

In recent years, as you know, arms-control proposals have foundered on the reef of what is judged to be the national interest, without, I believe, sufficient weight being given by governments to their broader responsibility to the international community as a whole. Yet when the destructive capacity of nuclear weapons makes national interest coincide with international responsibility, surely it is the common national objective of all peoples and governments to remove the possibility that these weapons will ever be used. There is nothing exclusively international about this. It is a national matter.

There is no need for me to dwell, with an audience like this, on the fantastic and frightening development of military power since the end of the Second World War. By the early sixties, however, this development, fortunately for us all, had resulted in a relatively stable, if uneasy, balance of nuclear strength between the United States and the Soviet Union, a balance based on the ability of each to destroy the other regardless of how or where the first attack was launched, a balance of shared capacity for mutual annihilation. The knowledge that rash action by either one which threatened the vital interests of the other might lead to a nuclear exchange fatal to both has, up to the present, deterred both sides from pushing any such action to a showdown. The sobering realities of this power balance were starkly revealed in the Cuban crisis of 1962, when the escape from a "showdown" showed how close we were to it.

One result of the reaction to that particular confrontation may well have been the subsequent agreement between Washington, Moscow and London on a partial nuclear-test ban. A short time later, the great powers were able to agree on a United Nations resolution prohibiting the orbiting in outer space of weapons of mass destruction. Following that, it was agreed to install a direct communication link -- if you like, a radio telephonic axis -- between Washington and Moscow.

These measures were important, since they were the first tangible steps towards arms control after continuous debate and negotiation since 1946. But, beyond their intrinsic importance, I suggest that they were also of importance because they marked a tacit understanding by the two nuclear super-powers to try to avoid direct confrontation which would threaten the outbreak of nuclear war. In this way, both East and West have acknowledged the danger of disrupting the existing power balance. They have attempted to reduce conflicts of interest, even if they have by no means succeeded in eliminating all potentially dangerous situations.

The existence, now, of a détente between East and West even an uneasy one - does provide us with an opportunity to re-examine afresh the need to control the arms race, to question whether we should continue to devote such a tragically large proportion of human and material resources to the development and improvement of weapons whose use in any circumstances, for any reason, would threaten humanity's very survival.