

Other people's nuclear weapons

Week-end diplomacy seems to have won Britain a prolongation of its role as a nuclear power, but the time has come to ask when and how this will be attenuated.

THE British government's case for maintaining nuclear forces is far from simple and far from clear. Historically, the British stumbled into making nuclear weapons because, in the late 1940s, it seemed to the then Labour government that this was the natural course to follow in a substantial and technologically advanced country. Over the years, circumstances have changed. The range of Britain's international interests has shrunk to an extent that could not have been foreseen forty years ago, while the country's industrial economy is no longer large enough to sustain the independent development and construction of strategic delivery systems.

The obvious parallel with the present time is that in the early 1960s, when the then Prime Minister, Mr Harold Macmillan (now Lord Stockton), persuaded President John F. Kennedy that, if the air-launched nuclear bomb called Skybolt was not available (because it did not function as designed), the British government should be allowed to purchase Polaris submarines instead. But why? In one sense, it is merely right and proper that a government which is a member of an alliance such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) should make an equitable contribution to its strategic forces; indeed, the British Polaris submarines are operated within NATO guidelines, but with the understanding that they might be withdrawn, and operated independently, if some vital national interest were involved.

But what could those circumstances be? Is not the United States fully committed to the defence of Europe not merely through the formal treaty on which NATO rests but also by the presence both of troops and of strategic missiles on European soil? The simple answer is that these assurances have been insufficient for a succession of British governments, all of which have recognized that circumstances could arise when the United States might shrink from using its strategic nuclear forces, risking retaliation in the process, for the sake of some ill-understood European interest. These dark suspicions have been strengthened by the news from Reykjavik last month.

Negotiations

Whether Britain and France will be able indefinitely to continue in that frame of mind is another matter. Everything will depend on what happens in the negotiations on strategic arms still continuing at Geneva. After Reykjavik, and the recognition by the two most powerful people in the world that even they cannot magic out of thin air lasting agreements on difficult questions in a dozen hours of conversation, it is inevitable that strategic arms control will be regarded as a matter for the long haul; the bilateral negotiations at Geneva will (with luck) be prolonged into the next decade, and more attention will be paid to other aspects of the relationship between the major powers. But the time will come when, again with luck, there will be another proposal that the balance between both strategic missiles and missiles of intermediate range should be struck at a lower level than at present. At some stage, the point will (with luck, again) arrive at which the British and French nuclear forces stand out conspicuously. Then the superpowers will be pressing to see these independent nuclear forces cut back to size. The United

States, having helped Britain to build Trident submarines, will be wanting to see them scuttled. That will be an awkward conversation for some future weekend at Camp David.

The British position on this forseen dilemma is, fortunately, explicit. In the first place, the submarine missiles are regarded as strategic weapons, contributing now to the strategic deterrent of NATO as a whole but also intended as a means by which Britain might threaten even a more powerful potential adversary with an unacceptable degree of retaliatory damage. Theoretically, the French regard for nuclear weapons is very much the same; they might not be sufficient to influence events on the global stage, but they would surely 'tear an arm' from an attacker, and give him pause. But the British government has also gone so far as to consider when it would be proper to think of limiting its nuclear forces, saying that this would be acceptable as part of a more general agreement for the substantial reduction of nuclear forces everywhere.

Unfortunately, this undertaking is not nearly as clear as it might be. The British government argues that, because its weapons are strategic, their number should not be affected by an agreement on the numbers of superpower nuclear weapons deployed in or against Europe, which makes sense. But the prospect that there may be very substantial reductions of European nuclear forces can only strengthen the British government's unspoken fears that Europe may one day be left to its own devices, whence in part Mrs Thatcher's visit to Washington at the weekend. The snag is that the British position is vague on what would happen if there were also a substantial agreement on strategic forces might be held to provide a licence for conventional wars in Europe, in which West European states would be disadvantaged. So British governments will be tempted to hang on to their nuclear weapons through thick and thin.

The lessons to be learned from these tortuous arguments are several. First, Britain's susceptibilities about its nuclear weapons mirror those of other European states about other aspects of their arrangements for defence. British nuclear weapons would indeed be an impediment to sudden and drastic reductions of nuclear arms along the lines fancied at Reykjavik, but so would be the political protestations of other European states, from which it follows that the superpowers must aim in their negotiations at a balanced package of arms control agreements covering not merely strategic and intermediate nuclear missiles but conventional forces and even the temper of East-West relations. On that score, the Europeans have a case. But the United States also has a right to expect that the British and French nuclear weapons will not be impediments to reasonable arms agreements that may in future be reached with the Soviet Union. Indeed, it would have been natural that President Reagan should have broached the question with Mrs Thatcher at the weekend, while confirming that Trident should succeed Polaris. And, given governments' temptations to hang on to weapons in the face of arguments to the contrary, there is the strongest case for asking that the British government should now be prepared publicly to define the circumstances in which it will let go. France, which is a harder case, should be persuaded also to follow suit. □