

Largest US overseas base placed on missile alert amid nuclear war warnings

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15 December 2020

In an extraordinary incident that points to the grave threat of global war, personnel at the US military's largest overseas complex were given chilling instructions to seek cover from an incoming ballistic missile attack.

The alert warnings last Saturday at Ramstein Air Base in Germany, the center of the so-called Kaiserslautern Military Community, consisting of 54,000 troops, civilian Defense Department employees, contractors and their families, were blared over sirens and the "giant voice" loudspeaker system that repeated the words "Aerial attack, aerial attack, seek cover, seek cover." Cellphone messages were also sent out, at least to some.

The incident was acknowledged by the military base's Facebook page, which stated: "Today, the Ramstein Air Base Command Post was notified via an alert notification system of a real-world missile launch in the European theater. The Command Post followed proper procedure and provided timely and accurate notifications to personnel in the Kaiserslautern Military Community. The missile launch was then assessed to be part of a training exercise and not a threat to the KMC area."

The US Air Force Europe-Army Africa command issued a separate statement reporting that "No US aircraft or pilots were scrambled. The missile launch was determined to be part of a regional training exercise and within minutes the control center again followed proper procedures and provided updated notifications."

The Pentagon, however, has yet to publicly explain the nature of the "regional training exercise" or why it was mistaken for an imminent missile strike on its largest overseas base.

The media has quoted unnamed US military officials as linking the alert to a Russian military exercise Saturday in which a nuclear submarine submerged in the Sea of Okhotsk off Russia's western Pacific coast fired a salvo of four intercontinental missiles that struck their targets 3,400 miles away in the Arkhangelsk region.

Russia had given a standard "notice to airmen" to avoid the area, signaling that such an exercise was taking place. The submarine missile launch was part of a broader four-day exercise involving the firing of an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) from a submarine in the Barents Sea, along with the launching of a ground-based ICBM and the firing of

cruise missiles by TU-160 and TU-95 bombers at test targets in the Arctic region.

Why the US military perceived a military exercise that was forewarned as a real attack and why it thought missiles aimed at targets 1,500 miles away were going to strike Ramstein is still unknown. Also unknown is what countermeasures were taken by the US military in the face of what was perceived as an imminent missile strike. While the Pentagon reports that no planes "were scrambled," it says nothing about ICBM bases in the US or nuclear submarines deployed at sea, which would be the first to respond to a nuclear attack.

In other words, the most critical unanswered question is how close this incident brought the world to the brink of nuclear war.

Replies to the statement posted on the Ramstein Air Base Facebook page ranged from expressions of the panic and fear caused by the sirens and loudspeaker warnings, to gallows humor and numerous complaints about the ramshackle character of the base's alert system.

"I ran into the [base exchange] and started yelling at folks to take cover," one airman wrote, adding, "When you hear this is not an exercise on the loud voice it makes your stomach knot up."

"It made my heart skip a beat for a second," wrote another, while a third commented, "The commissary might need to restock TP after that warning."

Many reported, however, that they had received no warning. In some cases, the loudspeaker could not be heard across the sprawling base, while in others, personnel were misdirected or received no cellphone notifications.

"Had this been REAL real so many would've been screwed, at best," read one comment. "Lodging literally told us it was training, even though command post/big voice told us to take shelter immediately."

Others pointed out that the Air Force and the Army use different notification systems, with warnings going out to the former, but not the latter.

One airman commented, "Is the Command Post system tied to the Hawaiian alert system? Thought I left that behind. ..."

This reference was to the January 13, 2018, incident in which, in the midst of increasingly rabid war threats by Trump against

North Korea, an alert was sent out by the Hawaii Emergency Management Agency to 1.5 million residents of the US Pacific island state that a ballistic missile would strike imminently and that they should “seek immediate cover.” The message, sent by cellphone and broadcast over television and radio added, “this is not a drill.” A full 38 minutes elapsed before the warning was rescinded, leaving an entire population in terror of nuclear annihilation.

