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Britain, France and nuclear weapons

Between now and 20 January, when Mr Ronald Reagan will be inaugurated as president of the United States, much important business elsewhere will be conducted in a vacuum. So much is clear from last week's meeting of the NATO Council in Brussels. Many of those present seem to have been as interested to know whether their old colleague, General Douglas Haig, will finish up as United States Secretary of State as in the prospect that threats of economic sanctions against the Soviet Union would deter an invasion of Poland. Yet vacua have their benefits. As boxers tend to free-associate in the nervous minutes before the beginning of a fight, so politicians and others in the West have been talking openly about some of the issues on which American influence will again be dominant in January — defence, arms control and the like. In Britain, this unaccustomed free speech has been mixed with the wild talk inseparable from the accession of Mr Michael Foot as leader of the British Labour Party, for Mr Foot used to be a staunch supporter of unilateral nuclear disarmament for Britain, and has not yet renounced his former views. The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament can boast of more recruits in the past few months than in the past several years.

Economic issues apart, the most obvious uncertainty is Mr Reagan's position on arms control, and on his plan to renegotiate the Salt II agreement. During the election campaign, his position shifted steadily, from outright repudiation to renegotiation. Soon after 20 January, it should be possible to tell where he now stands, but the signs are encouraging. The Soviet Union has not slammed the door on further talks about the agreement that President Carter shrank from fighting through the US Senate. His successor must by now know the strength of opinion in Europe, especially in Germany, about the need for agreement on short-range as well as strategic nuclear weapons. Anxiety about Poland has only sharpened suspicions that the stability engendered by mutual nuclear deterrence has its drawbacks. With nothing worth mentioning happening at the Madrid conference on the Helsinki accords, Mr Reagan is likely to have calculated that arms control is not, as he once supposed, the wishy-washy plaything of liberals but a considerable political opportunity. That, at least, must be the hope.

Will governments elsewhere be capable of similar (and still unproven) flexibility? The need is most urgent in Britain, as the defence debate in the House of Lords on 3 December showed. Since the invention of nuclear weapons, there have been two British positions on nuclear defence — the belief (shared by all governments in office) that an independent nuclear deterrent is a necessary part of British policy. This is the belief which led the Callaghan government to fit the Polaris submarine missiles with new warheads (at a cost estimated at £1,000 million) and the present government to order a fleet of six Trident nuclear submarines (at a cost of £5,000 million spread over the next ten years). At the other extreme is the view that British bombs are not a strength but a weakness, and should be dismantled. The unilateral position is not homogenous — some ask merely for the abandonment of British nuclear weapons, others would refuse to provide bases for US nuclear weapons or even withdraw from NATO. Nor are the unilateralists entirely wrong-headed in their views. Unilateral nuclear disarmament would bring certain benefits. The snag, which hitherto has far outweighed the advantages, is that there would be a profound change in the character of British political relationships across the Atlantic and across the Channel — and no assurance of British immunity from the consequences of foreign wars.

The novel development is that, in Britain, there is a growing body of opinion sandwiched between the two conventional extremes. In the House of Lords debate, people such as Lord Zuckerman (once Chief Scientist at the Ministry of Defence) and Lord Chalfont (Mr Harold Wilson's Minister for Disarmament) poured cold water on the decision to replace the Polaris submarines with Trident. "If we can afford it, so be it", said Lord Zuckerman, who knows as well as the next British taxpayer that the government's survival will soon depend on its success in cutting public expenditure. The case against the Trident replacement unites an impressive range of interests. The military (represented, for example, by Lord Carver, a distinguished field marshal) would prefer to see the Trident money spent on conventional forces. Strategists (like Chalfont) argue that weapons other than Trident missile submarines would be cheaper and no less effective. None of this implies support for unilateral disarmament — the denial of British bases to US nuclear warheads (in aircraft now, in cruise missiles sometime after 1983), for example. What has happened is merely that entirely sensible opinion has begun to question the most conspicuous cornerstone of British defence policy in the period since 1945.

The British government has been slow to see the way the wind is blowing, or to recognize the advantages of following Mr Reagan's apparent willingness to make the best out of accommodations with his critics. The most immediate embarrassment of the Trident programme is its cost, probably grossly underestimated at £5,000 million. Can it make sense that a government whose chief failure since its election eighteen months ago has been its failure to cut public expenditure should now take on a capital commitment on such a scale, more than half the cost of the US Apollo programme? The decision might be more easily justified if (as some Apollo-builders held in the 1960s) building the Trident submarines would bring uncovenanted technical innovations, but the objective is largely to replicate the nuclear submarines already being built in the United States. It is no wonder that there has been a revival, in the past few weeks, of the old dream of an Anglo-French cruise missile system. That would be cheaper and politically powerful.

These are narrow arguments. The broader question of whether countries such as Britain — France is the only other example — should hang on to independent nuclear forces is more divisive. The conventional British statement of the case is that nuclear weapons are a contribution to collective defence and an assurance of influence in international negotiations, about disarmament as well as making war. The French view, more iconoclastic, is that French security depends in the last resort on French arms. Both arguments are stiffened by chauvinism. With time, each is weakened. Each of them is less convincing as strategic technology becomes more sophisticated. Yet in Western Europe there is a crying need that the European Community should soon acquire what it should always have had — a foreign policy and a defence policy to go with it. Is that where Britain and France may pool their nuclear ambitions after 20 January?

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As in previous years, this issue of *Nature* (dated 18/25 December) is the last to be published in 1980. Because there are 53 Thursdays in 1981, the next issue, published on 8 January, will be dated 1/8 January 1981.

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