

## New chance for East-West talks

*The Soviet proposals put at Stockholm last week have been too quickly dismissed in the West as an old recipe for arms control. That they may be, but why not talk about them?*

THE Soviet decision to pull out of this year's Olympic Games has inevitably overshadowed the Soviet Union's presentation of a string of arms control proposals to the Stockholm conference on European security, which reconvened on 8 May. The first development, ostensibly on the grounds that Soviet athletes would be physically endangered in Los Angeles, is regrettable at such short notice but may in the end be an important contribution to international understanding; the Olympic Games have been, for far too long, occasions for unbridled displays of chauvinism. And on the face of things, the Soviet proposals at Stockholm are both familiar and unacceptable for reasons which by now should be widely understood. Yet that should not prevent the other participants at Stockholm, one of the meetings called within the framework of the Helsinki agreements, from taking this development as an opportunity for revivifying the East-West dialogue on arms control, distinctly in abeyance since the collapse of the nuclear negotiations at Geneva at the end of 1983.

The new Soviet package is a mixed bag of the familiar and unfamiliar. Predictably, it includes (at the head of the list) the demand that nuclear powers should declare that they will not be the first to use nuclear weapons. This old proposal is presumably included for form's sake, since the Soviet Union is well aware that for the past quarter of a century, the defence of Western Europe has been based on the assumption that battlefield nuclear weapons might be necessary to counter a successful conventional incursion from the East. But a no-first-use declaration would also have the contradictory effects of helping to encourage conventional conflicts that could escalate into nuclear wars and of encouraging nuclear powers to keep their nuclear arsenals intact (because of the risks inherent in taking such a declaration at its face value). At Stockholm, however, the Soviet Union has gone further by advocating a treaty under which all European powers would agree not to be the first to use either conventional or nuclear forces. At first sight, this is simply an attempt to revive the old idea of a non-aggression pact between East and West in Europe, a notion which pragmatic Western governments have consistently resisted on the grounds that such an agreement could be only a cosmetic device for pretending that political and ideological differences are less serious than they seem. But in the absence of constructive talks about serious arms control, it would be constructive to know precisely how else the Soviet Union proposes that conflicts should be settled. A standing commission for the discussion of differences of the kind from which European wars could spring would be no bad thing.

### Chemical weapons

Freezing (and then reducing) military budgets, another of the Soviet proposals, is by contrast meaningless, pointless and probably unacceptable even in Moscow. Just how powers with international commitments, such as the Soviet Union and the United States, would limit the resources devoted to preparations just for European wars is anybody's guess. Eliminating chemical weapons from the European theatre is, however, a suggestion that deserves serious consideration. None of the governments with interests in Europe can be cheerful about the present need to plan for the use of chemical weapons, and while the chief among them would probably be able deliberately to violate such an agreement (or to counter a violation) within weeks if not days, the risks in

being caught napping would not be overwhelming. So there is a case for talking constructively about the central problem in any such proposals — what arrangements could be made for verifying compliance with such an agreement? Technically, as the accusations and counter-accusations of the war between Iran and Iraq have shown, this is an exceedingly difficult issue — which is a good reason why it should be taken up in good time.

The remainder of the Soviet package is still more interesting at least in the sense that discussion can only be fruitful. First, there is a suggestion that the present arrangement under the Helsinki agreements whereby military exercises must be notified in advance should be extended to all movements of troops and military equipment above a scale yet to be fixed. Although intelligence-gathering by both sides in Europe is probably now sufficient for each side accurately to know what the other is about, such an agreement would be well worth having as a demonstration of openness and truthfulness. The West should jump at it.

### Zones

The proposal that some consideration should be given to nuclear-free zones in Europe — what many in the West consider to be the most obviously-poisoned chalice in the new Soviet package — also deserves serious consideration, the obvious dangers notwithstanding. Again, more than a quarter of a century has passed since the Polish foreign minister Rapacki proposed that there should be a nuclear-free zone in central Europe (including both Germanies and Poland) agreed only among the governments directly affected. More recently, there has been a great deal of enthusiastic talk in Scandinavia about the potential value of a nuclear-free zone stretching from Finland in the east to Denmark in the west. The Soviet proposal to the Stockholm meeting last week raises the further question of a nuclear-free zone covering the "Balkan peninsula" without specifying whether that term embraces Turkey. All such schemes have the disadvantage that their benefits are much less real than they seem. But although it might lead to nothing, the West should again jump at the chance of such a discussion, if only for its educative value (for both sides).

Of the three proposed nuclear-free zones, that in central Europe is the more important — and more difficult. One almost preliminary difficulty is that of knowing what is meant by the term "nuclear-free". In central Europe, the only possible meaningful interpretation must include the interdiction of the physical presence of nuclear explosives, by whichever organization they are manufactured. (The governments concerned do not manufacture nuclear weapons on their own, but provide house-room for other people's.) Since, in central Europe, it must be supposed that nuclear-free territory would quickly reacquire nuclear weapons if hostilities broke out, arguments that apply elsewhere about the propriety of command and control installations are academic. On the other hand, there are serious practical difficulties about the boundaries that might be drawn for a nuclear-free zone, given that an agreement including the whole of West Germany would effectively exclude NATO nuclear weapons from central Europe. Yet both sides would learn a great deal from a discussion of the problems. Why, "without prejudice" as the lawyers say, do they not agree to talk about them? □