

Another shakeup hits US nuclear missile command

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The Pentagon has fired two commanders in its highly troubled nuclear missile force and taken administrative disciplinary measures against a third, the Associated Press confirmed on Tuesday.

The actions were taken against senior officers in both the 90th Missile Wing at F.E. Warren Air Force Base in Wyoming and the 91st Missile Wing at Minot Air Force Base in North Dakota.

Each of these commands is responsible for 150 Minuteman 3 Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs). These missiles carry payloads with 27 times the destructive power of the nuclear bomb dropped on Hiroshima in 1945. They are capable of striking targets some 8,000 miles away within half an hour of their launch and vaporizing everything within a 50-mile radius, killing millions of human beings.

Carrying out simultaneous disciplinary actions against senior officers at two of the Air Force's three ICBM bases is unprecedented. An Air Force spokesman told the AP that it was merely a "coincidence."

The most senior officer to be fired in the disciplinary crackdown was Col. Carl Jones, who was the second in command at the 90th Missile Wing in Wyoming. He was relieved of his command post, according to the Air Force, "for a loss of trust and confidence in his leadership abilities." This assessment stemmed from a series of incidents, including one in which the colonel exhibited what appeared to be uncontrollable rage.

Air Force Global Command Spokesman Lt. Col. John Sheets told the AP that "In four separate incidents, Jones acted in a manner that degraded his status as a senior officer and wing leader including maltreating a subordinate." One of these incidents unfolded at a base thrift store run by volunteers, where Jones was described as having hit the door and "repeatedly hit the

shop's front counter while raising his voice, using profanity" and threatening to shut the store down.

The other incidents, while not detailed, were described by another officer who acted as a witness against the colonel as "shocking."

At the ICBM base in North Dakota, missile squadron leader Lt. Col. Jimmy "Keith" Brown was relieved of his command for what was described as a "loss of confidence in Brown's ability to lead his squadron." He was said to have engaged in "unlawful discrimination and harassment" and was cited in one incident in which a two-person missile launch crew became ill from fumes but remained at their posts for fear that they would face Brown's retaliation. The two had to be hospitalized.

Also disciplined at the North Dakota base was Col. Richard Pagliuco, the commander of the 91st Operations Group, who was charged with having "failed to promote and safeguard the morale, wellbeing and welfare of the airmen under his command." Outside of a letter in his personnel file, it was not clear if other disciplinary action was taken.

Overseeing the disciplinary investigations was Maj. Gen. Jack Weinstein, the commander of the 20th Air Force, which oversees the 450 Minutemen ICBMs. Weinstein was tapped to head the nuclear war command after his predecessor, Maj. Gen. Michael Carey, was sacked for going on a drunken binge in December 2013 while on an official trip to Moscow.

The report on Carey's dismissal cited him for consorting with "suspect" women at a Moscow bar, where he also demanded to sing with the band. He was also accused of provoking his Russian counterparts with remarks about Syria and Edward Snowden.

Carey's firing came on the heels of the sacking of another top-level nuclear officer, Vice Adm. Timothy

Giardina, who was second in command of the US Strategic Command. He was relieved of duty for trying to gamble at a casino with \$1,500 worth of fake chips.

General Weinstein has also had to confront the fallout from a scandal implicating roughly 20 percent of the missile force in cheating on exams given to test their operational proficiency, as well as a drug scandal involving Air Force officers, including two missile crew members at Malmstrom Air Force Base in Montana.

The series of scandals, crises and leadership shakeups within the US nuclear war command have unfolded under conditions in which the threat of a nuclear confrontation has emerged more sharply than in decades thanks to militarist provocations by Washington against nuclear-armed powers, including Russia and China.

Last September it was revealed that Washington has embarked on a revamping of the US nuclear arsenal that is projected to cost at least \$355 billion over the next 10 years and more than \$1 trillion over the next three decades.

The US “pivot to Asia,” aimed at militarily encircling China, at the end of last year saw the provocative dispatch of US B-52 bombers, which are designed to carry nuclear-armed bombs and cruise missiles, over the disputed Senkaku Islands (known as Diaoyu in China) in the East China Sea. The action came just days after Beijing declared an “air defense identification zone” (ADIZ) over the area, and was staged as a demonstration of US defiance.

More recently, US Air Force General Philip Breedlove, the supreme allied commander in Europe, told a press conference Monday about what he described as “provocative” flights by Russian fighters and long-range bombers into European air space, which had been intercepted by NATO warplanes. US military officials have acknowledged that these flights have taken place in international airspace over the Baltic Sea, North Sea and Atlantic Ocean.

Breedlove called the flights “problematic” and a “concern,” adding that they do not “contribute to a secure and stable situation.”

In reality, Washington has provoked a confrontation with Moscow, by first orchestrating a right-wing coup against Ukraine’s elected government last February and then imposing both anti-Russian sanctions and a

buildup of NATO forces in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Baltic republics. This reportedly includes the setting up of a command and control center in Poland to track developments in the region and prepare a military response if NATO member states are deemed threatened.

Breedlove used the press conference to argue that because of the recent events in Ukraine, there should be no further cuts in the size of the US military force deployed in Europe.

The NATO commander’s remarks are symptomatic of the growing and increasingly public tensions between the military brass and the Obama administration over a range of issues, including military spending levels and strategy for the new US war in Iraq and Syria.

In this context, the wave of disciplinary actions against senior officers in the nuclear war command, as well as elsewhere in the US armed forces, has ominous implications. The combination of a vast accumulation of power by the US military apparatus and symptoms of disquiet and even insubordination within the professional officer corps pose a serious threat to basic democratic rights.



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