

is "a crucial turning point" in the life of his country and of the contemporary world? If Gorbachev's words are taken at face value, he seems seriously interested in ending the nuclear arms race. He recognizes, as he said, that the "gift of the energy of the atom" is also "an instrument for the self-annihilation of mankind." The emphasis in his statement on the need to end nuclear testing, the new stress on adequate verification and inspection, and the very obvious concern about the Strategic Defence Initiative (because its corollary would be a Soviet build-up in offensive nuclear forces), all suggest a serious concern about a new cycle in the arms competition between the superpowers.

It is worth noting in this connection that the Soviets have changed their approach to arms control in recent years. With the SALT I and the ABM treaties in the early seventies, there was a minimum of technical detail, reflecting Soviet reluctance to reveal much about their armed forces or to allow constraints on their technology. But, with SALT II in 1979 and with their recent proposals in 1985, there has been a greater willingness to include more technical elements, suggesting greater interest in realistic restraint.

It should always be remembered, however, as Robin Ranger has pointed out, that "the Soviets consistently stressed the political rather than the technical elements of strategic stability" in their approach to arms control and disarmament in the past.

Thus Gorbachev talks about improving the international situation and the need "to overcome the negative, confrontational tendencies that have grown in recent years." He is attempting to refurbish detente by urging the European countries to revive that sense of accommodation. The heavy-handed support of the European peace movement during NATO's deployment of cruise and Pershing II missiles may have backfired, but the Soviets may still hope that the weight of European diplomacy will sway President Reagan from his Star Wars policy. Furthermore, the Soviet proposals have the apparent merit of being a less costly and more reasonable route to nuclear disarmament than the SDI path.

Gorbachev's proposals would also appear to have a domestic political purpose. They were headlined at the 27th Party Congress and touted in the Soviet press as "an epoch-making document in the struggle for peace." The disarmament programme could obviously be aimed at forestalling the necessity of an expensive arms build-up to counter American strategic defence. That would be a costly option that could wreck Gorbachev's plans for modernizing the Soviet economy on which the new regime has placed so much emphasis.

As always in recent exchanges between the superpowers, there is the apparent need to win the propaganda battle. Having lost the rhetorical stakes over which side was to blame for the breakdown of the START talks, the new Soviet regime seems determined to be seen as the side most willing to negotiate. Building on whatever "spirit of Geneva" was resurrected at the summit talks, Gorbachev proposed the expansive disarmament plan so unexpectedly that the Americans were caught without a measured response. It was timed, for global effect, at the start of the United Nations' "International Year of Peace" and just as the Geneva arms talks resumed. Despite the skepticism in some Western official and media circles—the NATO Secretary-General Lord Carrington referred to the proposals as 'nebulous'—the Gorbachev initiative has won public commendation from serious arms control experts in the West.

Unlike the Khrushchev proposal, Gorbachev confines his plan largely to the elimination of nuclear weapons. These are seen as the main threat to mankind, the Soviet security and to the expansion of communism. For the reduction of conventional weapons, Gorbachev seems willing to depend on arms control negotiations, knowing that total disarmament is still a utopian expectation.

His time scale is far more realistic than Khrushchev's four years and his plan is more flexible. None of the stages is tied to a final treaty, and the individual items, like test bans or Euromissile agreements, are open to separate negotiation. Gorbachev, throughout his proposals, pledges his country's willingness to allow open inspection and realistic verification procedures in all agreements. This is a welcome change that should be worth exploring.

Ironically some of the Soviet leader's ideas look very much like old American positions. As former American arms control negotiator Paul Warnke and others have pointed out, the deep cuts of 50 per cent in intercontinental strategic missiles and a 'zero option' in Euromissiles reflect in part proposals of the Reagan administration, while the support for a comprehensive test ban and the opposition to strategic defence reflect American positions of the seventies.

On the surface, there appear to be some areas where Gorbachev gives the impression of going the extra mile. One example is his extension of the Soviet unilateral moratorium on nuclear testing for another three months (and extended again after the Chernobyl disaster) while the Americans are continuing their own tests. The American objection is that such tests are necessary to develop the Strategic Defence Initiative and to assist in the modernization of their nuclear weapons until such systems actually become obsolete or are banned in a bilateral treaty.