

ilitary terms, is the strongest power in the Middle East, but it does not feel secure. By contrast, Switzerland, whose armed forces are negligible by modern standards, has felt secure for centuries. The United States is today as secure as a nation can be, thanks to the second-strike capability of its strategic nuclear deterrent. It is legitimate to ask whether the average American citizen feels secure in light of the turmoil of his own society. Security, then, is relative.

Looking back over the last 25 years, one could say that, on the whole, Europe has been secure. It has seen no major military confrontation and there has not been a serious confrontation between the two superpowers since the building of the Berlin Wall. Yet the very existence of the North Atlantic alliance and the Warsaw Pact is the source of a feeling of insecurity. Despite repeated disclaimers, the Soviet Union and its allies have not believed that the United States was not preparing an attack. The presence of overseas bases, the placement of nuclear weapons on European soil, the constant alert of the Strategic Air Command and the war in Vietnam have been perceived as a threat. The West could point to the suppression of the Hungarian revolt in 1956 and Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia in mid-1968, as well as Soviet support for what are called wars of national liberation and the constant willingness to intervene into any power vacuum, as evidence of the Kremlin's ultimate intention to rule the world.

Both sides have perceived a threat in the actions of the other. They would refer to what the other says but what it does. As a result, neither has felt secure in its knowledge that it could ride out a nuclear attack and wreak unacceptable destruction on the other. If the Big Powers do not feel secure, how can the smaller countries of Europe feel so? They are, of course, glad that the United States and the Soviet Union are finally talking to each other and apparently making a serious effort to bridge the chasm that has opened between them. However, this process has its own pitfalls.

The other European nations are at present worried that their big brothers will not take care of the future of the continent between themselves without consulting their allies — let alone the neutrals. An imposed security arrangement of this kind would be unacceptable, and most European nations feel that a conference would help them feel more secure. In this sense, the psychological effect of the SCE is likely to be quite different from the euphoria created by the summit meetings of the 1950s.

It could be argued that Europe is the most stable continent in the world. Apart from Czechoslovakia (admittedly a notable exception), it has not been the scene of a serious international crisis since the Berlin Wall was built in 1961. The same cannot be said for Africa, Asia or Latin America. They have all witnessed wars and *coups d'état* that have posed threats to international peace and security. However, Europe remains the only continent where the United States and the Soviet Union confront each other directly. The other crisis points, such as the Middle East, Vietnam and Southern Africa, are either of immediate concern to one superpower and not to the other or they involve a confrontation through friends and allies. There are those who believe that, because of this relative stability in Europe, it is best to leave things as they are. It has been said that the best guarantee of security would be two tanks facing each other at Checkpoint Charlie, with Richard Nixon and Leonid Brezhnev at the controls. According to this thesis, any change is likely to upset the balance and be destabilizing.

Nuclear arms deployed

Yet Europe is potentially more explosive than any other continent. Nuclear weapons are deployed there in large numbers. The United States and the Soviet Union feel their national interests are directly at stake, and a crisis will always contain the seeds of nuclear war. Anything that can be done to lower tensions, reduce the possibility of crisis and solve the issues that have created this set of conditions should surely be worth the effort.

The idea of a European security conference is not new. It can be traced in one form or another back to the abortive meetings of the Council of Foreign Ministers in the immediate postwar years. It surfaced again in the mid-1950s, especially with the so-called Rapacki Plan, which prompted the debate about disengagement and nuclear-free zones in Central Europe.

Over the years, proposals have emanated from both East and West but, when one side was interested, the other would visualize a potential trap and shy away. It might be said that each would be most anxious for a conference when it was having trouble at home or with its allies because such a situation would create a need to affirm the status quo. Usually, the other side would then be in a relatively stable situation and would not be as interested. Thus, the stars have not been in conjunction and the time was never propitious for both sides.

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