

III.

NUCLEAR COMMAND AND CONTROL: GOALS AND PERFORMANCES

The third day of the conference turned to what was perhaps the most central issue in an assessment of accidental war risk: the nuclear command systems themselves. There was a discussion of what should be required of nuclear command systems, and of the degree to which the existing systems of both superpowers met these standards. Presentations were given by Dr. Bruce Blair, General Mikhail Milstein, and Mr. Marco Carnovale; the commentator was Dr. Douglas Ross.

Bruce Blair's paper outlined the extent to which current US procedures for dealing with crisis alerts increased the risk of accidental nuclear war. He began his presentation with the assertion that the superpowers had overemphasized a cardinal principle of crisis stability, threat, at the expense of another complementary principle, reassurance, in designing procedures to reduce the risk of deliberate or accidental nuclear war. The ways in which threat increases the risk of accidental nuclear war are vividly illustrated by operational procedures for a crisis.

In peacetime, Blair argued, negative control measures act as safeguards to prevent the unauthorized or accidental use of nuclear weapons. In time of crisis, however, the emphasis would clearly switch from negative to positive control; the military would be more concerned with co-ordinating their forces and implementing their war plans accurately, than with maintaining safeguards against the accidental or unauthorized use of nuclear weapons.

The co-ordination of forces by a legitimate authority would be difficult due to the variety of weapons systems within the nuclear arsenal. Furthermore, the command system would be so vulnerable that positive control would be difficult to re-establish after a nuclear attack. Because of this vulnerability central authority would inevitably be weakened. National policy officials control the terms of the alert only in a legal sense; there is too much detail to be handled by central authorities and, in practice, alert authority resides as low as the level of commander. Because the commander is responsible for the safety of his troops, he is allowed to take those alert measures which he deems necessary or prudent.

Compounding the authorities' problem of dealing with a virtually incomprehensible amount of detail is the difficulty of maintaining communications with the field, once alert procedures have been put into effect. In order to avoid enemy detection, there are progressively stricter rules against radio transmission the higher the level of crisis alert. Blair noted the irony of this situation in which the higher the level of crisis, the more concerned national officials would be about operational interactions, but the less they would be able to control these interactions. Central authorities would become insulated from the realities of the field. However