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The Phone-a-Friend Option: Use Cases for a U.S.-U.K.-French Crisis Communication Channel

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This brief outlines the case for a multilateral crisis communication channel between the heads of state of the United States, the United Kingdom, and France (hereafter the P3). Such a mechanism should ensure that the three leaders can exchange rapid messages and clarifications even in conditions of rampant uncertainty and infrastructure degradation.

At a time of increased global instability, rapid, secure, and reliable communication channels can play an essential role in preventing and mitigating potential nuclear crises. The primary benefits of such channels stem from clear communication among nuclear-armed adversaries, reducing the risks of misinterpretation and inadvertent escalation. The hotlines that the United States, the United Kingdom, and France established with the Soviet Union during the Cold War provide prime examples of such communication channels.¹

However, crisis communication mechanisms among nuclear-armed allies play their own crucial role in facilitating close coordination and transparency at moments of acute uncertainty. Such mechanisms allow the allies to communicate valuable information about the crisis environment and share key decisions with each other. The encrypted telephone line between the White House and 10 Downing St, set up toward the end of World War II, was the earliest precursor to such communication links and presumably comprised an effective bilateral emergency channel.²

A P3 multilateral crisis communications channel could be modeled on CATALINK, integrated atop the U.S.-U.K. hotline, or built through other means.³ This channel would improve the resilience and speed of deliberations among Washington, London, and Paris during moments of crisis. In turn, such rapid, secure, and reliable communication could counterbalance the risks that accompany the growing complexity of global escalation dynamics.⁴

1 Leah Walker and Andrew Facini, "Atlas of Crisis Communications: Nuclear States," Institute for Security and Technology, July 2022, 4, <https://securityandtechnology.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Atlas-of-Crisis-Communications-Nuclear-States.pdf>.

2 "Churchill's top secret hotline to the President," Imperial War Museum, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/churchills-top-secret-hotline-to-the-president>; Haraldur Þór Egilsson, "The Origins, Use and Development of Hot Line Diplomacy," Discussion Papers in Diplomacy, March 15, 2006, 12, https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2016-02/20030500_cli_paper_dip_issue85.pdf.

3 For more information on CATALINK, see "The CATALINK Brief," Institute for Security and Technology, <http://securityandtechnology.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/The-CATALINK-Brief.pdf>.

4 Rebecca Hersman, "Wormhole Escalation in the New Nuclear Age," *Texas National Security Review* 3, no. 3 (Autumn 2020): 90-109, <https://tnsr.org/2020/07/wormhole-escalation-in-the-new-nuclear-age/>.

Improving Nuclear Hotlines: Relevance and Use Cases

Should multilateral crisis communications systems be used before, during, or after a crisis? How would nuclear-armed states benefit most from such a system? What challenges stand between theory and implementation?

Established in October 2023, the CATALINK initiative's Crisis Communications Resilience Working Group is a network of experts and practitioners who work collaboratively to augment nuclear risk reduction efforts and promote the idea and implementation of effective, secure, multilateral crisis communications among nuclear-armed states.

This report is the fifth in "Improving Nuclear Hotlines: Relevance and Use-Cases," a series of short essays and interviews authored by working group members. These briefs assess the status of crisis communications systems in specific nuclear-armed states, present potential use case scenarios of multilateral crisis communications, and examine the current operating environments and political and technical barriers to cooperation in each state of focus.

This series was compiled and edited by Sylvia Mishra and Christian Steins.

The opinions expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the view of IST, which seeks to promote and facilitate debate on these pressing issues.

Setting Up the P3 Channel

Taking into account the need to maintain secure and resilient lines of crisis communication among allied leaders, the primary candidate for a P3 communication mechanism is a trilateral channel between the U.S., U.K., and French heads of state. This channel would enable the transmission of urgent messages and responses between the three leaders in emergencies. Should such a channel include teleconferencing capabilities, it would also allow for joint crisis deliberations in situations when time is of the essence.

