

Negotiating a test-ban treaty

The new-found excitement about a comprehensive test-ban treaty is premature. There are technical and military difficulties still to be surmounted.

THE fortieth anniversary of the Hiroshima explosion has seen an unexpected revival of interest in the notion that the testing of nuclear weapons might be banned altogether. Indeed, Mr Mikhail Gorbachev, the Soviet leader, some weeks ago announced a unilateral moratorium on testing even within the limits now allowed by treaty (only underground, and only with weapons yielding less than the equivalent of 150,000 tonnes of TNT); Mr Gorbachev also says that the Soviet Union will extend the moratorium indefinitely if the United States will only agree to follow suit. The new-found popularity of the comprehensive test-ban has been further emphasized by Sir Geoffrey Howe, the British Foreign Secretary, who was saying at the end of last month at Helsinki that the British government would be happy with a test-ban if only it could be properly policed. The only discordant note has come from the United States, where spokesmen in Washington have taken the line that a test-ban could not at present be monitored securely, for which reason the Soviet offer must be regarded as a kind of trap. As on many other recent attempts to make progress with arms control, everybody is half-right and, at the same time, half-wrong.

There are two reasons why the comprehensive test-ban has sprung to prominence just now. At the end of this month, the third review conference of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) will begin at Geneva, and the non-nuclear powers that have signed the treaty will be upbraiding the nuclear powers for having done so little, these past fifteen years (since the treaty came into force), to negotiate measures to limit strategic arms. The Soviet Union can hope to fend off at least some of the criticism by pointing to Mr Gorbachev's offer. Soon afterwards, in November, Mr Gorbachev and President Ronald Reagan will be meeting again at Geneva; the former is certain to ask the latter why the United States will not agree to a comprehensive test-ban treaty. Both sides had better acknowledge in advance that the issue between them will not be simply settled. In many ways, the technical problems are not the most obdurate.

Workable

Close on seven years ago, the three signatories of the threshold test-ban treaty, Britain, the Soviet Union and the United States, had all but settled the terms of a workable treaty. Then, as now, it was plain that a comprehensive treaty cannot be verified by the recording of seismic signals picked up by seismographs located entirely outside the territory of the signatories to such a treaty, whence the sensible technical compromise that signatories should each provide houseroom for ten remotely operated seismic stations on their own territory. The haggle that had arisen during the negotiations of this draft treaty about the suspicion that such stations might be used for more general espionage were eventually resolved, apparently amicably, by the US suggestion that public-key cryptography could be used to provide security; the host country would be able to decode messages, but would be unable (lacking the encoding key) to corrupt them with false information. It may be that, on reflection, the United States doubts the validity of these solutions, but there is no reason to fear that the problems tackled seven years ago are not soluble in one way or another, perhaps by refining the network of observing stations, perhaps by more elaborate ways of making the transmission of information secure. (The absurd Soviet demand that there should be ten seismic stations

in the United Kingdom and its possessions is a different kind of stumbling-block, but one that is, as it was, negotiable.) What is lacking now is the enthusiasm for a comprehensive test-ban.

What has gone wrong? The Soviet Union appears to have forgotten that the eagerness of the United States to conclude further arms control agreements had waned long before the present US administration came to power at the beginning of 1981, and that the decisive Soviet influence over Afghanistan was as much responsible as President Carter's recognition, during his last year in office, that it would not be possible to force the SALT II agreement through the US Congress. Since then, East-West relations have further deteriorated, both in rhetoric and by the evidence of events. During the same period, the United States has made the painful discovery that the single new strategic missile allowed by the SALT II treaty, the MX missile, is too clumsy an object for security, and has also argued loudly (if mistakenly) that it should be possible to avoid the threat of nuclear attack, and also of the need of specific arms control agreements, by means of a defence against ballistic missiles. The Soviet Union may say "bad luck!" on the first score and be sceptical to the point of hostile disbelief on the second, but it must also know that two sovereign states can be made to conclude a treaty only if each should voluntarily have concluded that its own interests will be advanced by whatever surrender of sovereignty is entailed.

Unpropitious

There are other reasons why the present time is not propitious for a comprehensive test-ban treaty. With the passage of almost a decade since negotiations on the existing draft began, nuclear powers not party to the negotiations, France and China specifically, have become a decade more sophisticated. China's accumulation of nuclear explosives has probably been proportional to the time elapsed, but China has no plutonium warheads as things are; the chances that such a power would sign a comprehensive test-ban treaty are small, which should give the Soviet Union pause. France is less of an immediate problem, but cannot entirely be ignored. None of this implies that these two nuclear powers should be left entirely to their own ambitions, but the process of discovering where they stand cannot be accomplished by the issuing of public challenges by one superpower to the other.

Another reason why the test-ban treaty is more than a matter on which all people of good intentions should instinctively agree turns on the uncertainty that would inevitably be engendered among the military people, and thus among politicians in both East and West, if the testing of nuclear weapons were suddenly outlawed. Will those warheads function as we designed them? Quite apart from the nuclear explosives, will the other components still do their job? A test-ban treaty would be quickly followed by the development of techniques for the near-testing of nuclear weapons, but uncertainty about the function of existing stockpiles would persist. That is why, in present circumstances, a comprehensive test-ban treaty is attainable only as part of a larger package, involving a substantial reduction of the numbers of warheads deployed by the two superpowers. The occasion to look for such an agreement is not next November's summit but the bilateral negotiations that will have resumed a good two months earlier. □