

Two wishes for the zero option

Mr George Bush has spoken up (but not well) in Europe, and has won public agreement that no intermediate-range nuclear missiles would be best. But that is wishful thinking.

Mr George Bush, the Vice-President of the United States, seems to have done well in persuading his European hosts these past two weeks that the best strategy for controlling intermediate-range nuclear weapons in Europe is to do away with them altogether. Chancellor Helmut Kohl agreed with that proposition last week in Berlin and then, in London at the weekend, agreed with Mrs Margaret Thatcher, the British Prime Minister, that the zero option is indeed the best possible option. The trouble is that it may not be feasible, which is no doubt why everybody has taken to saying that flexibility is also important.

In the past few weeks, in an almost unprecedented exercise in diplomatic negotiation by means of public speeches, the Soviet Union has made clear that the zero option in its strictest sense is unacceptable. The Soviet position is clear. If the planned deployment in Western Europe of Pershing II and cruise missiles were abandoned, the Soviet force of SS20 missiles would be reduced to the numerical equivalent of the British and French nuclear forces. The strict zero option, first defined last year by President Reagan, would do away with all SS20 missiles without reference to the British and French nuclear forces. As in other negotiations of this kind, each side is by its own lights on firm ground. How will it ever be possible to reach agreement?

The first need is to acknowledge what is the most hopeful sign — the willingness of both sides to consider very substantial reductions of nuclear forces. In all previous agreements of this kind, springing from the strategic arms limitation talks of the 1970s, the objective has been merely to negotiate a ceiling for the numbers of intercontinental missiles which is comfortably above anything likely to be achieved in the foreseeable future. The United States, on behalf of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), is now pressing to be prevented from deploying intermediate-range weapons of any kind in Western Europe. The Soviet Union, preoccupied by what it considers to be the threat of the British and French nuclear forces, is nevertheless prepared to get rid of two-thirds of its nuclear weapons of intermediate range. That, surely, is progress of a kind.

The second need is that each side should try harder to understand the other's position. (Making public speeches on the subject, by making flexibility less accessible, is a bad habit that should be avoided at this stage.) The West's position is the easier to understand. The rapid deployment of the SS20 missile force during the late 1970s has substantially changed the balance of military strength in Europe, creating the spectre of circumstances in which the threat of open attack might cause the United States to reconsider its commitments under the North Atlantic Treaty. To its credit, the United States, in 1978 and 1979, fell in with the sense of fright that the SS20 missile force engendered, and agreed to deploy a force of missiles of intermediate range of its own manufacture. The plan was made public at the end of 1979, but made conditional on failure to achieve an East-West agreement. Surely, the argument goes, if the Soviet Union had felt as strongly, all these years, about the threat of Pershing II and cruise missiles, it might have said so sooner.

The Soviet position is also plausible. The SS20 missiles probably owe their existence to distant events such as the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, and some determination then in Moscow that the Soviet Union should never again find itself at the uncomfortable end of a military balance of any kind. In these

terms, the Soviet perception of Western Europe is probably of a subversive bridgehead (toehold?) on the western seaboard of Eurasia, containable by other than strategic means. And while everybody knows that in a nuclear war there are no victors, in the preliminaries to such a war, potential losers may declare themselves as such. The SS20 force is thus good strategic sense. To abandon it for good, and by binding treaty, would entail sacrifice, especially while the British and French nuclear forces remain in being. That is what the zero-option brigade must understand.

The trick at Geneva in the next few weeks must therefore be to find a compromise between these radically different opinions. The simple solution is that which has been apparent for the past few months — that the negotiators at Geneva and their governments should recognize that, so far as Western Europe is concerned, the INF ("intermediate nuclear forces") negotiations are about strategic matters. Put bluntly, the only circumstances in which the British and French governments would sanction the use of their nuclear forces are those in which Western Europe is threatened with destruction or occupation and in which the United States is judged to be irrelevant. This forecast is matched by the probable performance of the delivery systems concerned, none of which is accurate enough to carry through a counter-force strategy as distinct from deterrence. The obvious course for the people at Geneva to follow is therefore to agree that it no longer makes sense to talk about INF and strategic nuclear forces separately, but to roll both sets of negotiations together. For what it is worth, so much has been obvious from the beginning.

Diplomatically, there are two immediate problems. First, can the governments of Britain and France be persuaded that while their nuclear forces may not be obviously part of the INF negotiations, there must be some level of negotiation at which they must be counted? And, second, can enough progress be made within the year for the planned deployment of the NATO force to be avoided? The simple answers are respectively yes (by making Britain and France non-voting participants) and no (there is not enough time). The more complicated answer, for the West, is to insist that there is no logical basis on which the two sets of talks at Geneva can be separated, to acknowledge that while the zero option may be the most desirable of all possible options, it is not necessarily the best, and to plead continuing hardware failures (real enough) as reasons why the decision should be postponed by, say, six months. What, after all, is that compared with every-body's lifetime?

How to keep monopoly

British Telecom, soon to be private, could be a more powerful monopoly.

LIKE some mythical hero, Britain's Department of Industry has tried three times to tame the giant. But British Telecom (BT), even more than its fellow giant in the United States, looks like becoming more powerful the more it is hacked up. The possibility exists that any organization which has its grip on a nation's telecommunications system cannot be conquered. It can be made to tolerate competitors but not ever to be equal to them.

When the Conservatives came to power in 1979, they broke the then British Post Office into posts and telecommunications