

Of things military

Can the world bring itself to say farewell to arms?

A footnote to the special session

By Marcel Merle

At the beginning of last July, the curtain fell on the special session of the United Nations General Assembly devoted to disarmament. Those who had attended had heard some fine speeches, noted some interesting proposals, developed a "consensus" that had immediately been repudiated by certain countries, adopted resolutions that were not binding and, above all, altered the composition and working rules of the agencies responsible for continuing to study the problem of disarmament. Then every representative returned to his arsenals, to his balance of external claims and liabilities, to the safety of his borders or his supplies, as though the scene that had been enacted for some weeks in New York had been only an intermission.

Optimists will no doubt claim that a process has been started. Pessimists will see all the commotion as, at best, merely one of the ways an endangered society tries to exorcise the evil that threatens or, at worst, merely the homage of vice to virtue. Realists will simply observe that the community of nations, assembled in the largest of the international organizations, is not yet ready to say farewell to arms.

But it is not enough to bemoan the blindness of a world embarked on a suicide course. We must know why — above all where arms are concerned — the common interest does not succeed in prevailing over what each nation considers to be its individual interest. If the problem of disarmament seems to be a vicious circle, it is because the human spirit, confronted with the realities of society, finds itself unable,

on the one hand, to discover the means to attain the desired end and, on the other, to distinguish between cause and effect.

Is disarmament necessary? Is it necessary to put an end to the accumulation of weapons and use the money thus saved to improve the lot of humanity?

When the problem is posed in these terms, there is obviously only one answer for any reasonable person. Moreover, the stark figures are more eloquent than any speech on the subject. A report to the Assembly of the Western European Union on June 20, 1978, put it bluntly:

World military expenditure for 1978 is estimated at \$400 billion, the share of the NATO and Warsaw Pact countries making up 70 per cent of this and that of the Third World, including China, 18 per cent. The largest increase in expenditure over the last ten years was in the Third World countries, excluding China; their share of total world expenditure rose from 6 per cent to 14 per cent. On the other hand, according to the estimates, the expenditure of the two military blocs has remained roughly constant in real value, but as a proportion of world expenditure it has decreased from 80 per cent to 70 per cent. In 1976, total world military expenditure was estimated at \$325 billion — the same as world expenditure on health and more than expenditure on education. In absolute value and at constant prices, world military expenditure has increased by 13 per cent over the last ten years and 77 per cent over the last 20 years.

If we add to this picture the fact that annual expenditure on arms is 14 times as great as expenditure on aid to developing countries and approximately three times as great as the debt contracted by the latter with industrialized countries, one thing becomes clear: the production of means of destruction must be prohibited immediately and the funds released used for humanitarian activities such as the development of the emerging countries, the improvement of health and education

Community of nations not yet ready to abandon armaments

Professor Merle teaches political science at the Sorbonne and at the Institut d'études politiques de Paris and the Ecole nationale d'administration. He is vice-president of the International Political Science Association and has written widely on international affairs. The views expressed here are those of Professor Merle.