A JOINT NUCLEAR RISK CONTROL CENTER

by

RICHARD K. BETTS

War can result from a number of causes. The fundamental one is usually an irreconcilable conflict of interest, but misperception and miscalculation can be contributing causes or "accidental" precipitants of a war that neither side wants. In the nuclear age the United States and the Soviet Union have overwhelming reasons to decide that no dispute is irreconcilable because the costs of total war would dwarf any interest at stake. More than at any previous point in history the superpowers need to worry about the accidental factors in conflict. These could evolve from faulty assessments of a threat posed by the other side (assessments that could encourage preemption) or precautionary military actions that could in turn be misread by the other side, provoking it to preempt. In a crisis—when nerves are frayed, suspicions heightened, and time for decision compressed—the chances increase that miscalculation can produce an escalatory cycle of reactions. The technical conditions encouraging this possibility are also increased to the degree that both sides believe an appreciable portion of their forces are vulnerable to a first-strike—and leaders in both the United States and the USSR are likely to believe this for some time to come. This places a high premium not only on managing crises but on preventing them. Of course this is the task of policy and diplomacy in general. To prevent misunderstanding of particular actions that could aggravate a source of tension, however, may involve more technical matters. Given the parlous state of US-Soviet relations, and increased concern about the record of Soviet compliance with past agreements, the ideas discussed in this article may not be very promising. They are worth exploring, however, as long as hopes for what they might achieve in practice are kept modest.

The importance of regular consultation to avoid accidents from more technical factors becomes most acute when the more fundamental sources of conflict grow, raising the chances of crisis. This occurred in the early 1980s as US-Soviet relations deteriorated dramatically. In such time of tension, however, arranging special consultations becomes extraordinarily difficult. Suspicion, shrill propaganda, and unilateral moves tend to supersede frank discussions, and exchanges outside normal diplomatic channels decline. (This problem was most dramatically exemplified by Moscow's suspension of arms control negotiations at the end of 1983.) Given this paradoxical combination of the importance of communication and the practical barriers against it, there is particular value in *institutionalized* mechanisms for continuous discussion at the working level, mechanisms that might not be so much at the mercy of political winds as visible exchanges at higher levels.

Finally, there is another potential source of accidental war that could be as significant as misunderstanding of the other superpower, one which could also provide an incentive for further institutionalizing consultation that might help override resistance due to the brittle relations between Moscow and Washington. This is the danger of catalytic conflict

from actions of third parties such as terrorists or reckless client states. In this respect nuclear proliferation could present the greatest risk of unintended engagement between the superpowers. The nuclear proliferation issue is one of the few on which the United States and the Soviet Union share strong common interests, and on which cooperation has proved feasible and effective (for example, collaboration in the London suppliers group on restricting the transfer of sensitive nuclear technologies and equipment). Linking a new consultative mechanism to the prevention of catalytic confrontation should be attractive enough to modify or sidetrack objections based on normal reluctance to get involved in exchanging security data with principal adversaries.

A Joint Nuclear Risk Control Center would make discussions of how to deal with potential accidents a permanent and continuous enterprise. It would supplement other means that are not primarily geared to this function. The Hotline is an emergency channel to deal with critical events in progress or on the verge of occurrence. The Standing Consultative Commission (SCC) revolves around compliance with arms control agreements and meets only periodically or under special circumstances.

The Center would be a bilateral forum for the superpowers. For the United States especially there would be a need to consult allies and keep them fully informed, but attempting to integrate them into the Center would vitiate its effectiveness. Speed, efficiency, and frankness decline in direct relation to the number of parties involved in any discussion. This is all the more true when different sovereign states (rather than just the numerous agencies within a government) are involved. Issues between the superpowers are complex enough, and progress in exchange could only be further complicated by introducing intra-allied disagreements directly—not to mention the problems that including interested major parties like China would raise. Broadening national representation in the Center would have symbolic value at best, but genuine multilateralism would ruin it. (The problem is reflected in the fate of the United Nations Military Staff Committee, which "has not deliberated on any substantive matter in 35 years.")[1] Restricting membership need not raise delicate diplomatic issues with American allies—side consultations in bilateral arms control negotiations provide satisfactory precedent.

To function effectively, the Center should be conceived as one entity with two locations. This might appear awkward at first glance but could be resolved by having permanent low-level staff maintain two offices—one site in each capital, linked by teleconferencing—while higher-level commissioners would meet periodically at alternate sites. This would provide the advantage of easier interactions between Center personnel and the backstopping bureaucracies, which would be lost if the organization were headquartered in a single neutral site such as Geneva. If either of the two governments were reticent about jumping into a fully collaborative pair of organizations, the two sites of the Center could begin as nationally manned units, with a very few liaison officers from the other side. If this worked satisfactorily the site offices could then expand into fully joint manning in both capitals.[2]

PURPOSES AND FUNCTIONS

The Center would seek to help prevent crises, lay groundwork for more common

---

Richard K. Betts is a Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution. He has taught at Harvard, Columbia, and Johns Hopkins universities and served on the staffs of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and the National Security Council. He is the author of *Soldiers, Statesmen, and Cold War Crises* (Harvard Univ. Press, 1977), and *Surprise Attack: Lessons for Defense Planning* (Brookings, 1982). He coauthored *The Irony of Vietnam* (Brookings, 1979) and edited *Cruise Missiles: Technology, Strategy, Politics* (Brookings, 1981). In 1984 he served as Foreign Policy Adviser in the Mondale-Ferraro campaign.

