

## Prospect for agreement at Geneva

*The latest Soviet proposals on nuclear weapons may let negotiators negotiate. But Britain and France must decide how and when their missiles will be counted. And President Reagan must change his style.*

THE most helpful feature of Mr Yuri Andropov's declaration last week on nuclear weapons in Europe is that it is far from being crystal clear. For with the talks on intermediate-range nuclear forces due to resume in Geneva (next week), it is high time that the United States and the Soviet Union abandoned their recent practice of negotiation by means of press releases. The advantage, of course, is that the less clearly a negotiating position is known or understood in advance, the more easily it can be modified when private negotiations begin.

What Mr Andropov is now saying is also, however, a more negotiable proposition than his previous proposal that the numbers of SS20 missiles — Soviet devices carrying up to three warheads each — should be reduced to match the British and French nuclear forces in some way or other. For that line of argument would have required of the Soviet Union's negotiating partner (consisting exclusive of the United States) the complete abandonment of the planned deployment of cruise and Pershing II missiles beginning at the end of this year, the concession (which constitutionally it cannot deliver) that British and French nuclear forces should be regulated by an agreement negotiated only by the superpowers (and France does not even belong to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)) and the requirement that NATO itself should eat many of its words, especially the 1979 declaration that West European nuclear forces should be strengthened to match the rapid growth of the SS20 force and the more recent opinion that the French and British nuclear forces are what their governments say they are — strategic. The idea now is that there should be some equality based on counts of warheads, not missiles, between the East and West in Europe, but that the British and French nuclear forces should still figure somewhere in the equation. The proposal is like a fruit cake laced with razor blades, but nevertheless more palatable than pure steel.

### Difficulties

The British and French forces are an obvious stumbling block, and are bound to be so. The constitutional difficulty that Mr Andropov brushed aside last week is moreover not a mere formality that might, for example, be resolved by joining the British and French Governments in the negotiations at Geneva. For while the British Government has usually justified its independent nuclear forces as a kind of general contribution to the defence of Western Europe (with luck, by the deterrence of attack), successive governments have implicitly moved closer to the position the French have always taken — that nuclear guarantees by others cannot in all circumstances be relied upon. The Gallois doctrine of the 1950s, that safety in the face of a nuclear threat requires a nuclear retaliatory force commensurate in some sense with its value as a military prize, seems to be gaining more influence than its simplicity deserves. But these independent forces are also technically of a strategic nature. Even though the range of the British missiles carried by four submarines could allow them to be used against targets also accessible to the land-launched missiles due to be introduced to Western Europe in the next few years, their accuracy is of necessity much less.

So the British and French forces belong not in the negotiations on intermediate-range weapons but in the parallel negotiations on strategic arms reductions, called START, also at Geneva. But that is also a bilateral negotiation, while the British Government is

also right to say that its own independent strategic force is so tiny compared with those of the superpowers — a few per cent, according to the basis of counting — that it should be held significant only when plans have been made substantially to reduce the main striking forces. The most that the Soviet Union is likely to win on this point in the intermediate-range negotiations is therefore an undertaking that the independent European forces will be counted along with others at some predetermined point in what it must be hoped will be a continuing process of strategic arms reductions. To its credit, if in slightly lukewarm tones, the British Government has been saying that it will reconsider its own position on nuclear weapons if circumstances should change substantially. (The Government of France has not yet made even such a grudging promise.) Should not both these West European governments now attempt to define the circumstances in which they would acknowledge that their own nuclear forces must be counted explicitly in the START negotiations, not implicitly allowed for as in the numerical imbalance of the Salt II agreement?

### Solutions

All this boils down to the assumption that, at some stage, the two sets of negotiations at Geneva must be linked. This has been obvious to outsiders since the two processes began. Now it seems that there can be little progress on the intermediate-range negotiations unless the need for linkage is recognized formally, and the circumstances in which it will occur agreed. But even if a bargain can be struck about the time at which account will be taken of the independent forces, what chance is there that an agreement can be reached on the other problems of intermediate nuclear weapons — verification, the issue of whether the Soviet Union would be required to destroy surplus but mobile SS20s or merely move them out of range of Western Europe, for example? Given that so much of the past few months has been occupied with public statements by the two principals at Geneva, it seems improbable that much can be accomplished before the long diplomatic summer gets under way. But fortunately that is not necessarily the case.

Democratic elections may yet influence the way that events turn out. Mr Andropov's offer to reduce the SS20 force to match the British and French nuclear forces was evidently timed in such a way as to influence the West German elections in April, but seems not to have had that effect. Although the British election on 9 June will be enlivened (or made dull, according to taste) by arguments about unilateral disarmament, there is hardly enough time in which to seek to influence its outcome in any important way. The more influential election is that which must take place in the United States in November 1984, and in which President Reagan may yet be a candidate. In the past two years, he has given the impression of being as indifferent to the need for arms control as during his election campaign three years ago. And although the House of Representatives resolution that there should be a negotiated freeze on nuclear deployment will not tie his hands, the fact that it was passed at all is a sign that those wishing to succeed in November 1984 would be well advised to talk well, and act well, about arms control. So, with luck, even Mr Andropov may be surprised by what happens at the negotiating session beginning next week. A president eager to match Soviet enthusiasm for arms control could be disarming. That at least must be the hope. □