As with the latest “false alarm” at Ramstein, the incident in Hawaii remained shrouded in secrecy, with the official explanation put out that it was the result of one employee’s mistake on a keyboard.

At the time, the *World Socialist Web Site* insisted that the incident could be understood only within the context of extreme global tensions and as “a necessary link in the chain of preparations for a catastrophic war.” It raised the question of whether the people of Hawaii were being used as “guinea pigs” and, whether the false alarm was staged as a means of gauging the reaction not only of North Korea, but China and Russia as well, to a US incoming missile alert. Such an event would doubtless compel all three countries to make their own preparations for imminent war, to be “carried out, all under the watchful eyes of US spy satellites, providing intelligence that could prove vital for a planned US invasion of North Korea.”

Whether such a staged “false alarm” was at work at Ramstein is unknown. What is clear from both events, however, is that US imperialism has no serious plans to protect anyone, military or civilian, from the threat of nuclear war. It factors in the deaths of countless millions in its war plans.

The incident at Ramstein was bracketed by two major statements directed to the incoming Biden administration on the subject of nuclear war.

The first was delivered by Gen. Timothy Ray, the commander of the Air Force Global Strike Command, to the 20th Annual Nuclear Triad and Deterrence Symposium held on December 10. In his opening remarks, Ray praised the Air Force’s nuclear-war-fighting capabilities: “Our bomber crews are more ready today than they’ve ever been in the history of Air Force Global Strike Command. Our ICBMs have been absolute stalwarts in this whole endeavor...they’ve never faltered. I could not be more pleased.”

The thrust of Ray’s remarks, however, was the insistence that there be no cuts to the proposed \$2 trillion nuclear modernization program, and, in particular, to the Air Force’s bombers and missiles, which he described as a “visible” deterrent, presumably as opposed to the Navy’s submarines.

“It’s really important that we don’t let these issues, really, get swept up into ideologies or into political transitions between administrations,” Ray said. “It’s not simply a question of whether you are for or against nuclear weapons. It really isn’t an option anymore.”

Meanwhile, in an article titled “Sleepwalking Toward the Nuclear Precipice” published by *Foreign Affairs* on Tuesday,

former secretary of energy Ernest Moniz, and Sam Nunn, a former senator and longtime chair of the Committee on Armed Services drew a direct comparison to present global tensions and the situation preceding World War I.

“Whereas a century ago millions died over four years of trench warfare, now the same number could be killed in a matter of minutes,” they warned. The incoming Biden administration, they write, “must confront the sobering fact that the potential for nuclear weapons use shadows more of the world’s conflicts than ever before. A single accident or blunder could lead to Armageddon.”

The bulk of the article is a plea for “dialogue and diplomacy,” beginning with the extension of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), the last surviving nuclear agreement between Washington and Moscow, which is set to expire February 5. It argues that this should lead to a mutual reduction in nuclear arsenals.

It further calls for strengthening “fail safe” systems to prevent an “accidental” attack, and the institution of rules requiring consultation with congressional leaders before going to nuclear war.

“World leaders are once again sleepwalking toward the precipice—this time of a nuclear catastrophe. They must wake up before it is too late,” the article concludes.

All indications, from Biden’s own record, to his selection of cabinet personnel and the right-wing character of the campaign waged against Trump on the grounds that he had been too “soft” on Russia and China, signal that the incoming administration will not depart from the bipartisan support for massive military spending—including the latest \$741 billion Pentagon funding bill—and policies of militarist aggression from the Middle East, to Eastern Europe and the South China Sea.

If anything, with Biden’s coming to office, the US military and intelligence apparatus will seek to make up for lost time. This means the redoubling of both the “pivot to Asia” war buildup against China and the confrontation against Russia, which was sharply escalated with the US-orchestrated coup in Ukraine, both under the Obama administration.

The threat of nuclear war is the inevitable product of a crisis-ridden capitalist system. It can be answered only by means of the independent and internationally unified struggle of the working class for socialism.



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