

with caveats, which is wise. But the ambitions of the more hawkish members that there should be some counter-balance for the impending disappearance of intermediate missiles from Central Europe were neither embraced nor denied, but instead overshadowed by the more worthwhile resolution that there must be an attempt to negotiate in Europe an understanding about the balance of conventional forces in that densely populated region. That is not a compromise, but the only sensible course to follow at this stage (see *Nature* 332, 1; 1988).

But how? It is easier for a government to resolve that there should be an accommodation with a potential adversary than to ensure that negotiations will actually take place, and then succeed. Recent experience in this field is not encouraging. After nearly a decade, the East-West talks in Vienna on the balanced reduction of conventional forces are being abandoned, while the security talks under the aegis of the Helsinki agreements, while useful in reaching agreements such as those which now enable eastern and western observers to inspect each other's military manoeuvres, have little to say about the numbers of tanks and strike aircraft facing each other in Central Europe.

If another effort is to succeed, it will have to begin from painstaking and agreed inventories by East and West of their reciprocal conventional strength (with short-range nuclear weapons included). That is how the Euromissiles treaty (INF) was negotiated, and how the more ambitious treaty on strategic weapons may yet be ready in two months or so. The snag is that mere numbers, always the most easily estimated of quantities, are more relevant in estimating strategic than tactical strength, where geography and environment may be crucial.

Meanwhile, even those who take a cheerful view of last week's events should watch out for more distant but now predestined changes. Both in Europe and the United States, there is now a fashion for making gloomy parallels between the decline of the British Empire or even the Roman Empire with the supposed decline of the power of the United States. The argument is outrageously exaggerated, but there is nevertheless a sense in which European NATO members had better plan to play a more active part in their own defence.

Quite apart from imponderables about the future influence and (more important) inclinations of the United States, there has been a pronounced shift in the relative economic power of NATO's two halves in the past thirty years — in Europe's favour. US congressmen's complaints that Europe should do more to provide for its own defence are not mere sourness. It is also true that, with the INF treaty signed, the US contribution to the defence of Western Europe has been diminished in precisely the respect it is uniquely qualified to contribute. But the European members of NATO, now more anxious than ever to have an important say in the development of their relations with the East will find it simplest to pay for it.

This does not imply that Europe, having seen the back of exogenous long-range missiles, must arm itself to the teeth by other means. Nor does it follow from the pursuit of a strong defence of Western Europe that present and future improvements of political relations between East and West will be jeopardized.

Nobody suggests that Europe should transformed overnight from an armed camp to a demilitarized zone. Moreover, there is a need that Western Europe, with its present ambitions to become (from 1991, if the optimists are taken at their word) a properly unified community, must face the neglected problem of how a loose federation such as it will be should devise an external policy for itself. The European Commission at Brussels may have come a long way since the Treaty of Rome was signed, but it is still much better at drafting statements on external affairs than at making policy. The danger in the way in which the wind is at present blowing is that Western Europe, even if persuaded by events (and the United States) to spend more on conventional defences, will be poorly defended for lack of a wider framework in which to plan. □

Running in the dark

The present phase of the presidential election in the United States is disheartening.

IN the arcane catalogues of national customs, the procedures by which people elect their leaders deserve to be recognized as the most idiosyncratic. The Republic of Ireland, for example, is famous (among other things) for a system of proportional representation most outsiders cannot fathom, but which apparently ensures that no government will have a substantial majority over its opponents. The United States, by contrast, has devised a fiendish system whose chief effect seems to be that voters, before being given an opportunity to choose their next president from a list of candidates, are treated to the spectacle of members of the two principal parties abusing each other vigorously, but hardly bothering to complain at their titular opponents' policies.

That, on this occasion more than most, seems to be the consequence of the US system of primary elections, ostensibly a sensible way of enabling like-minded people to decide among themselves who will be their champion in the election that really matters. The result is that, since the beginning of the year, two dwindling bands of office-seekers have been shifting camp from one rural part of the United States to another, most of all concerned to undermine the reputation or the promise of their fellow Democrats or Republicans, as the case may be. What this does for the reputation of politicians is anybody's guess. And, in spite of the way in which a score of mostly southern states coordinated their primary elections on Tuesday this week in the hope of acquiring more influence on the outcome, the pollsters expect the abuse to continue until the summer.

While there may be few who fail to derive a little pleasure from the discomfiture of normally imperturbable people, the pity on this occasion is that the would-be candidates have allowed their obsession with their rivals' defects to dampen their participation in what might have seemed the purpose of the primary elections, that of giving them a chance to say how, if eventually elected, they would tackle important issues, of which there are many. Instead of policies, there are mostly only indications: Senator Robert Dole (Republican) and Representative Richard Gephardt (Democrat), for example, talk more openly about solving economic problems by protectionism, but not so specifically that voters would be able to complain if either became president and then followed quite different policies (as, it must be hoped, he would). And although the roster of prominent candidates in the primary elections includes one (Democratic Senator Albert Gore) with a distinguished record as a legislator concerned with science and technology, both in the House of Representatives and now the Senate, little has been heard of how research may help solve contemporary problems.

Part of the problem is the ghost of Mr Walter Mondale, the Democrat who stood for the presidency in 1984 and who lost. Legend has it that Mr Mondale's defeat is attributable to his ready declaration that, if elected, he would increase taxes so as to balance the US budget deficit (and also to finance various social programmes). In reality, there may be other explanations. But the result has been that none of this election's hopefuls still in the race has faced up to the budget problem, arguably the most serious for the new man's first year in office. Instead, there appears to be a conspiracy among the runners (in which the administration has joined) not to worry about the budget deficit expected this year (which may amount to \$175,000 million) and the accompanying trade deficit (\$160,000 million?). But that is merely the immediate difficulty. The present administration believed it would avoid the problems it has created because rising prosperity (and faster-rising taxes) would pay for the rising costs of an ageing population. That miscalculation points to a structural imbalance in the system that will make things worse before somebody has the courage to make them better. □