

The Nuclear Roadblock ^{Post} 10/12/66

If the roadblock to Soviet-American agreement on a nuclear non-proliferation treaty really has been removed, the world will rejoice. But it is well to restrain excessive enthusiasm. Even if the opening should lead to Soviet-American cooperation in completing a treaty and obtaining ratification by other nations, world security would not have been automatically assured. At best the treaty would be a brake in preventing present dangers from getting worse. It could be more important for what it would symbolize than for what it would accomplish by itself.

With China and France presently outside its scope, a nuclear treaty could not guarantee that additional countries would not obtain nuclear weapons. Nor could it secure India against the possibility that China might use nuclear weapons against her. It would be a meaningful factor in an Indian decision not to produce nuclear weapons only if India had practical reason to believe that she could rely on outside deterrence and that China would be restrained.

In cases of countries not immediately confronting nations that possess nuclear weapons, a treaty might be more of a check. If Israel and Egypt, for example, each felt more reassured that the other would not test nuclear weapons, there might be some stabilizing influence even though tensions remained high and each country presumably would have sought to develop weapons ready to test if necessary. Similarly, a treaty might be some check on the inclination of such countries

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as Japan to develop nuclear weapons for longer-range security or prestige.

But a danger of false optimism would remain. A treaty would not prevent a confrontation of existing nuclear powers, as over Cuba. Indeed, in view of all the emphasis placed on the status that nuclear weapons confer, it would be asking a great deal of non-nuclear nations to forego their own claims and place their faith in the responsibility of the present nuclear powers. A non-proliferation treaty might help to prevent the present situation from becoming more uncontrollable, but it would not be a magic formula for peaceful relations.

The next question is what compromises by the Soviet Union and the United States have produced the opening. We must assume that from the American standpoint these have not been at the expense of stigmatizing our German ally. There never has been any real question of national German ownership of nuclear weapons; what the United States has sought has been to keep the way open to German participation in an international nuclear force if one came into being. The multi-lateral nuclear force (MLF) concept is now dead, however; and the basic interest of Germany ought to be satisfied through participation in the McNamara Committee in NATO where Germany has a say in the strategy of her own defense. If the Russians now accept this, it will indeed be a step forward. But language still will be critically important, for the one thing the Germans could not endorse would be a proscription that denied them a nuclear role merely because they are German.

With all these caveats, the new movement could be significant evidence of a thaw in relations with Eastern Europe. Until recently the Soviet Union had insisted that no business could be done so long as the Vietnam war continued. Cooperation in limited areas—an air agreement and now the prospect of a nuclear treaty—would not necessarily lead to any Soviet help in bringing an end to the war. But when the Soviet Union and the United States can acknowledge a mutual interest in talking and acting together, many things may be possible.