3 Towards a Stable Peace

In the longer term, both West Germany and the United States, in their different ways, will have a more decisive voice than Britain in shaping the future of European security. In the shorter term, though, Britain could play a key role in accelerating trends towards a more stable peace. Unlike West Germany, Britain is not divided nor on the front line, and so is not caught up with a rather absolutist concept of nuclear deterrence and forward defence. Unlike the United States, Britain lacks the capabilities and responsibilities of a super power. Britain therefore has more choice than these major allies; but unlike its smaller NATO partners, Britain has both significance and nuclear weapons. If Britain cannot renounce nuclear weapons, and therefore by example put more firmly on the international agenda both military confidence-building and a commitment to restructure East-West relations, what hope is there that countries with less geopolitical choice will take radical steps towards a more stable peace?

As steps towards a stable peace, the record is not encouraging with respect to both British policy and multilateral arms control. The history of disarmament and arms control negotiations has been dominated by gamesmanship. In the 1980s, the manipulation of public opinion has been a major objective. Although positive results might emerge from the INF agreement, it too will be seen as part of the same cynical pattern if it is merely followed by a channelling of the arms race, and no actual restraint. For Britain Mrs Thatcher’s government went along with the super power INF deal, but like some other Western European governments, did so with no great enthusiasm. More to the point was the strong message Mrs Thatcher delivered to the Soviet leadership (and others) after the Reykjavik mini-summit. She told them to forget the talk about nuclear disarmament by 2000 since Britain would maintain its own weapons. This has been her firm position since that time. Greater restraint on arms, and a less nationalistic attitude to international security are essential if Britain is to make its contribution to a more stable peace.

A ‘LEGITIMATE INTERNATIONAL ORDER’

A non-nuclear defence policy, as recommended here, should not be considered as an end in itself; it is, on the contrary, only a means to
achieving the fundamental aims of policy. Strategy should always begin with the question: ‘What is it all about?’ Only when we have identified the political aim we are trying to achieve does it make sense to discuss military strategy and tactics. The latter should not dominate attention: exponents of alternative defence must avoid merely becoming radical equivalents of the ‘guns-and-ammo’ brigade on the right. The whole point of alternative defence thinking is to prevent the outbreak of war, not look forward to testing it.

In the absence of a major crisis or calamity, international politics is not usually an area where attitudes on fundamental issues change quickly. We cannot therefore expect momentous developments within a short time-span in the way people think about international security. It is salutary to remember that it has taken over 25 years of debate to get Britain to the brink of contemplating nuclear disarmament, and that in 1985 the Soviet Union renewed the Warsaw Pact for another 30 years. Change is in the air but utopia is not just around the corner; nor can it be guaranteed. Nevertheless, travelling hopefully is not out of the question; nor is the possibility that attitudes will evolve more quickly than in the past. It is not inconceivable, for example, that countries in the East–West confrontation might manufacture a robust détente relationship over the next fifteen years. This relationship could contain some of the more constructive elements of the super power détente of the early 1970s. At its best, 1970s-style détente was reciprocal, sought to establish ground rules for behaviour, was mutually beneficial, produced concrete results, began to be institutionalised, and appeared for a while to give the participants the expectation of a more stable period of coexistence than anything that had existed since the Bolshevik Revolution. Against the background of the acrimonious super power relationship since the 1970s, it will obviously take time to recapture a similar commitment to détente, let alone a shared idea of constructive engagement. Both sides are short of trust, and the ballyhoo accompanying the 1987 INF agreement should not obscure that. It will take years for the participants to become predictably trustful about the intentions of the other. If the new relaxation of tensions were to last, with the super powers growing to understand that their enlightened self-interest lay in preserving and building upon their cooperative relationship, we could then look forward to the arrival over the following period of 10–15 years (by the end of the first decade of the next century) of a situation and process which has been variously called a ‘legitimate international order’, or a ‘security regime’. Such an outcome