3 The Two Poles of the Debate

It is time to look more closely at the ‘view from within’ and the ‘view from above’. So far this distinction has been assumed rather than justified. Is it true that there are two main poles to the new European security debate? And, if so, is this an appropriate description of them?

Let us set the two approaches out again in general terms so that it is clear what is in contention.

The first approach assumes as its starting point the existence of the nation state as it has evolved since the sixteenth century and of the system of international power politics built upon it. International affairs are interpreted in terms of conflicting cultures, ideologies and interests, themselves expressions of human nature itself. It is the prime duty of political leaders entrusted with responsibility for defence to recognise these realities. Not to do so is regarded as inexcusable. In practical terms, therefore, things are seen from the point of view of particular governments, countries or alliances. Security means the protection of ‘our’ interests or values from what is outside. In the autumn of 1989, for example, from a Western viewpoint, it was the political upheavals in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union that were dangerous (though welcome), and the maintenance of NATO’s military infrastructure that was seen to underpin stability. The stress was on strong national defence, deterrence and collective alliance solidarity. This is an approach habitual to military planners and defence intellectuals, and widespread among a broad swathe of ‘tough-minded’ politicians, journalists and members of the public.

Margaret Thatcher’s response to the fall of the Berlin Wall illustrates the first approach:

‘We must remember that times of great change are times of great uncertainty, even danger. The librarian of the United States
Congress put it very well when he said: "there is no more insecure time in the life of an empire than when it is facing the devolution of its power, no more dangerous time in the life of a religion (communism being after all a secular religion) than when it has lost its inner faith but retains its outer power". Very wise words. Now is the time for us in the West to stay true to the policies and principles that have brought us safely through the years of confrontation and Cold War since 1945. I don't believe that the great changes now happening would have come about had it not been for NATO and the strength and resolve it has shown. And it must be through NATO that we continue to keep the peace by tried and tested means, while welcoming every step that allows us to do so safely at lower levels of forces and weapons."

13 November 1989

The second approach assumes at the outset that the world is now faced with global problems which threaten the very survival of mankind. Prominent among these are the arms race and the nuclear menace. They entirely eclipse sectional interests and can only be overcome if inherited traditions of state sovereignty and militarism, which have largely created them, are transcended. The same applies to the concentrations of capital and economic exploitation protected by this system. The real problems are common problems and the solutions can therefore only be common solutions. This means that political leaders must learn to see things independently of particular nations or alliances. From this perspective it was the military confrontation in Europe that was seen to be the danger in the autumn of 1989, and the political changes as providing a unique opportunity to end it. Mutual deterrence and collective bloc confrontation was seen to constitute the problem; progressive mutual disarmament and common security to offer the solution. This approach is central to the thinking of many Social Democrats, Liberal Democrats, Greens, and, increasingly, Liberal Conservatives.

One of Mikhail Gorbachev's speeches, delivered a few days before the fall of the Berlin Wall, illustrates the second approach:

'Peace envisages a general agreement between states that no problems, past or present, can be solved with the help of weapons. If this is so, armaments should be reduced to the level of sensible defensive sufficiency, while power politics, hegemony and interference in the internal affairs of other states should be renounced.