

Double-talk after Reykjavik

Both the Soviet Union and the United States have evidently over-committed themselves to arms control proposals that cannot be safely carried through. They need help in backing away from them.

THE fallout from Reykjavik has been confusing and disturbing. Two weeks ago, the general sense of failure appeared to be shared both by the Soviet Union and the United States. Then, the word went out, the hurried meeting at Reykjavik had not been a failure at all, but a successful exploration of radical measures of arms control whose negotiation would be completed at the bilateral negotiations under way at Geneva. This claim, on the acceptance of which the reputation of each government depends, is unfortunately disingenuous. The meeting was advertised as one at which arrangements would be made for a less hurried meeting later in the year, but no arrangements were, in the event, made. And while it is plain that some of the arms control proposals discussed at Reykjavik were radical by previous standards, it is also clear that, in their different ways, they are almost insurmountable obstacles to agreement.

The Soviet Union's eye-catching plan, of which Mr Mikhail Gorbachev has been singing since the beginning of the year, that all strategic nuclear weapons should be "eliminated" within a decade is, strange as it may seem, one obvious stumbling block. Seductive though the idea may be that the clock should be turned back to before 1945, when nuclear weapons were first used strategically to bring the Second World War to an end, that gigantic assault on the historical process cannot be undertaken in the light-hearted manner that Mr Gorbachev suggests. There may be a case for doing away with strategic nuclear weapons, but that would not by itself ensure that we would all sleep easier in our beds at night. For that to be possible, the following questions cannot be dodged:

● **What assurance would there be that neither of the superpowers would keep nuclear weapons hidden against an emergency?** Only the comprehensive inspection of all military nuclear installations could provide the security for which both sides would look, but could the negotiation of such arrangements be completed in a mere decade?

● **What would be done, by superpowers innocent of strategic nuclear weapons, about threats by smaller nuclear powers?** There are already three smaller powers in this category (Britain, China and France), not to mention others waiting in the wings. The logical solution would be to negotiate the general abandonment of strategic nuclear weapons. It is anybody's guess how long that would take, given that, so far, nobody has tried.

● **How, in the absence of strategic nuclear weapons, would conventional conflicts in, say, Europe be settled?** Presumably, under Mr Gorbachev's proposal, the present superpowers would be free to intervene in (or to attempt to deter) such conflicts by the use of tactical nuclear weapons, which is the state of affairs with which Europe was uneasily familiar in the early 1950s. The obvious difficulty is that the present threat of mutually assured destruction (the bizarre basis of the theory of deterrence) would be replaced only by the assurance that the superpowers might engage in nuclear conflicts without suffering much themselves. The only stable state of affairs would entail the abolition of tactical nuclear weapons as well, a great but distant dream.

These are only some of the reasons why Mr Gorbachev's proposal is unworkable, at least within the timescale he has laid

down. Much the same is true of the counter-proposal from the United States produced at Reykjavik like a rabbit from a hat. The proposal is that all ballistic missiles should be abolished, and that the superpowers should rely on more primitive (and vulnerable) ways of delivering nuclear weapons if the need should arise. This, again, is tantamount to a return to the early 1950s. The threat of nuclear retaliation against a transgressing power would still be credible, but retaliation would be no swifter than the passage time of aircraft and cruise missiles and no more sure than the deficiencies of the other fellow's air defences. Nuclear deterrence would become a kind of lottery.

Nobody should be surprised that European governments have been so quick to tell Washington that they are as uneasy about this proposal as about Mr Gorbachev's scheme. Under each scheme, they would have to put up with the knowledge that the United States would not be as directly committed to Europe as it is at present, even though the difference would not be very great; put crudely, soldiers are more evocative hostages than missiles. Yet the US proposal would be acceptable to the Soviet Union only if at least the British and French missiles were negotiated away, which is doubly unlikely in the circumstances.

These proposals, outwardly well-intentioned, have now become obstacles to further progress simply because they have been made. Neither side will wish to withdraw to a more moderate position for fear of being accused by the other of having been insincere at Reykjavik. Yet the world would be better off with, say, an interim agreement to reduce strategic warheads by a half and to abolish missiles of intermediate range in Europe, the sort of compromise talked of at Geneva in the past few months. Why could not the United States and the Soviet Union have agreed to sign such a package two weeks ago — and to keep on talking?

The other conspicuous obstacle is the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), on which President Reagan's vision is fixed and fixated. This project is now in a curious limbo of its own. Whether or not it is technically realistic, SDI is by common consent a long-term project that could not come to full fruition for many decades. Even the short-term by-products (such as satellite-based early warning systems) are not just around the corner and are, in any case, relatively uncontentious. The snag is that President Reagan cannot be seen to back away from his commitment to the concept of an effective defence against ballistic missiles, while the Reykjavik meeting has only sharpened the long-standing argument about the interpretation of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. (Does a hole in the ground beneath the Nevada desert count as a "laboratory" in which research may be conducted?) Here again, the need is that people should back down a little. It may be easier for Mr Reagan after next month's elections, when he and other supporters of SDI will have an interest in unpackaging SDI to make it more acceptable (and thus less vulnerable) to Congress, perhaps by specifying a series of stages in which successive goals will be attained. At that point, the Soviet Union may also find the project more palatable. Meanwhile Mr Gorbachev and Mr Reagan might usefully reflect what business people are always being told, that it is unwise to attempt important agreements within a few hours of stepping off a long-distance aircraft. □