

Making arms control stick?

It is a good sign that the superpowers have fallen silent, in public, about the intricacies of the Geneva negotiations, which suggests that they are getting somewhere. But what will happen next?

Two months have now passed since the United States appears successfully to have persuaded its European allies that they had better swallow their misgivings and agree that Europe would be a safer place without missiles of intermediate range. The United States had an easy case to make: Europe seemed content enough with the strategic balance of the mid-1970s, before Soviet SS-20 missiles began appearing in the East, so what could be wrong with returning to that state of affairs? West Germany's reluctance, born of the view that Central Europe was even then a dangerous place, was natural enough, but has been turned, at least for the time being. Britain and France (an ally if not technically a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization) were more concerned that their independent nuclear forces should survive an agreement on missiles of intermediate range, and appear to have been satisfied, again for the time being. But these half-reluctant partners in what seems to be an impending arms control agreement, not to mention the fellow-allies such as the Netherlands and Belgium, which will no doubt be heartily glad to see the back of the US Pershing missiles, had better be thinking now of what will happen next.

First, all concerned (in the Soviet Union as well) had better acknowledge that circumstances have much changed since the mid-1970s, when what was called *détente* was at its peak. For what it is worth, it has never been clear in the West what went so sour then. It is true that Mr Richard Nixon, the architect (with Dr Henry Kissinger) of the accommodation between East and West, had lost his job as president of the United States, but that can have made very little difference to the understanding that had been reached. And while the growing disenchantment of the United States with the war in Vietnam may have seemed to those then in charge in the Soviet Union to be a sign of incipient weakness, surely that knowledge would also have worked in favour of keeping the understanding alive. Yet the SS-20 missiles began to make their appearance in the East without formal announcement. The decade, it will be recalled, ended with the considerable Soviet presence in Afghanistan, still continuing. It would have been easier for those now worried about the damage that even short-range nuclear weapons could cause in Central Europe to accept the impending deal on intermediate missiles if there were a better understanding of why the earlier climate of *détente* had melted away.

By extension, it follows that the agreement the two superpowers appear likely to reach later in the year will be the more durable, even palatable, if it is accompanied by some kind of restoration of the climate of the mid-1970s. The obvious difficulty is that, while President Reagan may be well placed, in the closing year or so of his presidency, to make (and then carry through the US Senate) an agreement to remove intermediate missiles from Europe, it is much less likely that he could reach a broader political settlement at this stage. Mr Mikhail Gorbachev may therefore have to wait in patience for the broader understanding he seems to want until after the elections next November. Would it not, in the interval, be sensible to try to breathe new life into the Helsinki agreements, already negotiated and signed by all concerned?

Meanwhile, on the assumption that there will be an agree-

ment on intermediate missiles before the year is out, it is prudent to anticipate, first, that the agreement will itself engender some kind of rekindling of *détente* and, second, that the good effects will begin to fade unless there is the prospect of another agreement in sight. The obvious difficulty there is that the Geneva talks have shown that the obviously necessary agreement on strategic arms will not be possible without the containment of military technology in space, likely to be unacceptable at least for the duration of this presidency. This is why the time has now come to dust off the comprehensive test-ban treaty, even as amended by some of last year's ingenious schemes for allowing a quota of exceptions on either side. Both partners in the Geneva negotiations deserve congratulations for having brought things this far, but their efforts will have been in vain if they do not arrange to maintain the momentum of agreement. □

New brooms for old

The new British government's plans offer no fresh hope for research, but some opportunities.

PREDICTABLY, the newly re-elected British government has embarked with zeal on its new legislative programme (see p.6). If the prospect of being hanged clarifies the mind, reprieve (even from the passing threat of electoral defeat) is a powerful invigorant. Yet nothing in what the government advertised in the Queen's speech last week promises a respite from hardship for Britain's research community. Keeping "firm control of public expenditure", so as to keep inflation in check and further to reduce the burden of British taxes, remains the objective. Nowhere does the government acknowledge that the time may have come for adding to its economics of good housekeeping a strategy for research-led innovation.

Moreover, the promise of legislative frenzy notwithstanding, many of the uncertainties that afflict research persist. The Department of Education and Science hopes that its education bill (fondly known by civil servants as "Gerbill", for Great Educational Reform Bill, with scant regard for the principle that puns founder on poor spelling) will be at the top of the legislative queue, yet among the plans for changing the rules on higher education canvassed over the past few years, only that for taking polytechnics away from local education authority control rated a mention last week. The scheme for financing universities by means of contracts for the "provision of educational services" will no doubt be found in Gerbill when that is published in the autumn; between now and then, there is a chance that the government's views may be changeable by persuasion. It is not even clear whether the government will move to abolish academic tenure in this long parliamentary session, which again suggests that there may still be room for manoeuvre. Sir Keith Joseph's mean-minded plan for extinguishing tenure by means of a network of parliamentary commissions is an administrative nightmare the new administration cannot welcome, yet pride will impel it to do something. The best hope is that it will agree that the issue of tenure should be subsumed in a wider examination of the conditions on which academics are employed, and