Compared to other options, a mechanism connecting the heads of all three states would add the greatest potential value. One possible alternative to a crisis channel between the senior U.S., U.K., and French military leaders would likely duplicate existing lines of communication. Any nuclear crisis involving the P3 will certainly involve the rest of NATO, which would in turn engage the appropriate crisis coordination and response mechanisms within Allied Command Operations.⁵

On the flip side, any institutionalized lower-level channel, akin to the U.S. and Russian Nuclear Risk Reduction Centers (NRRCs), would likely be too slow for effective allied crisis communications. In their current form, the NRRCs continue to execute their original role of crisis prevention rather than crisis management. Moreover, the NRRCs' added benefit of confidence-building between U.S. and Russian technical staff is not required between the United States, the U.K., and France, which already have a high baseline of trust.⁶

With that said, a top-level communication channel between the heads of state could be supplemented with lower-level links to enable greater P3 coordination. This supplementary mechanism could build on the NRRC model or on the U.S.-Republic of Korea (ROK)-Japan hotline that linked the three countries' National Security Councils in 2023.⁷ A similar U.S.-U.K.-French mechanism would improve the discussion and implementation of any decisions communicated between the heads of state through the primary P3 channel. The supplementary channel would also allow closer engagement between the White House, 10 Downing St, and the Élysée during the initial stages of a brewing crisis.

This trilateral supplementary channel can be configured in a variety of different arrangements. Depending on the purpose determined by the three governments, the channel could either facilitate planning for future crisis management between the capitals' national security establishments or bolster operational responsiveness between the three nations' militaries. There are well-established precedents for such bilateral cooperation mechanisms between all three countries, including the Anglo-French Joint Nuclear Commission and the deployment of liaison officers between the U.S. and U.K. Strategic Commands.⁸

5 "The NATO Command Structure," NATO, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2018_02/1802-Factsheet-NATO-Command-Structure_en.pdf. It is worth noting that intra-NATO communication would have to involve mechanisms outside of the Nuclear Planning Group, which does not include France. See "Nuclear Planning Group (NPG)," NATO, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_50069.htm.

6 Rose Gottemoeller, Dan Zhukov, "Nuclear Risk Reduction Centers: A Stable Channel in Unstable Times," Stanley Center for Peace and Security, October 2023, 3-6, <https://stanleycenter.org/publications/nuclear-risk-reduction-centers/>.

7 Song Sang-ho, Kang Byeong-cheol, "S. Korea, U.S., Japan install trilateral communication hotline amid N. Korea, China challenges," *Yonhap News Agency*, October 17, 2023, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20231017001100315>.

8 Thibaud Harrois, "Franco-British Defence and Security Cooperation after Brexit: An Exception in Europe," *French Journal of British Studies* 25, no. 4 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.4000/rfcb.6582>; Jeffrey Lewis, Bruno Tertrais, "Deterrence at Three: U.S., U.K. and French Nuclear Cooperation," *Survival* (London) 57, no. 4 (2015), 42, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2015.1068554>.

To preview one possible configuration, this channel could connect the Coordinator for Intelligence and Defense Policy at the U.S. National Security Council, the U.K. Deputy National Security Advisor for Defence, Nuclear, and Strategy, and either the Strategic Affairs and Disarmament Adviser at the Élysée's Diplomatic Unit or a member of the French President's Military Staff.⁹ This configuration would facilitate greater coordination among the three leaders' nuclear decision-making apparatuses and their respective staffs.

Use Cases for the P3 Channel

The crisis communication channel linking the P3 heads of state would improve the speed of delivering key messages and decisions, allow for urgent clarifications of uncertain events, and enhance resilience when regular communication tools may be infiltrated or degraded. The following section further unpacks each of these non-exhaustive use cases.

Use Case #1: Swift Crisis Communications

There may be instances in which crisis decisions made in one of the capitals need to be transmitted swiftly to the rest of the P3. Several publicly known examples from the Cold War underscore the need for this capability.

In the early stages of the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Executive Committee assembled by President Kennedy considered the option of launching an airstrike on Soviet missile sites in Cuba. During the deliberations, Kennedy noted that Prime Minister Macmillan and President de Gaulle would have to receive advance warning.¹⁰ In another instance, the British government observed the Soviet alert during NATO's 1983 Able Archer exercise with great concern. Several months after the actual crisis, Prime Minister Thatcher instructed her government to "urgently consider how to approach the Americans on the question of possible Soviet misapprehensions about a surprise NATO attack."¹¹

With much more rapid intelligence and communication capabilities in today's digital age, nuclear crisis episodes similar to those Cold War episodes may develop at a far quicker and more unpredictable pace.¹² This change drives the pressure for faster coordination and deliberation among allies and key partners. The P3 crisis channel can provide that capability, enabling any of the P3 heads of state to communicate a vital piece of information to each other simultaneously and urgently, as well as consult on key decisions.

Use Case #2: Urgent Clarifications

Even despite the high baseline of trust, allies are not immune to misunderstandings that may emerge from accidents or unforeseen events.

