

Stepping back from the brink

Five steps that the U.S. can take to reduce the risk of nuclear war

By Judy Adams and Richard Duda

On May 26, Menlo Park Mayor Cecilia Taylor joined Los Angeles, Santa Barbara, and 44 other U.S. cities and signed a proclamation endorsing a call to reduce the risk of nuclear war. Entitled the "Back From The Brink Call to Prevent Nuclear War," the proclamation asks our nation's federal government to lead a global effort to prevent nuclear war by taking five concrete steps:

1. Renounce the option of using nuclear weapons first.
2. End the president's unchecked authority to launch a nuclear attack.
3. Take U.S. intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) off hair-trigger alert.
4. Cancel the plan to replace our entire nuclear arsenal with enhanced weapons.
5. Actively pursue a verifiable agreement among nuclear-armed states to eliminate their nuclear arsenals.

To people concerned about nuclear war, most of these steps seem to be just common sense — perhaps even insufficiently ambitious. To others, they seem

GUEST OPINION

idealistic and unrealistic — perhaps even dangerously naive. But, these proposed steps could dramatically reduce the chances of blundering into a catastrophe. How problematic are they?

1. No first use: Our nation's official nuclear policy is that the highest priority is to deter potential adversaries from mounting an attack of any kind — nuclear or non-nuclear. But the United States has unmatched conventional military power, and can defend against any non-nuclear attack. A simple "no-first-use" policy would maintain deterrence capability while significantly reducing the danger that a conflict could rapidly escalate out of control, or that a false alarm could trigger a nuclear war.

2. Limiting the president: Currently, no one can lawfully prevent the president from ordering a nuclear attack. This outdated Cold War era policy is extraordinarily dangerous and unnecessary. During the Obama administration, Congressman Ted Lieu and Sen. Ed Markey proposed legislation for much less dangerous command-and-control policy. No single individual

should have the power to start a nuclear war.

3. Take ICBMs off hair-trigger alert: This is a legacy of a bygone day and fears of a devastating first strike. With more than 1,000 nuclear warheads hidden on submarine-based missiles,

No single individual should have the power to start a nuclear war.

we now have ample time to respond to an attack, or to warnings of an attack. The risk of false alarms can be greatly reduced simply by taking our land-based ICBMs off hair-trigger alert. Or better yet — as advocated by former Secretary of Defense William Perry — by completely eliminating them.

4. Cancel nuclear modernization: The current plans call for developing new warheads and new delivery systems at a staggering cost — at least \$2 trillion over the next 30 years. In their new book "The Button," Perry and his co-author Tom Collina argue that spending on this vast scale would not only be a colossal waste of money but would

actually make us less safe. Neither we nor our adversaries can afford to engage in an arms race when we have to confront the challenges of pandemics, economic upheaval, climate change, health care and huge budget deficits.

5. Actively pursue a verifiable agreement to eliminate nuclear arsenals: This is admittedly the hardest of the five steps — but there are reasons for hope. One is the 1968 Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), under which the total number of nuclear weapons came down from more than 70,000 to around 14,000 today. Another is the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), which, though not signed by the U.S., was passed by the UN General Assembly in 2017.

We will not get to a world free of nuclear weapons overnight. But an arms race has no winners, only losers. Taylor has taken a step toward reducing the nuclear danger by endorsing The Call, and deserves our thanks. Add your voice by writing a letter or sending an email to Taylor, your representative in Congress, and to our senators saying that you too recognize and support the Back From The Brink Call. Every step counts.

Judy Adams and Richard Duda are Menlo Park residents.