Atomic Energy Exchanges: More Now Authorized, but U.S.-U.S.S.R. Visits Difficult to Arrange

Just as it was hard for Alice to have more tea before she'd had any, it may be hard for the U.S.S.R. and the U.S. to have more exchanges of nuclear scientists, although an agreement signed in Moscow last week seems to promise just that. One achievement of the talks between Glenn Seaborg of the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission and Andronik Petrosyants of the Soviet State Board for Peaceful Uses of Atomic Energy has been to increase the number of fields in which exchanges are now authorized, without making it more likely that any will come about.

What Seaborg and Petrosyants did was to extend and enlarge a nearly inactive agreement first signed between their two institutions in November 1959, under the broader cultural exchange agreement signed at that time. Although the broad agreement was renegotiated in March 1962, the atomic energy section was not. As a result, last week's memorandum is called the "1962–1963" agreement, although in fact it is scheduled to run through 1965, contingent on renewal of the broader exchange plans at the end of this year.

The first agreement provided for exchanging scientists in three- to five-man groups for 10- to 15-day visits on a "reciprocal and unclassified" basis. It listed specific fields in which exchanges could take place: thermonuclear research, high-energy physics, nuclear power reactors, nuclear physics, neutron physics, and the structure of the nucleus. A second part of the agreement provided for the exchange of unclassified information on research in peaceful uses of atomic energy.

The new agreement widens the number of exchange fields to include solid-state physics, the purification and disposal of radioactive wastes, the use of tracer compounds in medicine, radioneurological research, and the design and utilization of charged-particle accelerators. It also revises the procedures for exchanging information, provides for joint scientific conferences, and establishes another category of exchange visits; there is now the possibility of a year-long exchange of research specialists, in addition to the 10- to 15-day visits.

All this activity, however, has been more productive for the lawyers than for the scientists. Only two exchanges have taken place so far—one in high-energy physics, one in controlled thermonuclear reactions, both in the summer of 1960. There were also a couple of near-misses, on both sides. Shortly after signing the first agreement, the Russians wanted to send three scientists here but were stalled by a hassle over the itinerary; in March 1962 the U.S. proposed two exchanges that were blocked by the Russians.

Implementation of the agreements has been snarled in a variety of ways, some diplomatic, some bureaucratic. Both reflect the basic distrust that is one of the few things Americans and Russians share. On the diplomatic side, the State Department's insistence on reciprocity in all its exchange programs has had a particularly inhibiting effect in this field, though without the reciprocity proviso it is likely that most exchange traffic would be from East to West. Differences in the organization of research between the two countries make it difficult to arrange precisely parallel visits and this difficulty is enhanced by the fact that the Soviets classify more information than we do.

On the bureaucratic side, the fact that all initiative for the exchange must come from the government institutions and not from individual scientists also has a deadening effect. This arrangement has given the AEC a kind of monopoly on exchanges in the nuclear field, which it guards with some anxiety. It works something like this: the AEC decides on a particular project it would like to visit in the U.S.S.R. and negotiates strict terms for a Soviet return visit to a comparable project here. The Soviets equivocate; we equivocate. Are the projects really comparable? Are the quid and the quo really identical? Probably not. Probably the exchange doesn't come off, and probably there is secret relief on both sides, since atomic energy is such a sensitive area. Instead of an exchange program, we are left with an un-exchange program.

The AEC protects its part of the un-exchange program by discouraging other exchanges between American and Soviet scientists in the fields under its jurisdiction. (Strictly private exchanges, even from the American viewpoint, would be difficult, since the AEC funds so much of the research in this field. But there are other agreements under which a nuclear scientist might slip in—or out—if the AEC averted its eyes.) The reasoning is that private initiative might undermine the authority the AEC is able to invoke in its official capacity, or, in the words of one official involved with the program, "helping private endeavors would undercut our own position." This would be plausible enough if the AEC "position" promoted exchanges. But since—so far at least—it has practically excluded them, the logic loses a bit of its appeal, and the agreement seems more of an obstacle than an aid.

The AEC is "hopeful" that the program will pick up speed and feels that prospects are better now than they were at the time of the first agreement, which had been in operation only 6 months when the U-2 flight disrupted already shaky Soviet-American relations. Nonetheless, there are no projects in the works at present beyond the ceremonial one of a visit to this country by Petrosyants. Though things may change, there is little hard evidence to suggest that the new agreement will not be a dead letter, albeit one writ in a larger hand than the old.

—ELINOR LANGER

Reproduction Study: U.S. Grant Will Create WHO Research Unit

Last month's announcement of a $500,000 U.S. grant to the World Health Organization for research on human reproduction was carefully hedged to avoid the politically hazardous implications of "birth control".

Announcing the gift at the 16th annual assembly of WHO in Geneva, U.S. Surgeon General Luther Terry stressed the necessity of promoting, not reducing, fertility. More research in human physiology, he said, "would benefit thousands of presently sterile couples and possibly prevent the malformation, crippling and retardation of hundreds of thousands of innocent babies."

It is no secret, however, that research is not so conveniently compartmentalized, and that sterility studies produced the pills now increasingly used to regulate fertility and facilitate family planning. Nor is it secret that the U.S. chose human reproduction as the area for its gift when WHO's Director General had said that drug evaluation, immunology, and environmental contamination were also areas where U.S. support would be welcome.

The delicate approach appears successful. There have been no objections to the subject of the grant, only some rumblings about congressional control of the purse-strings.—E. L.