

Security of the Russian Nukes

Gen. Eugene E. Habiger of US Strategic Command was the first foreigner to enter a Russian nuclear weapons storage area.

Gen. Eugene E. Habiger, USAF, is commander in chief of US Strategic Command, Offutt AFB, Neb., which comprises the nation's nuclear deterrent forces. On Nov. 4, 1997, he met with reporters in Washington. He had just returned from Russia, where, at the request of Defense Secretary William S. Cohen, he examined the security of Russia's nuclear weapons. Here is how Habiger replied to questions posed by the press.

Nuclear Weapon Safety

"I've just experienced something that I never thought possible. ... As a Cold War warrior, I spent most of my adult life sitting alert with B-52 bombers. For a period of five days last week, the Russians showed me a great deal, specifically about their Strategic Rocket Forces, from their command and control to allowing me [to be] the first, as I understand it, non-Russian to ever go into a nuclear weapons storage area and to see how they keep their nuclear weapons secure and safe."

Genesis of the Visit

"I first met Gen. [Igor D.] Sergeyev [Russia's minister of defense] in October of last year, when Dr. [William J.] Perry, then Secretary of Defense, asked me to accompany him to Moscow for some high-level talks. ... I extended an invitation to him [Sergeyev] to come visit me at ... Offutt, and in late March, early April of this year, he did come. I spent six days with him. ... I showed him my headquarters in some depth, and I took him to one of our nuclear weapons storage facilities at F.E. Warren AFB in Cheyenne, Wyo., the first time that a Russian has ever been in one of our weapons storage areas. ...

"During [NATO meetings in October], Secretary of Defense Cohen ... asked Sergeyev's view of the safety and security of their nuclear weapons and, as I recall, General Sergeyev said that his nuclear weapons were as safe and secure as those in the United States. Secretary Cohen said, 'Well, General Habiger is going to be visiting you within the next few weeks. Could you perhaps show him how you go about doing that?' General Sergeyev said yes."

Questions Asked and Answered

"I was ... not expecting ... to actually go into a nuclear weapons storage site. On Friday, two weeks ago [Oct. 24], that's exactly what I did.

I went to a nuclear weapons storage site at ... [an] SS-24 missile base at Kostroma, which is a little over 300 kilometers northeast of Moscow. I was taken into the facility. I was shown the security.

“I went into a nuclear weapons storage bunker and saw an operational nuclear weapon. Actually, there were eight of them on an SS-24 missile. I went in to talk to the security people who were guarding the facility, as a matter of fact, and every one of my questions was answered.”

Three-Person Policy

“I was shown a lot of things that I was impressed with.

“For example, in the United States we have a two-person policy involving nuclear weapons. In other words, you have to have a minimum of two people in order to get close to a nuclear weapon. In Russia it’s the three-person policy. ... I’m talking about access to a nuclear weapon itself. The launching of a nuclear weapon is very complicated. It is very—the controls are very robust. There are a lot of safeguards built in. Trust me. ...

“At our [weapon storage] sites, you need two people to go do that, who understand what they are doing, whatever tasks they are going to do. In Russia you need three people. And, oh, by the way, in Russia, when you open up that igloo, you have to have a written order signed by the full colonel, who is the special technical unit commander, whereas we don’t have those specific kinds of requirements.”

Other Safeguards

“In the United States, we have a thing called a personnel reliability program where we monitor our people medically for any kind of abnormal behavior that would make them unstable around nuclear weapons. The Russians do not have a program that’s exactly like ours, but they have a similar program. Before missile crew members or before security personnel go on their alert tours, which are three- or four-day cycles, they are personally interviewed by a medical doctor and a psychologist.

“I actually saw a demonstration of the capability of their security forces. It was not something that was planned; it was something that I

asked for at the spur of the moment, and I was very impressed with these nine young men, the security force that was tasked with guarding this particular facility. The detachment of nine individuals was commanded by a senior lieutenant, all very professional. They knew what they were doing.”

Representative or Unique?

“Now, the caveat I would give you is that I saw one facility. Was it representative? I’d like to think so. They made it very clear that the facility I was in at Kostroma was very representative of the missile bases in Russia.

“As a result of what I saw, I had further discussions with Gen. Col. [Vladimir N.] Yakovlev, who is the commander in chief of the Strategic Rocket Forces, who replaced General Sergeyev, and we agreed to exchange security specialists from our respective commands. ... We also agreed that we would establish a shadow program where we would take the equivalent of a wing commander and squadron commander, a flight commander, and a missile crew member from one of his missile bases to come to the United States and shadow their respective counterparts for a one-week period—meetings, fitness center, dining facilities, everything—and then he would reciprocate with a team from my command.”

Low Tech

“On the down side, we tend to use high-technology devices much more than the Russians do. For example, we use television sensors, low-light television cameras, to monitor certain areas. The Russians have not made that capital investment. Manpower is relatively inexpensive for them, and they use more eyeballs, if you will. I specifically asked if they use things like night-vision goggles, and I was assured that they do.

“During the course of this little exercise, when I asked what would you do if this were to happen, the two-star Russian Strategic Rocket Forces general who was accompanying me directed them to show me exactly what they would do, and they went to the extremes of not only getting their weapons out but issuing the ammunition and then pulling out an armored personnel carrier that was in a garage right

Nuclear Warheads

Type	Cold War 1990	Current 1997	Change 1990–97
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United States

ICBM	2,450	2,400	-50
SLBM	5,760	3,776	-1,984
Bomber	2,353	1,781	-572
Total	10,563	7,957	-2,606

USSR/Russia/CIS

ICBM	6,612	4,544	-2,068
SLBM	2,804	2,480	-324
Bomber	855	922	67
Total	10,271	7,946	-2,325

behind the facility where the troops were bedded down—an experience that I was impressed with.

