

adversaries may be tempted to “test” each other by using coercive tactics. This leads Leng to conclude that:

Because these are also likely to be conflicts where there is a good deal of symmetry in usable military capabilities and, perhaps most important, motivation, such temptations could also too easily lead to a disastrous miscalculation, an accidental nuclear war caused by human error.

Johan Niezing’s paper was concerned primarily with the methodology of determining risk. It centred on the argument that risk analysis could be a useful tool in clarifying the basic shortcomings of nuclear strategy, especially in the assessment of accidental nuclear war. Niezing defined risk as the product of chance and damage, and maintained that investigation of both these factors would enable peace researchers to argue more persuasively. He asserted that while risk analysis cannot allot precise values in complex areas such as accidental nuclear war, it can identify some tendencies which increase or decrease the element of risk and thus it can counteract intuitive arguments which unduly minimize chance. From this point of view, studies of the structure of accidental nuclear war are a necessary complement to traditional nuclear strategy. Such studies should focus on the lack of redundancy in command and control systems and on the increasing inadequacy of international procedures to prevent accidental nuclear war. Nuclear strategy would benefit from an assessment of the probable damage of nuclear war in general, and particularly from studies of indirect or non-military effects, such as nuclear winter.

Niezing pointed out that risk analysis of accidental nuclear war was likely to evoke opposition in the form of silence or scepticism. Researchers should anticipate such opposition and seek to address it. Niezing asserted that risk analysis must analyze not only risk itself, but also the pattern of *risk acceptance*. Some people are prepared to accept a high risk of nuclear war because they perceive that it offers “benefits.” How these benefits are perceived will frequently be based on intuition or ideological assumptions. It is imperative that arguments against such views should not themselves be based on ideological assumptions, but should rather confine themselves to pointing out inconsistencies in the analysis and showing the ways in which such perceptions are arrived at. He suggested that the psychology of cognition might be relevant to such a study.

Cognitive theory shows that people block out information which they do not wish to take in, by various strategies ranging from ignoring to totally re-interpreting unpleasant information. “Hard” or “non-social” information, especially isolated facts, tend to be ignored, and complex sets of hard facts are trivialized by splitting them into isolated facts. “Soft” or “social” information can easily be transformed into less-threatening messages. These denials would not be so disturbing were it not for the fact that a failure to appreciate the importance of chance may cause great damage.