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On December 23 US President Elect Donald Trump “stunned” nuclear weapons experts by telling Mika Brzezinski, co-host of MSNBC’s “Morning Joe programme” that he was encouraging a nuclear arms race. This interview had followed his December 22nd tweet: “The United States must greatly strengthen and expand its nuclear capability until such time as the world comes to its senses regarding nukes”.

It is not clear whether Trump, who does not usually care to be briefed on such complicated subjects, has bothered to know that his outburst had negated 35 years of bipartisan US policy of reducing nuclear weapons. According to published sources President Obama had carried out a review of US nuclear capability in 2013 and found that US “already had a third more strategic weapons than were necessary to ensure nuclear deterrence”.

By sheer coincidence this outburst has come when the George Washington University’s “National Security Archives” had managed to declassify and release a file on December 22, 2016 on the same subject. This was a Top Secret file “Reagan Nuclear War Briefing” which had taken place at the National Emergency Airborne Command Post (NEACP) on 15 November 1981. Washington Post had covered this event without details on 16 November 1981. The Post report “Reagan Flies in ‘Doomsday’ Plane” had said that NEACP could fly 72 hours without refueling. It described the aircraft as “three-fourths the length of a football field” and “contains six areas for planning and directing military action in times of national emergencies.” The National Military Command System (NMCS) at that time had consisted of National Military Command Center at the Pentagon, the Alternate National Military Command Center, Raven Rock in Pennsylvania, the NEACP, and the communications systems interlinking them.

Donald Trump and his advisers would be well advised to study this file to know about the destructive potential of nuclear weapons even in

1981. In the background of the Cold War tensions, the briefing at that time had estimated that without civil defence, 80 million Americans could die if the Soviets launched a surprise nuclear attack. Reagan was already one year into his presidency and this was his first detailed briefing. Earlier he had received only shorter overviews of the U.S. nuclear programme. This briefing session came when a major Pentagon nuclear command post exercise known as IVY LEAGUE 82, aimed to test decision-making in a nuclear war, was about to be launched.

During this exercise it was found that the US national military command systems as above would be hit in case of surprise attack. US counter ability would depend upon how soon the “alternate Command Center, Special Facility [at Mount Weather, VA] and some of emergency locations” could be made functional. The briefing said that “Reagan and his advisers were not yet aware that the Soviets had similar fears of a surprise attack and were searching for intelligence that could warn them of a U.S. attack.” The American counter attack would target “the Kremlin leadership as one of the primary targets of retaliation”. The declassified report added: “Reagan would soon become a leading proponent of sharply reducing, and even abolishing, both sides’ nuclear stockpiles”.

However this reduction process was seriously threatened in November 1983 when a US- NATO war games “Operation Able Archer” caused fears in Kremlin leadership that a “nuclear strike was a real possibility”. Declassification of these papers was done in November 2013 through the efforts by Peter Burt, director of the Nuclear Information Service (NIS), London. This was published in the Guardian (UK) on 2 November 2013. The report indicated how risky the Cold War had become with near misses by 1983.

The NATO exercise had taken place during a period of great international tension. In March 1983 President Reagan had made his “Star Wars” speech outlining his “Strategic Defense Initiative” against Soviet Union. In September 1983 the Soviets had shot down KAL 007, a Korean Airlines Boeing 747, killing all 269 people on board. The plane had mistakenly strayed into their airspace and they thought that it was an American spy plane. Competitive rhetoric between 2 super powers had escalated global tensions.

“Able Archer” which started in November involved 40,000 US-NATO troops in Europe, co-coordinated by encrypted communications systems. In the imaginary scenario Warsaw Pact countries (Orange forces) would intervene in Yugoslavia following political unrest. NATO (Blue Forces) were defending their allies. The War games included a scenario of Orange forces expanding their operations into Finland, Norway and finally to Greece. The conflict would escalate from conventional war into use of chemical and nuclear weapons. “Able Archer” appeared to be so realistic that “it made the Russians believe that a nuclear strike on its territory was a real possibility”.

Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, on being briefed by her Intelligence of the Soviet reaction, ordered her officials to lobby with the Americans to make sure that such a mistake could never happen again. Peter Burt was quoted saying that these incidents were “a pivotal moment in modern history – the point at which an alarmed Thatcher government realised that the cold war had to be brought to an end and began the process of persuading its American allies likewise.” He continued: "The Cold War is sometimes described as a stable 'balance of power' between east and west, but the Able Archer story shows that it was in fact a shockingly dangerous period when the world came to the brink of a nuclear catastrophe on more than one occasion."

President Elect Trump should study these snippets from history to realize that casual remarks on such important subjects cannot be made without consulting security professionals. This is all the more necessary since his nominations for higher security positions in his government do not inspire confidence on their mature decision making abilities. These incidents also hold lessons to our Central political leadership that belligerent daily balderdash against Pakistan for domestic impression by our official spokesmen, supported by a complying visual media could entail similar risks.

(The writer is a former Special Secretary, Cabinet Secretariat who was a member of the High Level Enquiry Committee into the Mumbai 26/11 terror attacks. His book "National Security & Intelligence Management-A New Paradigm" was released in 2014)

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