

## Arms talks enter muddy waters

This week's negotiations on conventional forces in Europe will be more complicated than a few years ago, paradoxically because Mr Gorbachev has changed the agenda.

THE principle that any negotiations on arms control are better than none may be falsified by the talks begun this week in Vienna on the reduction of conventional forces in Europe. Ordinarily it would be a hopeful sign that the Warsaw Pact and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) are tackling directly the most serious threat to their mutual security — the risk of a European conflict — but that is only half the story. It is more important that neither side has a clear vision of its objectives, while each has taken an opening position which is certain not to be accepted by the other. So there are two dangers. One, the lesser, is that the negotiations will lapse into the ill-tempered stalemate of the talks on Mutually Balanced Force Reductions (MBFR) which dragged on at Vienna for nearly a decade until they were abandoned last year. The second is that they will blow up in the participants' faces, undermining the amity of the past two years.

The Soviet position, dramatized by Mr Mikhail Gorbachev's declaration at the United Nations of a unilateral reduction of conventional forces, is that there should also be a demilitarized zone in Central Europe, on either side of the mutual German frontier. The obvious objection is that such an agreement would put NATO at a serious disadvantage. The distance between the German frontier and the Rhine is already so small, especially in NATO's northern sector, that the effective defence of northern West Germany is an insomniac's conundrum. In any case, NATO says, the volunteered reductions of battle tanks will still leave the Warsaw Pact with more of them than the limit of 20,000 which is the centrepiece of its own opening bid. There is plenty of room for argument, but no obvious compromise, in all that.

NATO's starting position, which would exclude both battlefield nuclear weapons and aircraft from the negotiations, is similarly inconsistent. But nuclear weapons, for example, are said to be a necessary compensation for the Warsaw Pact's superiority in battle tanks. If there were an incursion from the East, NATO would attempt to halt it by using tactical nuclear weapons. So is it not fair that the Warsaw Pact should ask that NATO should trade its dependence on nuclear interdiction for an agreement that there should be parity on battle tanks? The same applies to aircraft, which can be used in interdiction as well as in other roles.

There are more serious difficulties with which neither of the participants has come to grips, but which cannot be

settled at Vienna. Part of NATO's opening gambit is that no more than 30 per cent of either side's quota of forces should be provided by a single nation. That is a way of teasing the Soviet Union about the military independence of its allies in Eastern Europe, but it also begs serious questions that the Soviet Union cannot answer now, so long as its allies have not had time to figure out what version of *perestroika* they will follow. The same is true of NATO's own little local difficulty, the West German government's reluctance to agree to the deployment of an improved version of the Lance short-range nuclear missile.

The big boys, the Soviet Union and the United States, should recognize that they cannot know what might best emerge from their negotiations until the political future of Central Europe has been clarified. Meanwhile, if ambition does not get the better of good sense, there is much that can be done. The negotiators could usefully begin where they would have to finish, by deciding how to verify agreed quotas of tanks and other battlefield machines. The framework of an agreement to pull back battlefield nuclear weapons from the interface would be useful, if not for now, then for the future. Trying to distinguish between offensive and defensive arms would be beneficial. But a lasting agreement at Vienna will require a political understanding that cannot be quickly reached. Better to recognize that at the outset than to spoil the future by hurrying. □

## Tokyo's brave reform

The University of Tokyo is embarking on a daring reform — not before time.

THE University of Tokyo may still be just a little ahead of the University of Kyoto in the affections of young Japanese seeking a university education, but, sadly, neither ranks with the great universities of the West as an international centre of scholarship. There are scholars with international reputations at both places, of course, but that is not the same thing. Even the best of Japan's national universities are parochial and static institutions compared with the cosmopolitan intellectual transit-camps which are not merely the custodians but also the sources of scholarship elsewhere.

Now, the University of Tokyo, or at least its science faculty, plans to change. There has been talk of reform for