

## Has the real Bush stood up?

President George Bush has won just praise for his performance in Europe last week, but the difficult decisions remain unmade, not just in Washington, but in London and Paris.

PRESIDENT George Bush's several statements on European security last week have been welcomed warmly not merely by allies of the United States, but at least in part by the Soviet Union, which is how it should be. That Bush may have been driven to some of the things he had to say by the need to compromise with West Germany on the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO)'s position on short-range nuclear missiles in Central Europe does not detract from the importance of what he had to say. Nor does it matter that Bush appears to have been jockeyed into the position he took up last week by the crying need that the United States should somehow respond to the noises Mr Mikhail Gorbachev has been making in the past four years about arms control in Central Europe (and, for that matter, elsewhere). In this business, what matters is not rhetoric but binding agreements. How they are reached is strictly irrelevant.

The new position of the United States has four essential elements. First, the United States has agreed to match the Soviet Union's declared intention of reducing its conventional forces in Central Europe with smaller reductions of its own; the details have not been worked out (and the need to do so has apparently taken NATO officials by surprise), but this paves the way for rapid progress in the negotiations now under way in Vienna. Second, the United States accepts that aircraft should be counted in the conventional arms equation, which is as it should be (British and French views notwithstanding). Third, the United States now accepts that there should be negotiations with the Soviet Union on short-range nuclear weapons in Central Europe, but only when there is an agreement on conventional forces for which Bush demands a timetable of "six months to a year"; this is the West German compromise, about which the British and French governments are even less happy. Then, finally, there is an element of non-empty rhetoric: there can be no "common European home" (Gorbachev's phrase) until the Berlin wall has been dismantled figuratively as well as physically.

The implications must be far-reaching. The now-better prospect that there will be a deal on conventional arms in Europe means that both the major powers will win considerable economic benefits. The Soviet Union will be the chief beneficiary, but the impending arrangement should make (or at least make possible) significant inroads into the US budget deficit. Other members of the two alliances will benefit similarly. But, even more important, there is a

good chance of a continuing process of arms control in Europe. If the process is not as quick as Gorbachev has been looking for, it is a prospect that would have seemed unthinkable even a few years ago. Nobody in his senses can complain.

So what are the difficulties? The most obvious are those already made plain by the British and French governments, both of which are opposed to the counting of aircraft in the conventional arms equations and which are deeply uneasy now that they know that it is only a matter of time before their nuclear weapons must be put up for negotiation. But this is unavoidable. The notion that the two governments might be free to deploy short-range nuclear weapons (on aircraft) as they choose while the major powers are negotiating limits on what they can deploy is, of course, preposterous. Better that they should face up now to the reality they may not be able to avoid in 1990. But Britain and France will have to accept, perhaps when the START talks on strategic weapons begin later this month, that their submarine forces will also have to be counted in the equations on strategic missiles. That is what happened implicitly during the negotiation of the never-ratified SALT II treaty a decade ago. This time, the counting will be explicit. The British and French governments had better reconcile themselves to that. Deciding what to aim for will not be easy. The more submarine missiles they insist on keeping, the less will be the influence of the United States in Europe.

The other obvious difficulties are the uncertainties created by the new circumstances. Bush's West German compromise will probably suffice to keep West Germany a solid member of NATO, at least if the timetable for negotiations on conventional arms can be kept. But it will be a different kind of NATO — one in which the US physical presence is significantly though not substantially diminished and in which smaller powers will have a bigger say. Ten years from now, especially if West European dreams of economic growth through cooperation come true, its military dimensions could be much less obtrusive than at present. The uncertainties in the East are greater. Bush's challenge about the Berlin Wall will have struck many chords in Poland, Hungary and the Baltic States, but Gorbachev's demeanour in the past few months suggests that he, at least, is sympathetic. But will he be able to carry his colleagues with him? If so, the result could be that Europe is radically transformed. □