---

understandings about potential threats to technical stability, and cooperate against dangerous third-party actions. In principle this could involve exchanges of data, discussions of particular issues in force posture and doctrine, and consideration of problematic scenarios and possible joint actions. In practice, this is a tall order since tension, suspicion, and bureaucratic and political conservatism all present obstacles to free and easy discussion of sensitive matters. Thus a prime interest is to preserve as much flexibility as possible in the conception of the enterprise. This would help avoid requiring such specific commitments in advance that leaders would be reluctant to endorse the concept; it would leave room for evolution and adaptation as circumstances permitted; and it would facilitate any of the specific activities that did get underway. The important drawbacks, risks, or barriers in practice to various functions will be addressed later in this article. What follows below is an elaboration of the aims in principle, holding the risks in abeyance.

The best way to deal with a crisis is to stop it from happening. Crisis prevention would be the primary purpose of the new organization. In one sense it would function as a cooperative watch center; that is, monitoring actual sources of conflict at a nascent stage, when explanation or consultation might help nip them in the bud. Additionally, in "normal" times, discussions could seek to anticipate hypothetical problems before they eventuate—especially potential sequences of escalatory precautions in which both sides believe themselves to be acting defensively and prudently while viewing the other as acting provocatively—and consider what measures might support the common interest of averting or ameliorating confrontation. In both cases this would involve providing data to clarify either side's reason for alarm about the other's action, or to explain why one's own action should not be construed as threatening. Even if exchanges did not solve the disputes at issue they might at least increase, at the margin, the stock of mutual understanding of what each side considers threatening and the measures it considers necessary for hedging against threats during crises. Moreover, it might help to clarify what actions are reactive; in the heat of controversy precautionary reactions may easily be misread as initiatives.

At best such consultations might provide some basis—however limited or tentative—for tacit agreements on avoiding certain types of alerts or movements under given circumstances, or for unilateral revisions of standard operating procedures to prevent unintended provocation. For example, consider a situation where one side had scheduled military maneuvers that coincided with the outbreak of a crisis, and the other side interpreted the action as purposively connected with the crisis and responded with an alert, which the first side then interpreted as an initiative requiring response. The problem would be aggravated to the extent that standard operating procedures (or deliberate decision due to misinterpretation) made the second side's action appear disproportionate to the first's—for example, alerting nuclear components in addition to conventional forces—and thus less perceptibly a reaction to the original maneuver. In theory this might resemble a situation akin to the US DEFCON 3 alert in October 1973, except that the Soviet action provoking it—alerting of several airborne divisions—would be part of a previously planned exercise. Even if discussions in the Center only helped to make leaders more sensitive to monitoring and intervening in peacetime activities of their own armed services, they would make a useful contribution.

Although problems to be discussed subsequently would make the whole proposition difficult, it might be worthwhile to discuss certain operational "rules of the game" for alerts, maneuvers, or reinforcements in peacetime that could occasion escalation. In a sense the considerations involved would be analogous to those in the 1972 Incidents at Sea Agreement. That accord provided for notification of naval actions that could endanger navigation or aircraft in flight and barred harrassment or close approach to ships. Certain provisions

for notification of ground force maneuvers already exist as the result of negotiations on Europe; the Center could be a forum for exploring refinements of these, or ways to extend them to other regions. Discussions might more directly focus on applications to nuclear forces. An ambitious possibility would be discussions of limitations on simultaneous nuclear alerts: for example, agreement that partial alert by one side would be followed by proportionately partial alert by the other, rather than a full alert that would push crisis escalation higher.[3]

Center discussions could also identify categories of data about forces or procedures that would give the side monitoring questionable activities more confidence in its judgments about what danger they pose: for instance, more certainty about whether exercises of tactical nuclear forces included warheads as well as launchers, or what types of command and control safeguards (such as permissive action links) apply to given forces.

Exchanges might distinguish between two levels of concern for confidence-building: "normal" times, and times of growing tension. The former could focus on things such as prior notification of missile tests or large-scale bomber launches, or data exchanges on force structure and posture. The latter would focus more on means for prompt and credible explanations of military activities that increase immediate capability, such as redeployment and reinforcement.

