

Editorial

The precarious international balance which gave comfortable illusions of security to the chancelleries of the rich world, has now come tumbling down as a result of the Nato onslaught against Yugoslavia.

That bombing was a step too far. Inexorably the West had pushed the frontiers of Nato towards the East, offering protection against what appeared to be empty phobias. The Partnership for Peace was launched, to provide a dilute form of Nato association, partly in order to eliminate neutralist redoubts in the West, in Ireland, or Sweden; and partly to provide the umbrella for joint military activities in states which had formerly been part of the Soviet Union. Then a Balkan war was launched, without recourse to the United Nations Organisation, and to the consternation of the Russian Government, not to mention the rest of Russia's political classes.

The bombing of Yugoslavia did not produce a capitulation, and the good offices of the Russians became necessary to bring about a solution before American ground soldiers had to be deployed. But even after the cessation of the war, the Russian Government was marginalised, and denied any adequate role in the postwar settlement.

What was to be the first sign that things were deeply wrong came with the race of the Russian forces from their billets in Bosnia to Priština. This military manoeuvre was not apparently initiated by the political authorities in Russia. The Foreign Minister was unaware of what was happening. After a period of confusion, Mr Yeltsin emerged to appoint a new Prime Minister, Vladimir Putin. From that point on, many things went into reverse.

In quick succession, we saw decisive action against an Islamic incursion into Dagestan, and first a stand-off, then the invasion of Chechnya. Kosovo appears to have lifted all restraints on the conduct of what was to become a very ferocious war further East. We have seen fierce new counter-pressure on the neighbouring countries in the Caucasus, especially Georgia and Azerbaijan. Central Asia has come into the frame, and all eyes have been focused on the activities of major oil companies and other entrepreneurial prospectors. The binge of Western initiatives in this vast region now appears to be becoming somewhat contentious.

At the beginning of the year 2000 there gathered a meeting of the Confederation of Independent States, the successor body which associates many of the former members of the Soviet Union. Much turbulence had been anticipated, but order reigned. It had been noised abroad that Russia would be denied the chairmanship of this body, which would go to Central Asia. But all the Central Asian Republics lined up behind Mr Shevardnadze from Georgia, to elect Mr Putin with unanimity. Clearly new parameters were being set in place. The Russians made it very clear that members of the CIS would not get too close to Nato, and would observe the new protocol.

Meantime, what has been called 'the Putin doctrine' was proclaimed. We publish in this number a summary of this crucial text. This is a new nuclear

policy, and it puts an end to the years of drift and accommodation which marked Yeltsin's Presidency. Russia's military strength is not at all what it was, although the new regime has made the decisions that are necessary to greatly expand the conventional armed forces. But this relative weakness doubtless explains why, henceforth, the Russians will eschew the doctrine of 'no first use'.

For the Cold War years, the boot was on the other foot. It was the Americans who would give no guarantee of no first use, on the pretext that the overwhelming weight of Russian conventional forces put them at a disadvantage unless they retained the option of halting the movement of arms with a nuclear blast. Neither then nor now should we assume that the proclamation of a harmful doctrine necessarily entails nuclear warfare. But it does entail a serious deterioration in the military balance, in that nuclear explosions become more, not less, likely. The Russians are telling us that if they are subjected to conventional attacks, they will use nuclear weapons rather than accept defeat.

Immediately this doctrine will give pause to all those former Soviet Republics that have been entertaining joint manoeuvres with Nato. On Western pressure, the armed forces of all these countries have been denuclearised. Of course, Nato frontiers could go further East, moving nukes with them. Already, there is great apprehension in Hungary that nuclear weapons may be stationed there to reinforce the new frontiers of the Western alliance.

We have had the Cold War, and now we have had the post-Cold War. Many of us believe that the only possible choice for rational men and women is to give peace a chance. In reaction against the nuclear confrontation of the '70s and '80s, we developed a call for European Nuclear Disarmament, and the creation of a nuclear-free zone in all Europe. When Gorbachev fell, although there was widespread disarmament in the East, the Americans regarded the end of the Cold War as a 'victory'. That victory was pushed to the limit, and we met that limit in Yugoslavia.

How the powers will adjust to the mess they have created is difficult to anticipate. They will certainly get the answers wrong until there is a peace movement strong enough, and confident enough, to recall the objections to nuclear war and the absurdities of a return to nuclear deterrence as the mainspring of international relations. It is time once again to move towards a politics of nuclear-free zones, and a dismantling of overarching military alliances.

Ken Coates