuclear warheads on them," Khan cautioned. He added that, "in this instance it is only carrying a non-nuclear conventional warhead. It could be perceived as if a nuclear strike has already taken place."

In this fog of war, he said, any official with nuclear authority might miscalculate and "a retaliatory nuclear strike might be ordered." It would turn out to be, in tragic irony, a first use of a nuclear weapon.

Former Defense Secretaries James Schlesinger (who served under presidents Nixon and Ford) and Harold Brown (who served under Carter) have urged Congress to approve the plan. A number of think tank experts warn that the idea creates a new level of nuclear risk. A number of Republicans as well as Democrats have voiced similar concerns.

So has a top general from the only nation that has a radar system that is likely to detect a submarine launch of a nuclear-capable missile. Gen. Yuri Baluyevski, chief of Russia's General Staff, reportedly noted to a group

of journalists that American advocates of the Pentagon plan cited an example in which a non-nuclear missile might be fired from a Trident submarine to attempt to kill Osama bin Laden. But the Russian general then warned: "This could be a costly move which not only won't guarantee his destruction, but could provoke an irreversible response from a nuclear-armed state which can't determine what warhead is fitted on the missile."

So it is that the Pentagon planners need to take this blueprint back to the drawing board and map out a surefire way of giving all nuclear nations instant (if not advance) warning that a conventional, non-nuclear weapon has just been launched. The world cannot bear one more U.S. example of a failure to communicate.

— Martin Schram writes for Scripps Howard News Service.

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