
Defense Report

AUSA



The Hottest Question: Who Controls Soviet Nukes?

The creation of a Euro-Asian Commonwealth on the rubble of the collapsed Soviet regime opens the way for new opportunities. But, it also raises some serious concerns in the West, not the least of which is the question of who controls the 27,000 nuclear warheads spread around the various republics that once comprised the USSR.

Even before the votes for independence were held in the four major republics (Russia, Ukraine, Byelorussia and Kazakhstan), the chief of the new Soviet foreign intelligence service visited Washington to discuss the matter with our State Department. Since then Secretary of State James A. Baker, 3rd, returned the visit, but this time to Kiev rather than to Moscow.

That visit set the stage for a whole new round of negotiations between the United States and former Soviet republics, and has already exacted a pledge to remove to Russia the estimated 4,000 nuclear weapons stationed in Ukraine. Similar moves by other republics could mean that Russia might eventually emerge as the sole nuclear power in the region. That is considered by some as a step in the right direction. For now, there are potentially many hands on the weapons—not all of which may have humanity's best interests at heart.

Unfortunately, the republics which are in the greatest state of turmoil are the very ones with which volatile regimes or radical subgroups might most closely identify.

The borders between the Azerbaijani Republic and the Iranian province of Azerbaijan stand virtually open. Arms smuggling is a regular practice in the region. Turkey, no friend of Armenia, has already recognized the independence of Soviet Azerbaijan; while not intentionally doing so, it may also offer a way-station for terrorist groups intent upon spiriting nuclear weapons out of the Caucasus region.

We now have a situation in which barely developed political entities, with little sense of cohesion and no history of self-government, are taking on heady responsibilities for weapons with enormous destructive power. Until the principal issue of control of these nuclear weapons is settled, the security of huge masses of people may hang in the balance.