

Geneva may be a can of worms

Last week's meeting at Geneva has committed the Soviet Union and the United States to solve three huge problems in arms control which have individually been insoluble. Is that wise?

THE outcome of last week's meeting between the United States and the Soviet Union is a disappointment. The occasion may yet turn out to have sown the seeds of greater danger. For, on the face of things, the agreement between Mr George Shultz and Mr Andrei Gromyko that there should be three interlocking parallel negotiations on strategic arms control (long-range missiles, intermediate missiles and anti-missile systems) is a recipe for a repetition of the breakdown at the end of 1983 of the earlier negotiations on strategic arms. The two men have in effect promised to build an exceedingly ambitious house of cards. The obvious danger is that the whole edifice will come tumbling down long before it can be completed, as one side takes the view that the other has done something to jeopardize the spirit of the negotiations due to begin in March or thereabouts. Shultz and Gromyko said last week that they will meet again if that should be necessary; it will be safest if they can do so before March, to anticipate the stumbling blocks that lie ahead.

The general but contrary opinion, that last week's meeting was a triumph for rationality as well as for those who took part in it, stems from the belief that it is something to be grateful for that the Soviet Union and the United States are willing to talk to each other. There is something in that view. It is also no doubt a plus that neither side saw fit to storm out of last week's two-day meeting. But a decision to open negotiations is to be counted as an achievement only if there is a reasonable chance that negotiations will not be a prelude to another falling out.

Past lessons

The events of 1983 are all too vivid a pointer to the trouble that may lie ahead. Then, there were two sets of parallel negotiations under way, on strategic missiles and missiles of intermediate range. The Soviet Union had been complaining for several months at the plan to install US cruise missiles and Pershing II rockets in Western Europe, a formal decision taken by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization four years earlier in response to Soviet deployment of SS20 missiles during the late 1970s. With the arrival of the first cruise missiles in Britain, the Soviet Union pulled out of the talks on intermediate-range missiles, but the parallel negotiations continued for a couple of weeks, suggesting to the optimists that they might resume in 1984. But that was not to be. At least to the Soviet Union, the linkage (the fashionable descriptor) between the two projects was too strong. One consequence was a deterioration of superpower relations that kept many people awake at nights throughout George Orwell's year. Another was that originally tentative plans for military developments became entrenched. The most notable of these, the United States plan to develop a defence against strategic missiles, the strategic defence initiative (see page 177) as it is called, emerges from last week's talks as the most likely candidate occasion for an angry repudiation of the negotiations now to begin.

What seems to have eluded Shultz and Gromyko last week is agreement on the procedures that superpower negotiations on arms control must satisfy to succeed. Such a mechanism must be sufficiently robust to survive the recurrent bouts of superpower bad temper that have been a feature of the past four decades, and which must prudently be assumed to have become perpetual. The objective in arms control should be a set of agreements on strategic issues capable of surviving all disagreements except those

likely to persuade one side or the other that a nuclear war is a lesser risk. The belief is mistaken that arms control agreements by themselves may engender such a state of sweetness and light that serious conflicts of interest will no longer arise. Some benefits of that kind would no doubt accrue, just as modest agreements would pave the way for more ambitious deals. But the serious objectives are that by voluntary agreement the two sides should so limit their own strategic power that both their capacity and their inclination to embark on nuclear warfare will be diminished. That, after all, is the only reason why others than the superpowers have a legitimate interest that some kind of agreement should be reached.

Criteria

The difficulty in the present circumstances is that there seems to be no agreement between the superpowers on the general principles on which their three parallel negotiations should be conducted, or on the criteria that should be satisfied by particular agreements. To what extent, for example, should the details of an agreement on strategic arms be capable of verification, either by remote methods such as reconnaissance satellites or by the provision of more immediate access? The United States has traditionally been the more zealous advocate of comprehensive verification, the Soviet Union has recently surprised some of its critics by a willingness to entertain access (in connection with the proposed treaty of chemical weapons), but by no means can verification be watertight (the US Congress notwithstanding). To what extent should agreements not to deploy weapons of some specific kind require of its parties an interdiction of research? Deployment can in principle be verified, but research as such is necessarily uncontrollable, even in many circumstances by the governments concerned (and so cannot be realistically constrained); but what can be said about the intermediate ground of testing (which happens to be relevant to the US strategic defence initiative)? And what, in any case, is the condition of strategic stability at which the superpowers are now aiming? The capacity for mutually assured destruction, the distant (and possibly mythical) prospect of assured invulnerability, or something in between? To embark on detailed negotiations when the objectives are not clear is far from wise.

The most obvious deficiency of last week's agreement is therefore the lack of some agreed procedure for arriving at a common understanding on these questions. The issues are not matters that can be negotiated, but are partly technical, partly military, largely political but in an important sense are also philosophical. How much certainty is needed for verification to be counted adequate, for example? To what extent would the mutual disclosure of information on novel weapons enhance security? And how could that be verified? Part of the enthusiasm for last week's meeting at Geneva derived from the notion that the Soviet Union and the United States were contemplating an "umbrella" (to use their word) for a serious and continuing process of negotiations on arms control, necessarily lasting for several years. What has emerged is a formula for detailed negotiations on three outstanding issues with the implicit danger that, if one fails, none will succeed. Mr Shultz and Mr Gromyko now must provide that themselves, by means of regular meetings to assess which way the wind is blowing. □