

FOCUS

NUCLEAR THREAT

The thirty-five years of 'Third World' war since 1945, in which the superpowers have confined their military confrontation to involvement in local conflicts in Africa, Asia and the Middle East, has bred complacency about the stability of the prevailing nuclear stalemate. But yet these Third World conflicts may at any time refuse to remain the opportunity for controlled, though very bloody, sparring and become the trigger for more general hostilities. How fragile the barriers to nuclear escalation will then be, we do not know, but in the present atmosphere of international tension it seems worth reviewing recent nuclear developments.

To Europe, the most significant development was the NATO Brussels meeting in December which decided to install 572 medium-range nuclear missiles, based in Europe but paid for and controlled by the

US. The indications are that about 160 new Ground Launched Cruise Missiles will be based in Britain, probably in East Anglia and Oxfordshire. Italy will take 112 cruise missiles and Germany 96 in addition to 108 new Pershing II ballistic missiles. Quotas of 48 Cruise missiles each were fixed for Belgium and the Netherlands, but both countries showed considerable reluctance to back the plan. Unlike the UK, there was major political opposition to the plan in the Netherlands.

The decision followed a long debate on Theatre Nuclear Modernisation, primarily concerned with developing a response to the Soviet SS 20 missile and Backfire bomber. A distinction is made between tactical weapons which would be used on the battlefield (Germany); theatre weapons which would operate over the whole of Europe; and strategic weapons which are intercontinental. The SS 20 is an accurate missile with a small yield warhead, which makes it suitable for military targets; has a range of up to 5,000km; and is mobile which makes it difficult to destroy. The problem for NATO planners was that they did not have a weapon like that, though it is still not clear why they should want one, since the targeting needs of NATO and the Warsaw Pact are quite different. The Cruise and Pershing II missiles neatly filled this gap in the escalation ladder, since they could be used to hit military targets in Soviet territory from Europe. The British Polaris missiles are too inaccurate to do more than take out the odd city. The US was also keen that the decision should signal NATO unity and resolve after the debacle over the neutron bomb, opposition to which they still insist was orchestrated from Moscow. In all this Britain took a major role, both as the most strident European proponent of the plan and as a major basing area for the missiles. The citizens of East Anglia may not be so keen on this role, particularly since they have only recently found out how closely they avoided nuclear catastrophe when a B47

crashed on the nuclear weapons store at Lakenheath in 1956.

At the moment Britain is considering its own nuclear responsibilities, or rather the Ministry of Defence and the Conservative government are considering them, since the public has been given little information and said little. The backbone of Britain's independent deterrent now consists of four submarines armed with Polaris missiles. The submarines seem likely to reach the end of their useful life in the early 1990s, and although the warhead is now being enhanced, the missile is outdated and the US production line for it is being closed. Given the planning and production times, a decision has to be made fairly soon if Britain is to maintain an independent deterrent. As Pym announced, the Conservative government, like its Labour predecessor is determined to retain it. The most likely replacement is 5 British-built nuclear submarines, using US Trident missiles and British warheads. Because of special factors, the UK obtained Polaris very cheaply from the US, such a special offer is unlikely to be repeated. Current estimates of the likely cost are speculative, but official figures are between \$4-5 billion at 1979 prices for research, development and procurement, but excluding running costs. This would be spread over some years, but is equivalent to just over half the defence budget expected for the financial year 1979-80. Defence spending has always absorbed a larger percentage of GNP in the UK than in other European countries, and this has imposed a substantial burden, on capital investment in particular. By multiplying this financial burden, the project will cause economic destruction, as well as increasing the risk of national devastation in a nuclear exchange.

Britain's defence budget may also have to bear other nuclear burdens such as replacement of the ageing fleet of Vulcan bombers. In addition the formation by the UK, France and West Germany of the Euromissile Dynamics Group, which the

Financial Times expects to be among the world's most powerful missile manufacturing organisations, also seems likely to create a further pressure for more military expenditure and enlarged arsenals.

Britain's bellicose role in the Theatre Nuclear Modernisation Debate, and its determination to upgrade its nuclear capability occur in a world context of growing nuclear weaponry. South Africa, Israel and Pakistan have become putative members of the nuclear club. The US has begun development on the powerful new M-X mobile strategic missile system. Carter has submitted a \$157 billion defence budget for the next fiscal year, and plans that real defence expenditures will grow by 4.5% pa for the next five years. SALT II, signed in Vienna in June by Carter and Brezhnev seemed unlikely to be ratified by the US Senate even before Carter's request for a delay. The Pentagon has estimated that rejection of SALT II would add \$15 billion to the defence budget, mostly for strategic nuclear weapons. The prospects for other areas of arms control look bleak. The Mutual Force Reductions negotiations in Vienna remain deadlocked, while the Brezhnev peace initiative and the US withdrawal of some nuclear warheads from Europe appear largely cosmetic. Nor in the atmosphere generated by Iran and Afghanistan is it likely that the Helsinki review procedure will strengthen mutual confidence..

Should one of the little local conflicts that are now so endemic grow up into a major confrontation, then the goodwill and good sense of the leaders of the nuclear nations becomes all that stands between us and catastrophe. Not reliable protection one might think given that it is those leaders who are now expanding and enhancing the weaponry which will increase the effectiveness and the likelihood of mutual assured destruction. But what is really horrifying is that we let them go on preparing to destroy the world, with so little protest.

