

GUARDIAN
5.9.86

Playing the game in name of peace

SUPERPOWER arms negotiators would be more likely to reach agreement if they played peace games instead of war games. According to Dr James Thompson, senior lecturer in psychology at the Middlesex Hospital, London.

He suggested two, the Prisoner's Dilemma, and the Dollar Auction. The aim, he told the association, was to give the men round the table at Geneva some insight into their own and each other's behaviour in the hope that understanding will breed trust.

In the Prisoner's Dilemma game two criminals are held in separate cells, and each is told that if he confesses and incriminates his partner he will get a light sentence. If one maintains his innocence and his partner rats on him, he will be gaoled for years.

The best solution, said Dr Thompson, would be for both to keep quiet so that they would be released for lack of evidence. But this depends on trust, so the temptation was to rat and get a light sentence.

"Each prisoner is behaving rationally as far as each other is concerned. But, seen from the outside, they are simply making trouble for each other."

Applied to the arms race, Dr Thompson said, this may explain why nations would rather have the cost and danger of armaments than act in trust which another nation may then exploit.

In the Dollar Auction, the highest and second highest bidders must pay the auctioneer their bid, while only the highest bidder receives the dollar prize.

Players invariably bid well over a dollar to win the dollar — an irrational result caused by bidders behaving rationally by trying to maximise their gains then minimise their losses.

The rational thing to do, said Dr Thompson, was not to enter the game in the first place, or form a coalition against the auctioneer. The superpowers were engaged in an equally irrational game.

The nuclear arms auction had reached a stage where the cost of the bidding far exceeded the value of the "prize" — global domination. The bidders were trapped by the structure of the game, despite behaving in ways that to them appear rational.

Effects Ps - Ed?