Stepping back from the nuclear brink

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Traffic will be diverted in Washington Friday to speed the movements of more than 50 world leaders gathered for President Barack Obama's fourth and final Nuclear Security Summit. The objective is important: to prevent the spread of nuclear material into the hands of irresponsible parties.

It would be much better if the participants could stay on a few more days to consider the responsibilities of the existing nuclear weapons states.

More than 95 per cent of the world's 16,000 nuclear weapons belong to the United States and Russia. Thus, U.S. and Russian policy is vital, and their 2010 New START arms-control agreement to restrict the number of deployed nuclear warheads was correspondingly important.

But arms control is currently at a halt. Instead, there is a strong move to nuclear modernization, a euphemism for rearming. Restraint is barely evident. For the United States, modernization has a price tag of $1-trillion. Russia will attempt to follow.

The major powers propose to perpetuate their overkill of land, sea and air long-range nuclear weapons. Additionally, both want to add new missiles. The Unite States is arguing for 1,000 new dual-capability (conventional-nuclear) cruise missiles to penetrate supposed Russian defences.

This is arms racing, made more dangerous by its blurring of the nuclear threshold.

Russia harbours the long-standing fear that its nuclear forces are vulnerable to a first strike by the United States, with its weakened retaliatory capability then negated by U.S. anti-missile defences (which are, in fact, barely existent).

This, too, is Cold War thinking. It should be addressed by reciprocal arms control. Instead, both the United States and Russia are planning additional "tactical" weapons for nuclear war-fighting. Russia has also revealed plans for a nuclear torpedo, with a range of 10,000 kilometres and armed with radioactive material, capable of making the U.S. East Coast uninhabitable.

Further, the United States, Russia and China are developing conventional/nuclear hypersonic glide vehicles that, by skimming Earth's atmosphere at supersonic speeds, increase the possibilities for stealth and surprise. Even this is an incomplete catalogue. Cyberweapons pose a threat to the command and control that we rely on to hold these horrors in check.

To all but the blindest devotees of deterrence, the emerging world is increasingly dangerous. Miscalculation is the greatest menace, lying most of all in the sensitivity of the nuclear trigger.

From earlier times, when their weapons were vulnerable, the superpowers have inherited a commitment to hazardous "launch on warning." Hundreds of nuclear weapons are kept in readiness for firing. Frequent military exercises ensure this readiness is real. All this in the face of a long history of false alarms.

The justification is that warning times are measured in minutes, as is now the case. These minutes include the time available to check the information, communicate it and effect a considered response. It is sobering that in a world in which so many have been recently freed from tyranny, a world leader can be called on at a moment's notice to command the deaths of millions.

It is urgent that we increase the time for reflection.

This "de-alerting"of nuclear weaponry is the subject of a study by the Global Zero Commission on Nuclear Risk Reduction, a committee of generals, admirals and defence ministers from all nuclear-weapons countries except North Korea. These people are realists. They propose a step-by-step approach to de-alerting, over a decade. Warheads would be separated from their delivery systems, so as to introduce delays of days, rather than minutes, before firing.

But first there must be a desire for it. In the matter of climate change, reason has altered thinking. The imperative to step back from the nuclear brink is every bit as great.

China has long kept its nuclear warheads separated from its missiles, but is signalling it may join the United States and Russia in placing them on high alert. Other nuclear powers will follow.

It is late, but not too late, to turn in a more hopeful direction. The world needs another Nuclear Security Summit, beyond the one that is to end Friday.