9 U.S. White House, "Joint Press Statement on Nuclear Consultative Group Meeting," December 16, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/12/16/joint-press-statement-on-nuclear-consultative-group-meeting/>; Joe Devanny and Josh Harris, "The National Security Council: National security at the centre of government," Institute for Government, 2014, 26-27, <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/NSC%20final%20202.pdf>; Élysée, "Presidential Team," <https://www.elysee.fr/en/french-presidency/presidential-team>.

10 David R. Gibson, *Talk at the Brink: Deliberation and Decision during the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 83.

11 Nate Jones and Thomas S. Blanton, *Able Archer 83: The Secret History of the NATO Exercise That Almost Triggered Nuclear War* (New York: The New Press, 2016), 47.

12 Herbert Lin, *Cyber Threats and Nuclear Weapons* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021), 115-116.

While the existing level of trust generally allows the P3 allies to sort out any potential differences that could arise from such misunderstandings, a crisis situation may demand quicker clarification and resolution before it spirals out of control.

For example, a collision between a U.K. and a French submarine in peacetime is not likely to trigger a crisis between the two governments directly.¹³ However, in an uncertain crisis environment rife with conflicting information and tensions vis-à-vis Russia, China, or another adversary, the same submarine collision could heighten suspicions of an enemy attack and even lead to an overreaction. Swift clarifications and resolutions of such accidents through the P3 channel would offer additional transparency and reduce the likelihood of perceiving “falsely detected attacks.”¹⁴

Use Case #3: Enhanced Resilience

Finally, if a crisis does escalate and approach the nuclear threshold, the P3 channel must provide sufficient resilience and security for the U.S., U.K., and French leaders to consult each other even if they are separated from traditional lines of communication or transported away from their capitals. Such episodes, even prior to turning nuclear, may be marked by adversarial attempts to infiltrate, disrupt, or sever space-based, ground-based, and undersea communication assets.¹⁵ And if the unthinkable happens and the nuclear threshold does get crossed, the P3 leaders may face an environment in which vast portions of communications infrastructure are destroyed on the ground or disabled due to electromagnetic pulses.¹⁶

Such risks highlight the importance of designing a sufficiently robust mechanism that can maintain intact lines of communication between the three heads of state. The mechanism should also ensure that key members of staff, such as interpreters and notetakers, can be rapidly connected even if they are not co-located with their leaders.¹⁷ President Bush’s limited ability to communicate with his own staff and allies while airborne on September 11, 2001, further underscores the need for a resilient crisis communication mechanism that the P3 heads of state can use whenever and wherever the emergency finds them.¹⁸

Conclusion

This brief laid out the case for a resilient crisis communication channel between the heads of the United States, the United Kingdom, and France. The P3 mechanism would enable rapid and simultaneous consultations,

¹³ A public relations crisis would be another matter, as exemplified by the public outcry after the 2009 collision between HMS Vanguard and Le Triomphant SSBNs. For more details, see Rachel Williams and Richard Norton-Taylor, “Nuclear submarines collide in the Atlantic,” *The Guardian*, February 16, 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2009/feb/16/nuclear-submarines-collide>.

¹⁴ Stephen J. Cimbala, “Nuclear-Crisis Management and Cyber War: A Dangerous Crossroads,” *Naval War College Review* 75, no. 1 (Winter 2022), 54, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48733088?seq=6>.

¹⁵ Carol Ann Jones, “Counter Nuclear Command, Control, and Communications,” Institute for Security and Technology, November 7, 2019, 5-7, https://securityandtechnology.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/jones_counter_nc3_IST.pdf.

¹⁶ “Effects of Electromagnetic Pulses on Communication Infrastructure: An IST Primer,” Institute for Security and Technology, January 2024, <https://securityandtechnology.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Effects-of-Electromagnetic-Pulses-on-Communication-Infrastructure.pdf>.

¹⁷ I am grateful to Rose Gottemoeller for this insight.

¹⁸ I am grateful to Christian Steins for this insight. For more details, see Garrett M. Graff, “We’re the only plane in the sky,” *POLITICO*, September 11, 2016, <https://www.politico.eu/article/were-the-only-plane-in-the-sky-september-11-george-bush/>.

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clarifications of crisis-time accidents, and reliable communication even in the event of widespread infrastructure degradation.

If successfully negotiated and implemented, the P3 channel would become an essential tool for enhancing allied coordination and reducing nuclear risks. Providing the benefits outlined above would add an additional layer of resilience to allied communications and thus potentially deter adversarial actions designed to sever vital communication lines. In turn, the P3 communication mechanism may serve as a valuable model that other allies and partners can emulate, thus expanding the web of secure communication links and contributing to global stability.