An additional function could be staff consultations on background issues that are pertinent to avoiding or resolving crises, but which involve non-observable factors. This would include primarily issues of strategic doctrine, concepts of stability, linkages between technical aspects of force structure and crisis stability, and the ambiguities of connection between declaratory policy and action policy on these matters. In the United States a critical debate in the past decade involved whether the Soviet Union was committed to a first-strike "war-fighting" nuclear doctrine, or accepted the principle of "mutual assured destruction" (MAD) and the unthinkability of using nuclear forces in any capacity other than retaliation. Similarly, Soviet critics charge that US official rhetoric about MAD covered ongoing attempts to maximize first-strike options. These subjects are problematic because much of what they involve is vague, theoretical, tentative, or the subject of some debate or confusion *within* the establishments of both sides. In terms of potential for miscalculation or misunderstanding, however, these subjects could be among the most important.

Discussions on such matters would probably have some of the qualities of a bull-session, so the Center forum could be more conducive to them than others (such as arms control talks) where official negotiated accords are expected to result or where legal matters of compliance with specific obligations are at issue (such as the SCC). The benefit would be that exchanges on such controversial or subjective matters where explicit agreement is unlikely could produce marginal increases in sensitivity or tentative understanding, without disappointing the larger expectations that go with formal negotiations.

Finally, the Center could be a place to raise issues of compliance with arms control agreements not covered by the SCC, such as the charges of Soviet violation of biological warfare agreements in the Sverdlovsk incident. This would be somewhat unrelated to other functions, but is reasonable on three grounds. First, in the absence of another officially designated regular mechanism for dealing with such matters, the Center would be as good a place as any for working-level consultations. Second, since the governing writ of the Center should be as permissive and flexible as possible, and specific requirements for agreed results avoided, the presumption should be that any matter of concern may be raised unless otherwise stipulated. And third, to keep the Center a thriving enterprise, it may prove helpful to keep the agenda as inclusive as possible in order to avoid long periods of inactivity.

Cooperation against third-party threats is another area of promise. The American and Soviet staffs of the Center might exchange intelligence on other countries' or groups' moves toward nuclear proliferation.

The clearest precedent for this is the 1977 case in which the USSR informed Washington and NATO allies of apparent South African preparations for a nuclear test. This sort of cooperation can be useful where the mutuality of superpower interests is clearest (as on proliferation) and they have different intelligence collection assets or patterns of coverage. It would be both most vital and most feasible in regard to potential attempts by terrorists or subnational groups to gain access to nuclear material. Cooperation on this sort of matter would be not only uncontroversial and unobjectionable to the overwhelming majority of other governments, but quite popular as well. Therefore it might be an ideal mission to establish the rationale for the Center, and emphasizing it could be a way to get the enterprise rolling quickly.

The number of cases in which cooperation against national governments would be practical, however, is very limited. South Africa was not a problem because the United States had no interest in warm relations with Pretoria that would compromise the interest in strong-arm tactics against proliferation. But most potential proliferators are closer to Washington than to Moscow. In the case of Argentina, for instance, numerous considerations—such as supporting the endurance of the new democratic regime—would argue for more discreet unilateral initiatives and against bringing the Soviets into the picture. It is vital to consult in advance about third-party detonations of any sort, however; a study undertaken by General Richard Ellis, former head of the Strategic Air Command, in response to a request by Senator Sam Nunn, concluded that the possibility of third-party action catalyzing a superpower nuclear exchange in some scenarios is alarmingly real.[4]

In regard to the terrorist possibility the Center could be a forum for contingency planning, exchanging information, and maintaining contact during incidents—for example, consultation on means for determining the nature or origin of unexplained or uncertain detonations such as the "South Atlantic flash" of 1979. Contingency planning might involve procedures to be followed in the event of loss or theft of nuclear weapons, plutonium, or uranium from US or Soviet inventories, or disappearance of fissile materials in transit. To deal with the political problems of considering national action, two principles could be used. First, to keep the programs of British and French allies or those of the Chinese out of contention, it could be stipulated that issues of concern would be limited to those states defined as non-nuclear under the terms of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty of 1968. Second, in regard to other countries, the norm could be established that either side is free to raise questions about a given case, but the other side is bound to engage the question only at its own discretion. This is consistent with the notion that cooperation is practical only where the mutuality of interest is clear and accepted, and that reticence in a particular instance need not be cited as bad faith.

ORGANIZATION AND OPERATION

The structure of the Center and the nature of its activities over time would have to be determined in advance, but the prior determination should strike a balance between murkiness (which could confuse or paralyze the start-up of the organization) and rigidity (which could cut off chances in advance for desirable evolution and elaboration). The best compromise might be a writ that stipulated both a minimum set of requirements and the expectation that broader arrangements would be undertaken at the discretion of both sides as experience with Center discussions accumulated.

