Steps toward Disarmament

A British physicist and World War II military operations analyst discusses the problems that underlie the present disarmament negotiations

by P. M. S. Blackett

The representatives of 17 nations—the two main nuclear powers, seven nations allied with one or the other of them, and eight uncommitted nations—have convened at Geneva for the third formal, full-dress attempt since the end of World War II to negotiate disarmament. It must be conceded that the circumstances are not entirely favorable to agreement. During 1961 the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. reversed the trend of nearly a decade and increased their military expenditures by something on the order of 25 per cent. The three-year moratorium on the testing of nuclear weapons was terminated by the series of Soviet tests in the fall; on the eve of the Geneva meeting the U.S. announced its intention to move its present series of underground tests into the atmosphere if the U.S.S.R. did not immediately agree to a test ban.

On the other hand, both the Soviet and the Western bloc are committed by categorical public statements to the objective of complete and general disarmament under strict inspection and control. What is more, practical military considerations, arising from the nature of nuclear weapons, commend substantial reduction in armaments to the great powers as a measure that will increase their security in the first step toward disarmament.

In considering possible first steps that would lead to increased security for both sides, partisans of each side should try to understand how the present military situation must look to the other. A military commander, in planning a campaign or a battle, attempts to do this as a matter of course. He has first to find out all he can about the material facts of his opponent's military deployment and secondly to assess the probable intentions of his opponent for its use. This is the process that has been described as "guessing what is happening on the other side of the hill." A similar obligation rests on those who plan a disarmament negotiation. A military planner, it is true, can much more easily put himself mentally in the position of his military opponent than a statesman can think himself into the position of his opposite number, because a statesman must enter imaginatively into the political as well as the military thought processes of his opponent. This is hard to do at a time of acute ideological struggle. It is nonetheless essential that the military and political leaders of both sides do just this. No small part of the present crisis, concerning armaments in general and nuclear weapons in particular, has been due to a tendency in the West to attribute to ideological motives actions by the U.S.S.R. that seem to have been motivated mainly by military considerations. Conversely, much of the West's defense policy appears to have been influenced by political and economic factors.

It may be useful to start by describing the most important elements in the military capabilities of the Soviet bloc and the Western alliance. In recent months there have been significant disclosures about the nuclear weapons and their means of delivery possessed by both sides. On November 12 of last year Robert S. McNamara, Secretary of Defense of the U.S., said that the U.S. nuclear-strike force consists of 1,700 intercontinental bombers, including 630 B-52's, 55 B-58's and 1,000 B-47's. He said that the U.S. possesses in addition several dozen operational intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM's), some 80 Polaris missiles in nuclear-powered submarines, about the same number of Thor and Jupiter intermediate-range missiles, some 300 carrier-borne aircraft armed with megaton war heads and nearly 1,000 supersonic land-based fighters with nuclear war heads. According to his deputy, Roswell L. Gilpatric, "the total number of our nuclear delivery vehicles, tactical as well as strategic, is in the tens of thousands, and of course we have more than one war head for each vehicle.... We have a second-strike capability that is at least as extensive as what the Soviets can deliver by striking first, therefore we can be confident that the Soviets will not provoke a major conflict." The U.S. stockpile of nuclear weapons is most often estimated as around 30,000 megatons, that is, enough for some 30,000 one-megaton bombs.

Naturally no such precise figures for Soviet strength are available. I have seen no reliable estimates of the U.S.S.R.'s nuclear stockpile, nor of its possible nu-