

## Goodbye to Detente? Paul Nicholls



John Cox's article (*Marxism Today*, September 1980) is a valuable contribution to the present wide-ranging discussion of the arms race and its consequences. It is fitting that the theoretical journal of the Communist Party should feature a much needed critique of that tendency within the peace movement which mindlessly equates 'peace' with the every action of the Soviet Union. It is to be hoped that such blind faith is now less prevalent in the Party than it would once have been.

### **Complete disarmament**

Truth, as they say, is concrete, and it is a sad truth that the Soviet Union is no longer

wholeheartedly committed to *working* for General and Complete Disarmament. The record of the USSR as far as proposals for arms limitation are concerned, is an honourable one when compared to that of any Western government. But having said that, the Soviet government's commitment to arms *control*, albeit with disarmament as a professed long term aim, is disturbing, for two reasons. Firstly, because, as John Cox makes clear, arms limitation treaties have frequently harmed the long term possibility of total disarmament, serving to accelerate the development of new weapons systems. Secondly (and perhaps more disturbingly), because the latest Soviet proposal calls for the nuclear powers to agree not to use nuclear weapons *against non-nuclear states*. The logical conclusion to be drawn from this is that, under present circumstances, the possible use of those weapons against Western Europe and the United States is in some way 'acceptable'; a position no socialist should countenance.

The Communist Party should take the lead in calling upon the Soviet government to return to its position of the early 1950s, when it demanded the total prohibition of all weapons of mass destruction. It should also urge the Soviet government to stop seeking nuclear parity with NATO, and to take some kind of unilateral action which would be seen in the West as an uncontroversial token of good faith.

I had expected Dan Smith's response to the original article (*Marxism Today*, February 1981) to extend and refine some of its arguments, whilst filling in some of its more obvious gaps. To a certain extent Dan Smith does this. But at the same time, there is a certain 'nit-picking' in Dan Smith's article, and a vagueness in some of his arguments, which combine to make it unsatisfactory.

By far the most welcome aspect of Dan Smith's article is the attention given to the so-called Schlesinger Doctrine of 'limited' Theatre Nuclear War (TNW), which was ignored by John Cox; an omission remarkable for two reasons. Firstly, because the theory of 'limited' nuclear war has obviously played an important part in the decline of East-West relations, and will continue to do so as the Soviet Union works to improve its own theatre nuclear arsenal. Secondly, because the developments in military technology and strategy resulting from the theory of TNW have been fundamental to the current resurgence of the peace campaign. Many of the hundreds of new disarmament groups formed during the last year or so came into being as a direct result of widespread concern at the decision to house Cruise missiles in Britain.

But if Dan Smith is correct in showing that his failure to discuss the Schlesinger Doctrine, and the subsequent Presidential Directive 59, is a flaw in John Cox's article, many of his other criticisms are far less convincing. The points I have singled out for discussion here are: Dan Smith's rejection of three of John Cox's five 'axioms' (there *are* five, and not four, as he states).

### The arms race

John Cox's first axiom is that the US has always been the pacemaker in the arms race. Dan Smith does not actually *contest* this statement. But he attaches great significance to the fact that the Soviet Union has responded '*in kind*' (his italics). That is to say, the USSR has attempted to keep pace with the US at every point in the arms race. Yet surely the very fact that both nations are engaged in a *race* makes it inevitable that the Soviet Union should respond to US moves '*in kind*'; if it did not, there would be no race. As I have made clear, I do not condone the Soviet possession of nuclear weapons; neither does John Cox seek to exonerate the USSR from its responsibility as a major participant in the arms race. He simply attempts to label the United States, correctly, as the instigator of every fresh phase in the process of escalation, whilst drawing attention to the qualitative differences between the super-powers, accepting that both are, in varying degrees, culpable. One nation is wholeheartedly committed to the continuing development of nuclear technology, while the other contributes to that development, but would prefer to bring it to an end. Dan Smith himself once wrote, with John Cox, that NATO 'consistently campaigns against disarmament' and 'consistently rejects, on behalf of its member nations without waiting for their governments' approval, Warsaw Pact proposals for "no first use" of nuclear weapons'. He commented that the 'prime objective' of NATO is to secure its own continued existence.<sup>1</sup> The Warsaw Pact, on the other hand, has repeatedly called for the dissolution of both military alliances.

In the event of war, of course, such distinctions would be of little consequence: the warheads of East and West are equally lethal. But in the meantime they are vitally important to the disarmament campaign in Western Europe, faced as it is with the considerable task of convincing the general public that the Soviet Union is not the cause of all international tensions, and the protractor of the arms race.