The Center would not manage crises, because top officials and their own staffs would inevitably take over. Other organs and channels would be the crucial ones for dealing with immediate, high-priority conflicts. The Center might, however, be able to perform some ancillary or limited support functions. This should be considered only a possible minor role, not a *raison d'ètre* for the institution. An example of what might be involved, though, would be if other elements of

leadership or bureaucracy in one country noted an apparently minor yet worrisome and ambiguous change in military posture by the other side in the midst of a confrontation—not a massive nuclear alert, but perhaps a curious shifting of some aircraft from one base to another. This could be a place to ask for explanations when other channels might be overloaded with communications on more urgent matters. If staffs of the Center have established reasonable working relationships and are used to interacting with each other in "normal" times, and discussing low-order technical questions on which higher officials have not focused, they might be well geared to exploring *tactical*-level options for deescalation or disengagement. To have flexibility to do this, though, it would have to be well understood that Center personnel did not necessarily speak for their governments, were only authorized to suggest possibilities, and no suggestion could be taken as a firm offer by the opposing government. One potential problem with this arrangement, in the context of crisis, is that it might be seen as a license to "smoke out" the opponent, creating suspicion or "Alphonse and Gaston" attempts to get the opponent to be forthcoming first. Even if no agreement or solution were suggested by discussions in the Center, this would at least be a basis for increasing information available to other actors in crisis management; Center staffs could report whatever their counterparts said, and the crisis managers could take it or leave it as an intelligence input.

With regard to the Center's regular activities, exchanges should be as frequent as practical in order to maintain the habit of dialogue, yet not so frequent that it becomes difficult to fill the agenda. Regular meetings should be held (perhaps bimonthly) to avoid making whether or not to call a meeting an issue in itself, as well as to prevent any public presumption of malfeasance or noncompliance with agreements if a meeting is called. (These points are suggested by previous experience with the Standing Consultative Commission. In parallel with the two-tier approach of permanent staff and higher-level commissioners, the former could maintain regular dialogue while the latter would handle special meetings related to compliance questions or gathering tensions.)

The Center's mandate for discussion should be explicit, stated as an order from highest authority (which would increase Soviet representatives' frankness). It should also be broad in principle (to leave maximum room for evolution) but narrow in concrete requirements (to give the experiment a chance to work). Given the mandate in principle (such as "the parties will discuss means to reduce nuclear risks and exchange data appropriate to that task"), the Center personnel themselves could work out the specific agenda once the operation gets underway.

Normal military secrecy requirements or political desires to maintain flexibility by preserving ambiguity will pose challenging constraints. The Soviets in particular have traditionally been reluctant to reveal more data than necessary for negotiation of official agreements; by the end of the 1970s, though, they were more forthcoming than they had been in earlier years, so the possibility of greater openness cannot be dismissed. Within whatever limits prove feasible there could be periodic exchanges of data on military forces' composition, exercises, or alert procedures. The focus should be on nuclear forces, although enough flexibility to raise other issues should be retained. Monitoring and discussion of conventional force activities can be appropriate because the danger of nuclear accidents or confrontations could grow out of actions at the conventional level.

Other topics are matters pertinent to avoiding or resolving crises but that are not covered in arms control agreements or official understandings. Examples include deterrence concepts, operational doctrine, and connections between technical aspects of force structure and crisis stability.

The staff of the Center should be small because speed and openness of communication decline as the number of people involved grows. Moreover, the agenda might not be big enough to keep a large number constantly employed. So a large staff would not only aggravate bureaucratic redundancy

but would also raise the danger of incentives to make work for itself in normal times, and thus possibly to increase friction by "creating" crises out of insignificant issues. Finally, if the Center is to function in a way that offers policymakers something more useful than they already get from other organs, the staff should be of high quality. A problem to guard against is that assignment to the Center might not be considered "career-enhancing" in most bureaucracies. This underlines the argument for keeping the operation "lean and mean."

Combining this goal with the need to keep the Center functioning on a day-to-day basis could be done through the two-tier arrangement suggested earlier. The small permanent staffs could keep channels open and perhaps engage in follow-up exchanges on details concerning matters discussed by the higher-level commissioners who would meet only periodically. To preserve flexibility there should be provisions for temporary augmentation of either permanent or high-level staff, depending on the issues under discussion at specific meetings.

