

Israel's nuclear weapons in the open

The US plan to contain the accumulation of destructive weapons in the Middle East has much to commend it, but it will require that Israel should be open about its nuclear weapons.

ISRAEL, a crypto-nuclear power since the early 1960s, will probably be flushed out into the open on that issue by the arms control initiative for the Middle East announced last week by President George Bush. Israel's nuclear complex at Dimona, in the Negev desert, has no known functions except the training of nuclear engineers and the manufacture of modest amounts of plutonium, which over the years would have allowed the manufacture of some scores of atomic bombs. The Bush proposal is that there should be an agreement among the major arms suppliers not to provide the ingredients of 'weapons of mass destruction' to states in the Middle East and North Africa, accompanied by an externally monitored 'freeze' on the manufacture of nuclear weapons. It is a good idea. There is a plan that the five governments which are permanent members of the United Nations Security Council should meet in Paris early in July to see if agreement can be reached.

On one reading of the strategic situation, Israel has the strongest possible reason to be a nuclear power. It is at least technically at war with most of its neighbours (the exception is Egypt) and evidently vulnerable to conventional attack — well-armed tanks could drive from Jerusalem to the Mediterranean coast in half an hour. So what better means of avoiding military catastrophe than to threaten the retaliatory destruction of the perpetrator's capital and other population centres? This is classical deterrence. Moreover, it hardly matters whether the threat is open or implicit. Even as things are, any neighbour planning a serious attack on Israel would have to calculate the risks of nuclear retaliation.

Israeli governments, which are never fools, have studiously fostered uncertainty on the issue. Israel has not signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Government statements on the nuclear question blend a refusal to forswear military options that may make future sense with a refusal to say what is the present state of affairs. The result is that most people, including neighbour governments, believe that Israel has a modest stock of nuclear weapons — but neighbour governments are denied the sense of indignation that sure knowledge would give them, not to mention the right to make claims on states elsewhere that might be induced to lend them nuclear assistance. That, no doubt, explains why Iraq, Libya and Pakistan have all, from time to time and with more or less reason, headed the list of potential nuclear proliferators.

Bush's proposal would remove some of that uncertainty. And, ironically, Israeli commentators have already reacted

by arguing that a freeze on nuclear weapons in the Middle East would be unfair to Israel when nuclear forces are the only valid counterpoise to the potential preponderance of conventional forces that it faces. But what if the dangers posed by those forces should be substantially reduced, perhaps by an agreement among the chief arms suppliers? Then, Israel's need of a nuclear deterrent, even a hypothetical deterrent, would in logic be reduced. Indeed, on a less narrow view of Israel's present danger than that habitually taken by Israeli governments, the need for the capacity of nuclear retaliation has also been eroded by the recent demonstration of the mobility of US conventional forces, likely only to be reinforced by the decision of the United States to base substantial stockpiles of military equipment in Israel itself.

That is why Israel has nothing to lose by, first, acknowledging that it is a nuclear power and, second, by allowing that it would itself be safer if it were to trade its status as a nuclear power for arrangements making sure that none of its natural enemies could follow suit. It should now be all the safer. What seems to have changed, partly no doubt as a consequence of Mr James Baker's dispiriting merry-go-round between the capitals of the Middle East, is that the United States is reconciled to becoming the de facto physical guarantor of Israel's continued existence if a regional peace settlement cannot be reached. There are many in Israel who will not trust that development, let alone welcome it. But they have no choice.

For people elsewhere, the past ten months (since the invasion of Kuwait) have mostly been dispiriting. At one stage, it seemed as if the superpower agreement on conventional weapons was about to fall apart, while the ending of an apparently successful war to undo the invasion has been followed by hardly any tangible sign that similar events will not recur.

But recalcitrant Middle East states have left out of their calculations that states elsewhere are as fearful that the region will remain a tinderbox as they should be themselves — and that they have the power to make things otherwise. That (as well as the hope of joining this year's Western economic summit) seems to have prompted the change of heart in Moscow on the conventional arms treaty. France (the ultimate originator of the concept of arms control "from the Atlantic to the Urals") seems about to set Israel an awkward example, as it talking of joining the NPT. Maybe not all is lost. □