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Please, SIPRI, stay on the fence

AS commentators never tire of pointing out, the presence of the word 'peace' in the title of any organisation immediately renders the intentions of that body suspect; such has been the misuse of one of the most beautiful as well as one of the most significant words of the English language. But the same commentators generally make that point in order to draw attention to the one glowing exception—the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI)—an organisation which in nine years has built up for itself a major reputation as a purveyor of accurate unvarnished information on armament and disarmament provided by an international team whose commitment has been to objectivity in assessment rather than to politically motivated public statements.

Scientists have had particular cause to be grateful to SIPRI. Much of the present debate on arms control and disarmament centres on technological feasibility, prospects held by military research and development and methods of verification. In these fields, in which no national military organisation exactly invites the participation of outsiders, SIPRI has fought bravely to keep abreast and to provide hard fact. The SIPRI Yearbook has become necessary reading for all who profess an interest in defence, of whatever political hue.

Since SIPRI's inception, *Nature* has been both an admirer of the institute and a regular user of its data. (This partly stems from the concerns of both the present and the immediate-past editor in nuclear matters. The present editor (declaring an interest) also worked for a time at SIPRI.) We shall, no doubt, continue to depend heavily on SIPRI for many things, but it is necessary to note a gradual shift in the institute's policy which could jeopardise its future effectiveness, at least if it conceives of its future function as similar to the one it has discharged with distinction in the past nine years.

When SIPRI was founded by the Swedish government and guaranteed its independence, there were those who saw it simply as a private research department of Mrs Alva Myrdal, the Swedish delegate to the Eighteen-nation Disarmament Conference. Certainly Mrs Myrdal has used SIPRI's work more than most, but any fears that the institute would become subservient to a particular philosophy were soon allayed. As well as eschewing external alignments, SIPRI has had to watch its internal scene rather carefully. Of necessity staff who are prepared to uproot their lives elsewhere in order to spend two or three years in Stockholm are going to be of more than average commitment. The institute has never made any secret of this—indeed in the first yearbook the then director, Robert Neild, acknowledged that his staff were of one mind that the arms race was dangerous and that efforts to slow it down had been incommensurate with the danger: SIPRI's skill has been in converting this conviction into objective analysis.

In the past few years there have been signs of growing impatience—not with objective analysis but with political systems which stoke up the arms race and treat arms control with such little respect. Until recently this impatience has hardly manifested itself in very extreme forms; the pages of SIPRI reports don't exactly drip with blood. There has just been the odd paragraph or two in a preface or a summary indicating despair, particularly with the pursuits of partial arms control measures to the exclusion of more general disarmament. Small beer, maybe, compared with the sort of editorialising that everyone else does—and why shouldn't they use their own results more positively? And yet the surprise one feels at encountering even such inoffensive (though controversial) comment is akin to the shock that would be created if the Registrar-General were to preface his annual statistics by a comment that he was getting tired of recording increases in population; people must cut down on copulation.

The most recent publications from Stockholm suggest that the trend towards a more committed viewpoint continues. Two booklets by Frank Barnaby, the present director, (*Preventing nuclear-weapon proliferation* and *Nuclear disarmament or nuclear war?*) are fairly obviously aimed at a new and much wider audience. The emotional temperature has gone up a fair bit, to the extent of a few half-page pictures, not all strictly relevant (such as a napalm victim) and some ringing phrases about nuclear strategy being "inhumane, immoral even genocidal" and so on.

Well, who are we to snipe about emotional writing and irrelevant pictures? The point is simply this. If SIPRI is to become more polemical it will undoubtedly gain in popular acclaim and will always find a ready audience and willing supporters. But it will forfeit its status as an organisation that can work within the system and command respect and help from insiders. There are far too few bodies of this sort in arms control for this to be seen as anything but a matter of great concern.

It is quite likely that much of this change of attitude at SIPRI springs from a feeling of impotence in the face of so much military expenditure. This is to adopt too pessimistic view of the benefits of reliable factual reporting, for which the dividends are always less tangible but ultimately more profound. And SIPRI has had real successes, particularly in its reporting on the world arms trade and its long term study in chemical and biological warfare. These very successes have sprung from the institute's ability to seek opinions and deal directly and honestly with many individuals deeply involved in questions of defence and armament. Come down off the fence on the other side from them and they will neither give advice nor read what is written. □