The representation of both sides' various bureaucratic components in the Center should be parallel insofar as possible, though asymmetries in organization of the national security structures preclude absolutely identical composition. Parallelism should be greatest in the first tier of high-level commissioners. Among the most important agency representatives there would be those from the military (the Joint Chiefs of Staff and possibly the Strategic Air Command on the US side, the General Staff and Strategic Rocket Forces on the Soviet side) since the danger of accidental engagements can flow from unanticipated consequences of standard operating procedures. (This of course is not the only major source of nuclear risks, since political crises create the potential for escalation. Dealing with political conflicts of interest and nipping a confrontation in the bud, however, are for high policymakers, not the Center staff.) For diplomatic as well as substantive reasons the State Department and Foreign Ministry should be represented, and so might the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) on the US side and some comparable civilian official for the Soviets (although the lack of a Soviet organization comparable to OSD might make that difficult). At the second tier of permanent staff the same units should also be represented. Representation of other components at this level might be left more to the discretion of either side. For the United States a Sovietologist should be included, to help gauge likely reactions of the opposing delegation. The Arms Control and Disarmament Agency might participate in some non-crisis functions, especially discussion of formal confidence-building measures. Finally, there should be an *ex officio* member from the National Security Council Staff.

Perhaps most important, however, as well as most delicate, would be the representation from the intelligence community. Information security will be a prime concern and a very difficult issue to manage, because there is an obvious, severe tension between the aims of the Center—greater confidence due to more revelation of information—and normal security. The Soviets are also especially sensitive to the possibility of an adversary using talks for intelligence collection, which direct participation of intelligence officials might symbolize if not managed discreetly. Intelligence representatives would have to be available (at least for the United States) to make determinations about whether certain exchanges would endanger "sources and methods." (The SCC handled this problem by assigning a CIA representative the responsibility for sources and methods, and a Defense Department representative the responsibility for protecting US information.) Also (though this might have to be done outside the Center staff), there should be some declassification contingency planning for crises—prior determination of what sorts of information could be revealed for purposes of preventing Soviet miscalculation. (Waiting until the moment to consider this question would cause long delays at just the time that expeditious communication became most vital.) At the same time the profile of the intelligence community representatives should be kept

low because of Soviet suspicions of such forums as intelligence gathering operations. This is a delicate problem to manage because in one sense the basic idea for the Center, in assuming the desirability of less secrecy, *does* promote intelligence collection.[5]

For the United States, the Center should report directly to the National Security Council rather than through a department. This chain of command has three advantages. First, the Center's functions do not fall clearly within the military, political, or analytical provinces; rather, they crosscut them, so none of the most relevant units—State, Defense, or the Director of Central Intelligence—has a clear claim to responsibility. Second, flexibility might be enhanced if the operation is not dominated by foreign service, military, or other departmental bureaucracies. Third, in crises the Center would have to contribute to decisions speedily or not at all; direct access to the top would help.

In proposing a new organization it is useful to anticipate charges that it may only be a new layer or redundant complicating factor in government. It is true that the Center's functions might overlap to some degree with other organs or channels. In normal exchanges for the crisis prevention purpose, Center discussions could wind up treading into territory of the SCC or relevant negotiations themselves (START, INF, MBFR). In crisis management support activities there might be some potential overlap with the Strategic Warning Staff, the National Intelligence Officer for Warning (NIO/W), and the Hotline. In neither case need the redundancy be substantial, and it could certainly be less than is usual in the other areas of the policy process.

The clearest way to distinguish the Center in the first case is that negotiations (and the SCC, which is meant to deal with implementation of agreements) deal with force structure and force levels while Center talks would deal more with force *status* and operations. (In a sense the former deal with "static" matters subject to formal agreement, the latter with "dynamic" issues or those too uncertain for clear and binding treaties.) There might be some provision, perhaps informal, for merging SCC and Center discussions on particular crosscutting issues. This could also be an indirect means for linking Center talks with negotiating teams, without further complicating the negotiations themselves.

It would not be difficult to differentiate functions in the second case, but the question of communications between the units would have to be handled with care. It might be helpful for the NIO/W to know how Soviet representatives in the Center are explaining apparently threatening movements, but not for warning communiqués to flow freely to the Center, where chances of unapproved Soviet access are greater. (A counterargument would be that a warning unit's perspectives should not be compromised by official Soviet statements that could be meant to deceive, and that such statements could be compared to "unadulterated" warning reports at higher levels anyway. It is just as sensible to argue, however, that professional warning officers should have a chance to consider and comment on possible disinformation before top decision-makers judge it.) The Center offices could have secure facilities and communication links to the warning apparatus and White House Situation Room, but with careful procedures to control sharing. Though it is important to be sure that this process is controlled, however, the problem is not crucial because the Center would play a minor role at best in crisis management.

Congressional oversight of the Center presents both opportunities and problems. The principal opportunity is that it can help short-circuit public misunderstanding due to suspicion by validating administration claims that Moscow has a satisfactory explanation for questionable activities. The principal problem is the Soviet penchant for insisting on the privacy of discussions, which discourages wider participation and publicity. Both potential aspects are illustrated in the history of the SCC, where privacy provisions initially inhibited disclosure of reasons for events that some public critics have charged were SALT

violations. One option would be to give normal oversight jurisdiction to the intelligence committees (which have a reputation for leaking less than other committees) with provision for informing other relevant committees on matters of particular interest, while encouraging the Soviets to see how occasional revelations can work in their interest.

