

Matter of Fact By Joseph Alsop

Need of More Air Strength Stressed

LAST WEEK the President's appointment schedule was quietly revised to conceal a significant fact. By the President's order and under his leadership, the National Security Council held an all-day meeting.

Since the morrow of Pearl Harbor, no single problem has ever engaged the continuous, combined attention of all the heads of the American Government throughout a working day. Yet the subject of last week's unprecedented meeting of our highest policy making organ was not the Korean truce, or the power contest in Moscow, or any other topic of current discussion. The subject was the air defense of the American continent.

Despite the very special consideration given to the problem, it is not clear that any conclusions were reached. Most probably, the Administration will want the views of the new Joint Chiefs of Staff before taking its decision about air defense policy. But the mere fact of the recent Security Council meeting rather clearly implies that the Administration is increasingly worried about the increasing air-atomic striking power of the Soviet Union.

This is not a distant danger, if the official estimates are not misleading. One of the reports that have been presented to the Security Council actually credits the Kremlin with power to destroy just under 40 percent of the American industrial potential, and to cause the death of about 13 million Americans. Any such estimate of current Kremlin capabilities is of course highly debatable. But the signs are plain, nonetheless, that a major turning point in American policy is now approaching.

THE APPROACH has been made by stages, several of which have been revealed in this space. First there was the report of Project Lincoln, the remarkable scientific task force of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Then there was the Truman Administration policy paper, NSC-141, which defined the air defense problem for President Eisenhower. Then there was the further report of a special committee of leading scientists and industrialists headed by Dr. Mervin J. Kelly, president of the Bell Telephone Laboratories.

All these successive papers

pointed in the same unpleasant direction, toward the need for an urgent, costly effort to improve our air defenses. Finally, after receiving the report of the Kelly Committee, the Security Council named still another study group. This new group was headed by the President's wartime Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations, Gen. Harold Bull, who is now an official of the Central Intelligence Agency. The President and his Cabinet colleagues wanted "something from their own people," according to one explanation. General Bull and his coworkers, who were recruited from the armed services and other interested agencies, presented their recommendations for action at last week's meeting of the Security Council.

It is hard to believe that fairly dramatic action will not be taken, simply because of the character of the potential threat. In the first place, the best estimates of Soviet atomic production now appear to have been revised upward. Until rather recently, the British were talking of Soviet atomic bombs of the power of the bombs that fell on Hiroshima, while American estimates were given in bombs of 50 kilotons.

IT IS NOW forecast, however, that the Kremlin will stockpile its one hundredth atomic bomb of 80 kiloton power during the current year. An 80 kiloton bomb has the explosive force of 80,000 tons of TNT, or four times the force of the Hiroshima bomb. One hundred such bombs is an impressive stockpile.

In the second place, the Kremlin's ability to deliver these bombs to American targets is not seriously questioned in any official quarter. All American targets can be reached by the thousand or more TU-4 bombers of the Soviet strategic air army. It is considered that 500 of these planes can be sent against the United States in a single saturation attack. It is further known that the Soviet TU-4 squadrons have been equipped and trained for night flying and night bombing during the past two years.

Meanwhile, the strength of the American Air Defense Command has not kept pace with the growing threat. If an attack were delivered in broad daylight and good weather, it is thought that our defenders might knock down a maximum of 15 percent of the attackers. But if an attack should be delivered by night, it is thought that the maximum rate of kill would be only one tenth of 1 percent.

With what amounts to a zero kill rate, an air-atomic saturation attack delivered by night should in theory unload the whole Soviet atomic stock on the chosen American targets. Such are the calculations behind the estimate that the Kremlin can now destroy nearly 40 percent of our in-

dustry and take a toll of 13 megadeaths (which is top secret jargon for the death of 13 million people).

An estimate close to this has already been made public by Sen. Stuart Symington, in his rather lonely fight for American preparedness. It can now be disclosed that the estimate comes from the authoritative report of the Kelly Committee.

SUCH AN estimate cannot be lightly disregarded, when it comes from a group led by Dr. Kelly and including such scientists as Prof. Charles Lauritsen, and such industrialists as R. E. Wilson, of Standard Oil of Indiana. At the same time, it should not give rise to hysteria, either.

For one thing, the Kelly Committee was not equipped to "war-game" the problem, and careful war-gaming is essential if the results of complex air operations are to be accurately judged.

The British Cabinet recently directed a parallel study of the air-atomic threat to Britain. For this study, the damage estimates were carefully war-gamed. The result was a forecast that an all-out air-atomic attack on the British Isles would take a toll of two million deaths. The figures are still fearful, but two megadeaths are much less than 13 megadeaths. And the British Isles are far more exposed than the United States.

Under realistic operating conditions, therefore, it seems likely that the Kremlin now has the power to hurt this country very badly, but not to cripple it. Unfortunately, however, the Kremlin's atomic stockpile and the strength of the Kremlin's strategic air army are both still growing. The power to hurt this year can become the power to cripple next year and the power to destroy the year after. That is the real problem that the National Security Council has got to solve.

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