### Differing international roles

John Cox's second axiom, that NATO seeks to preserve reactionary regimes while the

Warsaw Pact seeks to undermine them (though often 'muting this policy in its own state interests') is perhaps more contentious than the first. This is largely due to John Cox's use of the word 'undermine'. It is certainly true that the US attempts to preserve reactionary regimes; at the same time, of course, 'de-stabilising' progressive governments, with notable success against Salvador Allende's government of Popular Unity in Chile. Accepting the pragmatism of Soviet foreign policy, as indicated by John Cox, it might be more accurate to say that the USSR supports the establishment of progressive regimes, rather than to say it 'undermines' reactionary ones. The word 'undermine' does, after all, suggest that, for example, the revolutions which have taken place in Africa, Asia and South America were actually instigated by a foreign power, the USSR, lending weight to the myth of the 'International Communist Conspiracy' which is frequently used to denigrate popular national liberation movements. But if John Cox's rather casual choice of phrase makes his axiom slightly misleading, it is nevertheless true that the US does *not* support progressive governments,<sup>2</sup> while the USSR usually does support them.<sup>2</sup>

The last of John Cox's axioms to be discussed by Dan Smith asserts that the USSR does not use military force to maintain its own influence 'to anything like the same degree' as the US. Dan Smith responds to this by hypothesising that the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan may signal a change in the Soviet attitude to the use of military force, and by stating that the USSR has used such force to maintain its influence in Eastern Europe since the end of the Second World War. There is no room here to discuss Dan Smith's claims for the significance of the incursion by Soviet troops into Afghanistan. However, events in that country since 1978 have been far too important to be discussed in simple terms of 'Soviet expansionism'. Dan Smith would do well to read Fred Halliday's lucid and intelligent analysis of the period leading up to, and immediately after, the Soviet intervention.<sup>3</sup>

As far as his second point is concerned, Dan Smith overstates his case. It is undoubtedly the case that military force has played a part in the relations between the Soviet Union and its allies during the past thirty years, and that in moments of 'crisis'

<sup>1</sup> John Cox and Dan Smith, *NATO Rules OK?* CND 1978 pp19-20.

<sup>2</sup> That it does not always do so is reprehensible: that it occasionally gives aid to reactionary regimes is even more so: but that is a subject for discussion in its own right.

<sup>3</sup> Cf *New Left Review* Spring 1980.

the USSR has shown itself willing to intervene militarily. However, the maintenance of Soviet hegemony in Eastern Europe is far more complex than Dan Smith suggests, and I would argue that economic factors, and the early duplication of Soviet-style bureaucracies during the Stalinist period, have been of far greater importance than the threat of military intervention.

### Unilateralism

I find Dan Smith's comments concerning END once more difficult to understand, if they are meant to be a response to what John Cox had to say about that movement. END is, as yet, a relatively minor campaign, both in terms of its grassroots support, and in the impact it has made upon the British public. The vast majority of CND activists would support the ultimate aim of END: the establishment of a nuclear-free zone in Europe. Few, however, actually belong to, or work actively for, autonomous END groups.

CND's strategy for world disarmament has always been based upon a call for unilateral action by individual states, with particular emphasis on Britain. As a member of CND myself, my major criticism of the 'multi-lateral' approach of, say, the WDC, is that it is essentially non-committal and idealist, and

there is a great danger that END could become a localised version of the WDC. Its initial declaration, composed by the historian Edward Thompson, is bland and non-controversial. It declares that guilt 'lies squarely upon both parties' (ie, the US and USSR): I find it difficult to believe that this is the opinion of Thompson himself; it has the look, as John Cox says, of a 'transparent effort to be open-handed'. The declaration continues: 'The remedy lies in our own hands. We must act together to free the entire territory of Europe, from Poland to Portugal, from nuclear weapons, air and submarine bases, and from all institutions engaged in research into or manufacture of nuclear weapons.' Admirable sentiments, but the declaration is short on concrete suggestions as to how to bring this about. There is, at present, no strategy for a 'European-wide campaign', and I find it difficult to envisage such a strategy evolving in the near future. A transnational nuclear-free zone would be as difficult to achieve as the instant world disarmament envisaged by the WDC; more so, perhaps, since the area 'from Poland to Portugal' has no structure equivalent to the UN, upon which pressure could be exerted.

There is recognition of this fact in the END declaration itself. A key sentence

reads: 'It will be the responsibility of the people of each nation to agitate for the expulsion of nuclear weapons and bases from European soil and territorial waters, *and to decide upon its own means and strategy, concerning its own territory*' (my italics). In campaigning for disarmament, we in Britain seek to reverse or overthrow decisions made by our Government (albeit decisions often made under pressure from outside forces). The same is true of campaigners in Belgium, Holland, France, and so on. If END is to succeed, it must be an *alliance* of national movements, rather than an autonomous (and inevitably monolithic) single structure.

It is quite in order for Dan Smith to disagree with John Cox's criticism of the 'US=USSR' tone of the END declaration. But I can see nothing in John Cox's article which could lead anyone to assume that British Communists are not concerned with freeing Europe from the domination by the superpowers, and that they will not support END. But until a European convention *has* moved beyond the vagaries of the initial declaration, and clearly defined the aims and working methods of END, John Cox is right to continue to place emphasis upon a proven vehicle for disarmament campaigning — CND. •