RISKS AND IMPLICATIONS

In the largest sense the risks posed by the proposed Center flow from the essential dilemma of US-Soviet relations. The superpowers have both cooperative and competitive interests; they share an interest in avoiding armed conflict, but they also seek to prevent each other from gaining any advantage in the balance of power. The matters of concern to the Joint Center for Nuclear Risk Reduction lie in the gray area between cooperation and competition because both sides will be alert to the possibility that any measure that is discussed, or any piece of information revealed at the request of the other side, might help that side disproportionately. The goal is to focus on ways to avoid accidental sources of conflict, which should be matters of equal interest. But each side will recognize that there can be future conflicts of interest where actions or reactions would be purposeful rather than accidents or miscalculations, and they will want to preserve their options. If one side does miscalculate and act in a dangerous manner, the other will want to be free to react rationally but effectively to counter it. Many of the risks in the Center's operation would result from these ambiguous tradeoffs. The general norm for trying to manage the tradeoffs should be that the Center's mission is to discuss and explore, not to decide or make commitments; when discussions do yield agreement at the Center level, consideration of more formal commitments can be passed to higher levels of authority.

The general potential benefit of the Center is to reduce the risk of nuclear war. At best this may be done directly by discussion of matters that could lead to agreements on mutual restraints or operational precautions against unintended provocation. The secondary or indirect benefit would simply be more wide-ranging, detailed, and regular dialogue, which offers possible gains in reduced misunderstanding, increased confidence, a better atmospheric background for other contacts, and the symbolic promise of enhanced cooperation on other issues. Reduction of nuclear risks from this indirect benefit would be a matter of marginal or serendipitous spillover effects, but the priority of the nuclear danger makes even the slightest incidental benefits a warrant for the institution. There are several negative possibilities that must be measured against these aims.

Dialogues in some instances could aggravate conflict rather than alleviate it, for instance by forcing unresolvable issues into the open or highlighting basic differences of strategy that frustrate agreement. This could be more desirable than the "ignorance is bliss" alternative, but it would then make those irritants harder to ignore, or could enhance the propaganda position of one side. Perhaps the most general example is related to a basic asymmetry in politico-military strategy. Historically the United States relied on escalation as an instrument of policy, to offset perceived Soviet advantages at lower levels of military power, or to make a diplomatic signal particularly dramatic.[6] The last prominent instance of this sort was the DEFCON 3 alert during the 1973 Middle East war. Whether or not actions of this sort are wise or a desirable option to maintain, tradition poses potential obstacles to American agreement to circumscribe them. The Soviets, however, given favorable asymmetries in geography and the size of ground forces, have had less strategic or doctrinal incentive to exploit such options in crises near their borders. They might logically propose extension of the nuclear "no first use" principle (which they have declared and the United States has not) to "no first nuclear alert" or some such variant.

Conversely, the United States could cite the mobilization of ground force units in the Soviet Union, say, in the region near the

Persian Gulf, as the first step in an escalatory process. But since Soviet forces in normal times are kept at a proportionally lower level of readiness, they could see limited mobilization as a necessary element in precautionary behavior in a crisis, and cite it as less dangerous than the alternative of changing the status of nuclear components. In short, what one side views as fundamental to strategic options as opposed to what is a potential source of accident or miscalculation could be the reverse of the combination seen by the other side. If discussions bogged down in such matters, the apparent utility of the Center could diminish.

Another negative possibility is that if incorrect signals are given inadvertently, the other side may see them as attempted deception or bad faith. This problem is not trivial because one's own policy or doctrine is not always understood in the same way even *within* one's own bureaucracy, while the nature of the Center's mandate would put a premium on free discussion—which multiplies the chances for errors or inconsistencies to be communicated.

Clarifying US doctrine might also undermine the "uncertainty" component of deterrence. There is a historic tension in US strategy between acceptance of *mutual* nuclear deterrence on one hand, and on the other, commitment to first use of nuclear weapons to stave off defeat in a European war. Most analysts believe that the second lacks credibility on rational grounds, but retains some credibility as long as the Soviets cannot be certain that US leaders accept such a conclusion. Detailed, frank discussions might erode the benign aspect of confusion that underwrites such uncertainty.

Beyond the general value of dialogue another benefit would be the possibility of fostering more consensus on the conceptual frame of reference for mutual interests, particularly in regard to technical norms of stability. There are probably no notable risks attached to this goal. One possibility that might be considered, however, is that if the Soviets *reject* particular US rationales for why certain activities are threatening, then the US might feel less confident in the advisability of responding to such activities if they occur. Or if we did respond, the Soviets could more easily charge that there was no legitimate excuse for the US action, since they had clearly demonstrated why their own action was unobjectionable.

