Science in the News

Disarmament: American Position Is Awkward: Neutralists Skeptical of United States Intentions

The United States won a procedural victory on the disarmament question at the United Nations last week. Khrushchev's proposal for a full dress debate in the General Assembly was defeated 52–13. But the vote indicated only the assembly's refusal to go along with the Soviet proposal to depart from normal procedure by bypassing the Political Committee, where the question would normally be considered. It did not imply a preference for the American view on disarmament or a rebuff of the Soviet view. The awkwardness of the American position remained unchanged as the formal debate in the Political Committee began this week.

As noted here last week, considerations of national self-interest which lead the United States to talk mostly of controls and which lead the Russians to talk of immediate disarmament are a basic source of American awkwardness. Neither side has given any indication that it seriously expects much progress to be made, and neither has much basis for a claim of moral leadership. The fact remains, though, that the American proposals have less popular appeal than the Russian proposals, particularly among the uncommitted nations.

But considerations of national self-interest are only the beginning of the source of American awkwardness. Some of the difficulties stem from the nature of American society and of America's position in the world, and they are things which are American strong points even if they lead to awkwardness on a specific issue like disarmament. Others, though, are clearly weaknesses which the Democrats, publicly, and many leading Republicans (including Nixon), privately, acknowledge to be things the next President will have to do something about.

That America is an open society and Russia is not is a source of awkwardness, as is the fact that the nations of the world, in general, expect more of the United States than they do of the Soviet Union. The openness of American society contributes, of course, to the basic tactical disadvantage of the United States described last week because it forces Americans to worry a great deal more about the dangers of inadequate control and inspection procedures than the Russians. But beyond this, it puts this country at a disadvantage on any question where the private views of its individual citizens differ from the official view of its government.

Skepticism on Both Sides

There is no question that the Russians are as skeptical of the likelihood of making real progress on disarmament as we are. Gomulka of Poland gave the General Assembly a shrewd and reasonable presentation of the Communist point of view on disarmament. In the course of his remarks he mentioned that experts on both sides recognize that it is possible that controls can increase rather than decrease the chance of war. But the same sort of analysis that leads to the unpleasant conclusion that certain kinds of controls can increase rather than decrease tension also leads to the even more unpleasant conclusion that certain types of disarmament can increase rather than decrease tensions. This particularly applies to disarmament without adequate controls.

A Russian at the United Nations, talking privately about disarmament, blandly remarked that he really didn't think anything was going to be accomplished until after there had been a general lessening of East-West tensions. This is the common view on both sides, but not the official view on either side. Both East and West have placed resolutions before the Political Committee reaffirming their support of immediate steps to get general and complete disarmament underway. But while convincing evidence of the skepticism with which American officials and students of disarmament regard such proposals is readily available to anyone who can read English, the private doubts of their Soviet counterparts do not find their way into any Soviet publications. And beyond the skepticism with which American officials regard progress towards disarmament, the foreigner also becomes aware that there are Americans who are simply opposed to disarmament or to negotiating with the Russians at all; to be told that such and such a senator or such and such a retired admiral does not really have any influence does not completely reassure these foreigners. Undoubtedly there are people with similar views in Russia, but, once again, such views do not find a public outlet in the Soviet scheme of things. This does not mean that anyone takes the Russian proposals without a grain of salt. But it does leave the Russians with some advantage since people know that the United States is skeptical about disarmament while they can only suspect that the Russians are.

Beyond this, the world in general expects more of the United States than of the Soviet Union. The United States is the leading nation in the world, and although the Russians have convinced quite a few people that this will not continue to be the case much longer, the United States is still regarded as pre-eminent and therefore as the nation which ought to be taking the initiative in such an important matter as disarmament. This places a burden on the United States, although hardly an unwanted burden. For not many responsible Americans look forward to a day when the world will no longer expect more of America than of the Soviet Union.

Under present circumstances the United States is in an awkward position when the Russians, as they do at every opportunity, say that, if the West will agree to some disarmament proposals, the Russians will then agree to whatever controls are necessary to assure everyone that these proposals are being carried out. No one blames the United States for doubting that the Russians would actually agree to adequate controls as they say they would. But almost

everyone seems to blame the United States for not taking up the Russian challenge, agreeing to some disarmament, and thus putting it up to the Russians to demonstrate their often-stated readiness to agree to controls. Since no one is suggesting that disarmament proposals, even if agreed upon, should go into effect until after agreement has been reached on controls, it is a common view, particularly among the neutralists, that the United States is holding things up, without any really sound reason for doing so. The actual situation is more complex than this simple view suggests, but this view, nevertheless, makes sense to a good many people at the U.N., including some Americans.

