
Defense Report

AUSA



With all the Turmoil in the Soviet Union, are Moscow's Nukes Safe?

The continued deterioration in many of the 15 Soviet republics raises the very scary prospect that some of Moscow's 30,000 nuclear weapons might fall into the wrong hands. Of the total Soviet nuclear arsenal, some 16,000 warheads are in the hands of elite Russian strategic offensive and defensive forces. Most are presumed to be equipped with technical safeguards that would render them unusable by dissidents or terrorists.

Much greater concern should be given the 15,000 tactical nuclear weapons in the hands of units throughout the Red Army and Navy. By some expert accounts, many of these may not have the same fail-safe controls that are found on strategic weaponry.

In any event, a grave threat is posed by the presence of so many nuclear weapons in a nation where unrest and instability are the order of the day. Already, Moscow claims to have withdrawn all nuclear weapons from its former Warsaw Pact allies in Eastern Europe, but now the problem lies with several of the more recalcitrant republics of the Soviet Union itself.

Were any of these weapons of mass destruction to come into the possession of militant factions in the Baltic or Islamic republics, neither Moscow nor any other Eurasian nation would be immune from nuclear blackmail. The economic and ethnic chaos that pervades through the Soviet Union today could easily motivate dissidents, revolutionaries and terrorists to seek fulfillment of their goals through this medium.

Even in the Soviet Union's largest state, the Russian federation President Boris Yeltsin has raised the specter of civil war by hinting that the republic might create its own army if Russian interests are threatened by the Soviet central government. He also stated that Russian soldiers would not be used to suppress ethnic conflicts in other republics. Certainly, one has to wonder how hard these Russian troops would fight to keep warheads and nuclear facilities out of the hand of Latvians, Lithuanians, Americans, Moldavians, Azerbaijanis, or just about anyone else who might make a concerted effort to seize them.

Those who would foment or abet civil war in the Soviet Union had better give this dimension of the problem careful consideration. The question of the safety of Soviet nuclear weapons is one that will be with us for a long time.