

Swords to ploughshares: is it possible?

A NEW initiative is being launched today (December 2) by a group of natural and social scientists to shed some light on public attitudes to disarmament. It originated with M Albert de Smaele, a former Belgian Minister and leading figure in the Belgian Socialist Party, and has been co-sponsored in a personal capacity by a group including Professor V. S. Emelyanov of the Commission on Disarmament Problems of the USSR Soviet Academy of Sciences and Professor Eric Burhop, President of the World Federation of Scientific Workers.

The group rightly notes that it is difficult to arouse public opinion on security questions because of a 'mistrust of opposing theses'. So it tries instead to frame questions on armament and disarmament rather than peddle answers, and it hopes that by getting these questions to politicians, leaders of industry, trade unions, the professions, the universities, churches and so on it might help to get going again a debate which has noticeably run aground in recent years.

The premise of the questionnaire is that either the expenditure of 60% of all research and development funds and the employment of 50 million people in armed forces is futile and a senseless waste, or that sooner or later there will be the 'ultimate catastrophe'. So, run the (somewhat paraphrased) questions:

- can war solve the tensions dividing political systems?
- with the current balance of power, is security better served by competitive escalation of armaments or by balanced reduction—and might some nations in Europe lead the way in a reduction as an example?
- what course is being taken by political thought? Would a debate in Parliament, or in the Interparliamentary Union be appropriate?
- would you favour a collective, controlled commitment to forbid new scientific projects related to mass destruction accompanied by an increase in socially beneficial research; the first consequence of which would be a ban on underground nuclear testing?

● could a military-to-social transition, retaining full employment, work?

● should there be more denuclearised zones, and what further measures might help halt the arms race?

It would be easy to dismiss the questionnaire as naive, if not loaded. The first two questions are really statements—very worthy ones, of course, but calculated to encourage one to dismiss the whole thing as a leftist propaganda exercise and to read no further. This would be a pity because it really would be valuable to hear a wider range of views than is normally advanced on the question of putting military resources, particularly in research and development, to work in new fields.

The huge stumbling block, it is always claimed, is adequate monitoring. There are thirty years of distrust to be overcome—mainly worry by Western nations that the Soviet Union by the nature of its society and its geography, would be able to continue military development clandestinely. Present signs are a little more optimistic: there has recently been revived talk in the Soviet Union about permitting on-site inspection in nuclear test monitoring. Even so, the sponsors of the questionnaire should leave Moscow in no doubt of the disquiet that monitoring questions are bound to raise when it is research and not hardware that is being observed.

It would, nevertheless, be good to get some intelligent non-doctrinaire assessment of what potential there is within the defence industry for a change in purpose. And the first step in that direction is to see whether there are any good ideas around for how a task so financially, politically and technologically complicated could be fulfilled. If the questionnaire did no more than start a modest debate on changing objectives for the 1980s it might have started something worthwhile. For too long military R&D has been regarded as too sacred to touch. □

Fear of flying

Which country gave away the largest percentage of its GNP as foreign aid in 1974?

Which country has legislated that private manufacturing companies offer 49% of their share to employees?

Which airline flies the longest non-stop scheduled flight?

So runs a recent advertisement for Iran Air, which seems also to have a bit of a public relations job to do for Iran. The country is growing fast, thanks to its oil revenues. Its expenditure on arms quadrupled between 1972 and 1975. And because of its military spending and its oil money, it enjoys good international relations with a wide range of nations. Amongst its ambitions is clearly the development of universities and science and technology faculties the equal of those in the West. But amidst all this bustle, some detect a faint smell of the violations of human rights.

Amnesty International, in a briefing which academics might wish to read before visiting the country (40p from 55 Theobald's Road, London WC1), has tried to put together what is known about political prisoners in Iran. Even their numbers are uncertain, ranging from the three thousand that the Shah himself concedes to the tens of thousands claimed by some foreign journalists and exiles. Torture is admitted to by the Shah, and is clearly common, although evidence is not as forthcoming as in some other countries, probably because of the immense power of SAVAK, the security organisation, and the fear it instils. Justice is dispensed with little regard for human rights to those accused of political crimes in Iran. Execution for such crimes is not uncommon. Is it impossible for a rapidly-evolving newly-rich country to survive without such repression? □