Pushing further, the Russians argue that they have as much reason as the Americans to want adequate controls. They scoff at the idea that America could not cheat on a disarmament agreement because it is an open society. How many people, ask the Russians, knew about the U-2 flights? This is not an unanswerable argument, for the fact remains that it would be much easier for the Russians to cheat than for the Americans to do so, and therefore controls that might be adequate to reassure the Russians are not likely to offer an equivalent amount of reassurance to the United States. But it is still an argument that does carry some weight.

Relative Military Power

The question remains, why doesn't the United States take the initiative by agreeing to some disarmament measures and putting it up to the Russians to come to terms on control? In part the answer is, as noted here last week, that American officials have good reason to suspect that the Russians are not yet ready to accept adequate controls, and that if the United States agrees to some steps on disarmament it will find itself in the position of either having to go through with the agreement on Russian terms, without adequate controls, or else of disappointing the world by backing out of the agreement.

Since a reduction in armaments is easy to understand while the adequacy or inadequacy of given controls is not, the United States has reason to fear that it will look bad if it finds itself forced to back out of a disarmament agreement, no matter how justified the American refusal to go ahead on Russian terms might be.

But aside from this tactical problem, there is the simple fact that many responsible Americans are uncertain whether the United States can afford to agree to start arms reductions right away, and the more complicated fact that the nature of the American system makes it difficult to reach an agreement within the government on what kinds of arms reduction might be agreed to. A Russian, again talking privately, remarked that the Soviet Union was not prepared for serious disarmament negotiations until the late 1950's because it was weaker than the United States. It is assumed that any disarmament arrangements will be aimed at keeping the relative military power of the disarmament nations stable as the over-all level of armament is reduced. Thus, until the Russians felt that their military strength was satisfactory in relation to American strength they were not ready for serious disarmament negotiations. Today the shoe seems to be on the other foot. The Rockefeller, Gaither, and Coolidge studies have all criticized what they saw as the inadequacy of the American defense effort, and this view appears to be held by almost everyone in Washington outside the White House.

Kennedy, explicitly, and Nixon, implicitly, have made it clear that they will recommend increases in the defense budget. The suppressed report of the Coolidge Commission on disarmament policy is believed to have specifically recommended that the United States needs several years to build up its defenses to the point where it will be in a position to enter serious negotiations with the Russians on arms reduction. The net effect of this widely assumed relative weakness is not only to restrict the United States freedom to make concessions to the Russians in order to demonstrate that the United States is ahead of the Russians in terms of what we are willing to do in order to make progress on disarmament; it also makes reaching agreements just so much more difficult.

A Russian, asked why the Soviet Union shows so little interest in Eisenhower's proposals to ban nuclear weapons from outer space, replies quickly that Russia would be foolish to do so, because Russia is ahead in outer space. Critics of American policies argue that the risks of the arms race are so enormous that the risks involved in moving toward disarmament are small by comparison. This feeling is becoming increasingly widely held; but it also seems to be the case that the Russians are not likely to participate in the real exchange of concessions necessary from both sides so long as they feel that American proposals on disarmament are based on weakness rather than strength: that is, on American fear that America is losing out to the Russians in a given area rather than on American confidence that it can match or beat the Russians but that it is in the mutual interest of both countries to arrange to refrain from the race.

The Russian's belief in their superior strength may be only an illusion. But as long as it exists it makes serious disarmament negotiations difficult. The unsatisfactory American defense posture, real or imagined, is far from the whole source of American awkwardness on disarmament, and perhaps it is not even the most important factor; but it exists and adds just so much more difficulty to the problem.

And finally, beyond all the real and apparent sources of American awkwardness on disarmament, comes the fact that peculiarities of the United States political system make it difficult for this country to reach agreement internally on what sort of disarmament proposals might be put forward at the United Nations. There is a great deal of logic to the claim that there ought to be a real unification of the armed forces, but the logic does not alter the political fact that real unification is not likely to move very fast. For any proposal for reform arouses opposition from everyone who fears that his service will lose something through the reform and who manages to deduce that his disinterested concern for the national welfare requires him to oppose the move. Every important faction in the Pentagon has sources of support in Congress and elsewhere throughout the country, which makes it very difficult to make progress on reorganizing the defense department despite almost everyone's profession that he favors some sort of reorganization. Similarly, any proposal for disarmament implies that some section of the armed forces is going to be weakened, and since everyone tends to be convinced that his particular area of concern is uniquely important to national defense, it is very hard to think of any disarmament proposal that would not arouse strong opposition from someone in the Pentagon and from his supporters outside—H.M.