The Center's effects on third parties could be both negative and positive. It should help reassure US allies, especially Western European publics, against fears of American nuclear adventurism. It might also marginally enhance joint US and Soviet diplomatic pressures against nuclear proliferation by increasing the credibility of superpower efforts to reduce their own reliance on nuclear weapons. On the other hand, the same efforts could have negative results; by raising European governments' doubts about the US commitment to extended deterrence and nuclear first-use; by encouraging European and Chinese suspicions about superpower condominium (especially if consultations involved sharing data on British, French, and Chinese strategic forces); or by promoting further Sino-Soviet detente (though that would not be altogether a bad thing). The condominium issue could be especially sensitive, since if the Center yields optimum results it could indeed increase the image of a joint security regime being imposed over allies, possibly at their expense. There were murmurings of at least tentative concern on this score from NATO allies in some phases of past arms control negotiations. In most recent times, however, US allies have appeared most concerned about the opposite danger—that the death of detente between the superpowers threatens them. If the Center were to get off the ground in the near future, therefore, it would almost certainly be welcomed by European NATO members. The condominium issue might only arise in "better times," that is, if the aims of the Center—reducing the risk of nuclear war—appear to be achieved to a significant degree. Some of these problems are inevitable, given our NATO allies' traditional alternation between fears that the United States is not sufficiently dependable and fears that it is excessively dependable (that is, provocative). Suspicions might be calmed by

keeping allied governments regularly briefed on the talks, and soliciting their recommendations for questions to be pursued.

Finally, there is the question of domestic political implications. A positive result might be some calming influence on the US antinuclear movement, and thus some reduction in opposition to weapon modernization programs. The negative risk is that apparent success of Center exchanges might exert some lulling effect, highlighting optimistic assumptions and reinforcing skepticism about threat assessments. If secrecy is maximized (as Moscow might wish) domestic impact—whether favorable or not—would be minimized.

The military and intelligence areas are the realms where management would be most difficult. At worst the Center will not function well and there will be few exchanges that reveal information or ideas in a more useful way than other channels do. This would represent failure, but would not introduce new risks into the relationship. It is only if the Center *succeeds* in its mission of sharing data or views that are not fully detectable or understandable by "national technical means" that the double-edged quality of some of its activities could be problematic. Voluntary revelation of information can reassure an opponent, but to the extent that such reassurance depends on trust it can be an occasion for deception or manipulation. In creating reciprocal obligations, exchange can also pose problems for the preservation of one's own information security and operational flexibility.

For intelligence collection and analysis the most positive result would be to increase the amount of available data and official Soviet signals about doctrine and operational concerns. The negative possibilities would be compromise of our military plans or intelligence assets, increased vulnerabilities to deception, or a temptation to accept asymmetrical exchanges of data (since the Soviets have been traditionally less willing to see benefits in transparency). A related criticism might be that overanxiousness to maintain dialogue might increase chances of revealing too much or enhancing understanding of matters better left misunderstood. For example, better information on the opponent's force structure and procedures could overlap with the information that is useful for offensive targeting. With careful prior planning, however, there is no reason that need occur—stalling the talks would be more likely than foolish breaches of secrecy.

The greatest overall risk associated with Center activity that some critics would cite is vulnerability to Soviet disinformation (possible compromise of sensitive US information is another danger to guard against, but is within US control). If exchanges in the Center are to be a meaningful improvement over what is so far offered by mechanisms already in place, both sides will have to be forthcoming. On many issues there may be no way to assure Soviet veracity; if all their explanations could be reliably checked by independent means, there would be less need for this mechanism in the first place. Perhaps a team of devil's advocates—making a case for why a given Soviet explanation might be questioned or rejected—should be integrated in the operation, if not in the Center itself then in the backstopping apparatus.

In dealing with the potential for accidental engagement of military forces, the benefits of the Center might be to reduce the chances by clarifying potentially dangerous circumstances, reaching tacit agreements on avoiding such circumstances, or expanding or refining the 1971 "Accidents Measures" Agreement. The negative possibility, as with many confidence-building measures, is that such progress could restrict our own military flexibility. It might, for example, reinforce political pressures against quick response to apparent Soviet war preparations; there might be inhibitions against abrogating confidence-building measures right after Moscow does, lest we blur the issue of who is at fault in the crisis.

The danger of deception is linked to the natural continuing competition for strategic advantage. Ambitious proposals would heighten suspicions that one side was seeking to disarm, delay, or hamper the other's options for legitimate defensive reaction in a crisis by posing those options as dangerous

sources of "accidental" escalation. Placing a high premium on avoiding risk of accident may be seen to paralyze initiative or prevent proper precautions. Asymmetries in organizational structure and SOPs also mean that certain hypothetical "brake" mechanisms for crisis prevention or management would affect one side's options more than the other's. Reinforcement of crisis stability through risk reduction could conflict with the view that deterrence is sometimes reinforced through deliberate manipulation of risk. Yet the fact remains that both sides do recognize the danger of accident; the problems mentioned may obstruct some agreements but should not preclude discussion. Precedent for revelation of sensitive information when conditions warrant exists in the SCC.[7]

The positive results in regard to nuclear proliferation would be increased chances of leverage against potential proliferators due to increased availability of information or expanded consultation on measures mutually desired by the superpowers. The risk would be that evidence of "elitist" superpower "collusion" to maintain nuclear duopoly might spur proliferators' incentives. One question bearing on this is whether US-Soviet consultations would be linked to cooperative preventive measures—for example, joint diplomatic initiatives, economic pressure, or other actions.