“We have a lot more work to do, a lot more transparency, a lot more details, but from my observations, I was impressed and have confidence that the Russians, from what I saw at that one base, have a program which is ensuring the safe, secure processes involved regarding nuclear weapons.”

Fail-Safe

“I was also exposed to their command centers, from the national level command center down to the command center in a road-mobile missile, and also a rail-mobile missile, and at all levels [I] saw the individuals on duty, talked to them, asked them questions. Every question I asked was answered in depth, and the thing that struck me about going into their command centers, command-and-control centers, is that they are very much geared to a fail-safe mode. And what I mean by that is that any one of the command centers, from the national level down to the unit level, can inhibit the launch of an intercontinental ballistic missile.”

Safe as in the US?

"I saw one site, and I was assured by General Yakovlev and General Kirillov, who is the commander of the 27th Rocket Army [and] who accompanied me on this leg of the trip, that what I saw was representative. And if what I saw was representative, yes, I have confidence in the safety and security of their nuclear weapons stockpile.

"They are deadly serious about this. This is a very valuable resource. It is something that in the wrong hands would be a very dangerous resource, and they go to great lengths. The security personnel, I was told, and just from what I saw, I would tend to believe, that they are elite. They call themselves the 10-Alpha Force. They are regularly tested by an anti-terrorist group that comes around to these kinds of facilities and attempts penetration."

Subs and Bombers

"[There was no discussion of submarine-launched or bomber-launched nuclear weapons], and that's one of the things we need to do. When I gave my debrief to the Secretary, [I said] we need to now start looking at the long-range aviation, the bomber folks, and the submarine folks to make sure that these kinds of measures are in place at the other nuclear-weapon legs of their triad."

"Comforting" Answer?

"I did ask them ... about the accountability of the weapons. In other words, how did they know they had all of their weapons where they are supposed to?

"I got back a very comforting response. At the wing level, there is a section called the 6th Directorate, and it's a shop of three or four officers, and their sole function is to make sure they know where every nuclear weapon in that wing is. At the Rocket Army level there is a similar kind of organization.

"At the Headquarters, Strategic Rocket Forces, there is a 6th Directorate, and then, for whatever reason, the Ministry of Defense is called the 12th Directorate, and their sole function is this accountability issue.

"General Yakovlev was very open to me. As a matter of fact, we spent almost three hours just talking one-on-one with a Rus-

sian interpreter. General Yakovlev showed me, for example, his computer screen, which is tied to a local area network, and he sees the equivalent of up to top-secret information. Now, I do not speak Russian, do not read Russian, and when he showed me what was on his computer screen, it was in Russian, but he told me what was on there, and as a very senior officer in the Russian military, I believed him. He showed me, for example, the page that listed the whereabouts of every nuclear weapon in his command. ...

"Whenever the Russian Rocket Forces move a weapon, whether it's 30 yards from a bunker to a facility to do maintenance or from a missile field back to the home base, which may be 30 or 40 miles, a minimum of a two-star on the Rocket Forces staff approves that."

Organized Crime Theft?

"From what I saw, if what I saw is representative of the Strategic Rocket Forces, organized crime getting their hands on a weapon out of their facilities would be extremely remote. I cannot speak to other facilities,

Strategic Nuclear Weapons

Type	Cold War 1990	Current 1997	Change 1990-97
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United States			
ICBM	1,000	720	-280
SLBM	672	464	-208
Bomber	574	321	-253
Total	2,246	1,505	-741

USSR/Russia/CIS			
ICBM	1,398	872	-526
SLBM	940	648	-292
Bomber	162	124	-38
Total	2,500	1,644	-856

but it gets back to the point of under START III we really need to start getting some transparency into their tactical nuclear weapons stockpile."

Russian Modernization

"They are building a new follow-on to their [SS-25] mobile missile. [It is designated SS-27]. It will be either road-mobile or they can put it in silos. It will be [a] START II-compliant, single warhead.

"The initial operational capability of that missile has been slipped significantly over the past two years, and I think it's just a matter of coming up with the funds to get that system on the streets. Because of some very, very wise investments, I do not see the United States even thinking about having to modernize any of our forces until the year 2020.

"It [the initial operational capability of the SS-27] depends on whom you talk to. I'd say the middle of [1998] some time. ... They just test fired one here not too long ago, a successful test. They are proceeding with the construction of a silo to put it in. They have done some work on the Transporter Erector Launcher, the TEL. The program is going along well.

"They just laid the keel for a new Borey-class, ballistic-missile submarine here last fall [1996], and we don't expect to see that operational until the year 2005 or so."

Out of Life

"They are doing a research and development program on a new, air-launched cruise missile for their bombers. You know, we've seen on occasions, for example, the Black-jack. Apparently they have got some that are still undergoing construction and should be rolling out of a plant here before too much longer. ...

"We made some very wise investments back in the 1980s. ... The Russians weren't modernizing their forces as we were during that time frame, and what's happening is that the service life of their systems is coming to an end, and that's one of the reasons why, in my view, the Russians very much want to get down to START III levels very quickly, because the SS-18, for example, which is their heavy ICBM with 10 warheads, the thing is just flat, you know, running out of service life." ■