Too close for comfort: Cases of near nuclear use and options for policy

Sasan Aghlani outlines just how close the world has come to the inadvertent use of nuclear weapons in the last 60 years – and suggests some immediate measures to reduce the risks.

Nuclear weapons have not been detonated in conflict since 1945. There is a danger however of becoming too complacent about this record of non-nuclear use. If risk is defined as probability × consequences, the risk of nuclear use is much higher than we have long assumed.

A recent Chatham House report documents 13 instances between 1962 and 2002 where nuclear weapons were almost inadvertently used due to miscalculation, miscommunication, or technical errors. What prevented their use on many of these occasions was the ‘human judgement factor’ – intervention of individuals who, based on prudent assessment of situations and against protocol, either refused to authorise a nuclear strike or relay information that would likely have led to the use of nuclear weapons.

Prudent judgement saves the day

Human judgement will always be an imprecise but vital part of nuclear command and control. The alternative – the automation of nuclear weapon launch policies – is fraught with its own profound problems. The Soviets had introduced a semi-autonomous system, ‘Perimeter’, designed to automatically launch nuclear-tipped Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) at the United States if it detected a launch. The logic behind Perimeter was that in order for a state’s nuclear weapons to deter, the state needs to convince others that it can inflict “unacceptable damage” even if devastated in a first-strike.

Too Close for Comfort raises a deeply disturbing paradox about nuclear weapons. While prudent judgement has saved the day in some instances, miscalculation and misperception have brought us close to inadvertent nuclear use in others. The human factor is therefore a double-edged sword. It is not simply the case that only technical errors can lead to inadvertent use: accurate data still requires decoding and interpretation by fallible human beings so that wrong conclusions are not drawn.

Recommendations

With the current absence of a complete ban on nuclear weapons, the report offers a number of near-term policy options that could potentially reduce the risks of inadvertent nuclear use. These include adopting measures that buy time, such as taking thousands of nuclear weapons off ‘hair trigger’ alert, and retargeting nuclear weapons to the ocean. Recommendations also include increased trust- and confidence-building measures, a wider set of decision-makers involved in nuclear command and control, and educating militaries about the humanitarian impacts should nuclear weapons ever be used again.

One concern emerging from the report is lack of transparency. Nuclear weapons possessors are anxious about revealing details about their nuclear launch policies, and want to avoid embarrassment over instances where they may have come close to launching nuclear weapons due to negligence or miscalculation. There are likely to be other instances where the world has come close to nuclear war by accident, choice, or sloppy practises that we simply do not know about due to secrecy. This poses the question: for how long can the world depend on people making the right calls?

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References