CONCLUSION

High expectations that the Center would be a major breakthrough of some sort would have to rest on two kinds of extreme optimism—about how many of the elements of the risk of war are only problems of communication and misperception, and about the willingness of either government to maximize the open exchange of information. Ambitious hopes and optimistic assumptions fit best into a dubious conception of East-West relations that sees conflict as the unnecessary product of misunderstanding or unfounded mutual suspicion. Unfortunately the essential conflicts of interest are real, so even the maximum benefits of focusing on sources of miscalculation will be limited. The opposite conception of East-West competition—that it is inevitably unremitting and involves negligible common interests—allows little room to see benefits in a joint Center. Thus the rationale for the Center that makes most sense, and is not hostage to excessive optimism, rests on the notion of a mixed US-Soviet relationship, in which cooperative avoidance of risk is a shared interest but also in which legitimate suspicions based on competitive interests will limit exchanges or agreements. In this context huge strides in accommodation should not be the standard for success; small steps are worth effort and experimentation. In late 1983 the US and Soviet governments discussed the possibility of establishing something like the Center proposed here.[8] Although their ideas about what should be the focus of exchanges differed somewhat, enough common ground existed—despite the heat of relations in general at that point—to suggest reasons for optimism.

If the Center is established it will only be one of several tools available to the National Security Council, not necessarily *the* one of importance. It will be useful to keep this in mind in order to avoid overselling the Center's importance, which could produce disappointed expectations. Along with the SCC, however, the Center could not only help reduce risks but also supply some continuity of discussions across administrations—and discontinuity has been a problem in arms control. All considered, a Joint Center for Nuclear Risk Reduction would not offer tremendous promise of great breakthroughs in US-Soviet relations, but would offer modest yet possibly meaningful improvements in communication. In a period of somber prospects for superpower relations, modest progress would represent a major achievement.

NOTES

This article also will appear in Barry M. Blechman, ed., *Preventing Nuclear War* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, forthcoming). It was originally prepared as a paper for the Nunn-Warner Working Group on Nuclear Risk Reduction.

1. William Lynn, "Catalogue of Existing-US Soviet Crisis Management and Confidence-Building Measures," unpublished paper, 5 November 1982.

2. "Nunn and Warner Propose Nuclear Risk Reduction System," press release, Office of Senator Sam Nunn, 23 November 1983, p. 3.

3. On the dangers of simultaneous alert see John Steinbruner, "Nuclear Decapitation," *Foreign Policy*, No. 45 (Winter 1981-82).

4. "Nunn and Warner Propose Nuclear Risk Reduction System," p. 2.

5. Of more than minimal importance is assurance that competent language interpreters are integrated in the organization, including planning sessions. Since on one hand the sorts of misunderstandings of concern to the Center can turn on a nuance, and on the other hand the purpose of the organization is to encourage as much freedom of discussion as possible (as opposed to the more plodding or carefully planned formal proposals characteristic of regular negotiations), it is important to avoid translation mistakes. Therefore, interpreters need to be apprised in advance of what is likely to be said.

6. See Richard K. Betts, "Elusive Equivalence: The Political and Military Meaning of the Nuclear Balance," in Samuel P. Huntington, ed., *The Strategic Imperative* (Cambridge: Ballinger, 1982), pp. 109, 112-17.

7. See Robert W. Bucheim and Dan Caldwell, "The US-USSR Standing Consultative Commission: Description and Appraisal," Working Paper No. 2 (Center for Foreign Policy Development, Brown University, May 1983), and Jane M. O. Sharp, "Confidence Building Measures and SALT," *Arms Control*, 3 (May 1982), 39-42.

8. Charles Mohr, "Talks Urged for Averting Accidental Nuclear War," *The New York Times*, 24 November 1983, p. A11; "US and Soviet Seek to Prevent a Surprise Attack," *The New York Times*, 8 December 1983, p. A6. For other works dealing with the issue, see the report for the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency by William Langer Ury and Richard Smoke, published as *Beyond the Hotline: Controlling a Nuclear Crisis* (Cambridge: Harvard Law School Nuclear Negotiation Project, 1984), and Hilliard Roderick with Ulla Magnusson, eds., *Avoiding Inadvertant War: Crisis Management* (Austin: Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs, Univ. of Texas, 1984).