Reagan Seeks Expansion of Soviet Ties

The political pendulum has now swung in favor of U.S.-Soviet cultural and scientific exchanges

With the election approaching and little sign of a thaw in U.S.–Soviet relations, President Ronald Reagan has decided to seek expansion of a handful of U.S.–Soviet exchange programs and low-level technical agreements, including several involving environmental and agricultural scientists, medical researchers, and engineers.

"Civilized people everywhere have a stake in keeping contacts, communication and creativity as broad, deep, and free as possible," Reagan told a somewhat surprised conference of exchange program administrators and participants in Washington on 27 June. "I feel that we should broaden opportunities for Americans and Soviet citizens to get to know each other better." Over the last 4 years, Reagan has himself repeatedly put off consideration of a meeting with the Soviet premier.

Now, however, he has asked the Environmental Protection Agency, and the Departments of Agriculture, Housing and Urban Development, and Health and Human Services to expand existing agreements with their bureaucratic counterparts in the Soviet Union. He also proposed reopening negotiations on a cultural exchange program canceled by the Carter Administration in the wake of the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and then put off again by the 1983 Soviet shoot-down of a Korean airliner. In addition, he said that the United States is willing to discuss the construction of new consulates in Kiev and New York City; the coordination of oceanographic research; the possibility of joint rescue missions for ships at sea or astronauts stranded in space; and the possibility of routine contact and discussions between U.S. and Soviet military leaders.

Under the proposed cultural agreement, numerous artists, musicians, and athletes would be sent to the Soviet Union at government expense, along with a variety of commercial and cultural exhibits. "The general feeling is that this one is worth renewing, because it helps the Soviets learn more about American life," says a senior State Department official. The arrangement clearly benefits the United States more than the Soviet Union, he added.

However, a handful of additional agreements that were canceled for political reasons will not be resuscitated, according to the official. Included in this group are agreements on space and energy, along with an umbrella science and technology agreement, which were suspended in 1982 in response to the imposition of martial law in Poland; and an agreement on transportation, which was suspended in 1983 in response to the downing of the airliner. In contrast to the cultural exchange program, these may have primarily benefited the Soviets, the official says. "There is a general feeling that they simply cost too much in relation to the output."

Despite the absence of a reversal on all of the exchange agreements, the President's decision nevertheless constitutes a dramatic change in the Administration's position on U.S.–Soviet ties. As one of those attending the conference explained, "previously, the State Department officially neither encouraged nor discouraged U.S.–Soviet exchanges, largely due to politics. But now the President has given us his official blessing. The result may be a substantial flowering of such exchanges."

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The announcement also constitutes a significant admission that both official and unofficial sanctions on issues such as human rights and military aggression have met with little practical success. It comes, in fact, at a moment of great uncertainty and intense international concern about the whereabouts and health of Andrei Sakharov, an eminent physicist who was internally exiled for publicly challenging Soviet military policy.

It also comes in the wake of a new crackdown in the Soviet Union on contacts with foreigners. Under a law that took effect only last week, for example, Soviet citizens may not invite foreigners to visit, provide them with housing, or transport them in autos without official permission. Under another law, enacted in January, no citizen may convey to academics, researchers, or other foreigners "economic, scientific, technical, or other information" derived from professional employment, again without official permission.

In his speech, Reagan took note of the dilemma that such policies create. "We must have ways short of military action," he said, "that make it absolutely clear that Soviet actions do matter and that some actions inevitably affect the quality of the relationship." Drawing a new distinction between contacts with the Soviet government and with the Soviet people, however, Reagan went on to say that the United States must be careful "not to take out our indignation on those not responsible." He emphasized that the Administration will "continue to demonstrate our strong sympathy and strong support for the Afghan people," as well as for jailed Soviet scientists such as Yuri Orlov and Anatoly Shcharansky. But he concluded by saying that "the way governments can best promote contacts among people is by not standing in the way. Our Administration will do all we can to stay out of the way and to persuade the Soviet government to do likewise."

James Billington, who directs the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, D.C., and who helped put the conference together, says that most of the participants approved of this new approach. "Many of us feel that exchanges can legitimately be used to register unhappiness over these matters, and that it is better to participate and speak up than not to participate at all," he said. David A. Hamburg, president of the Carnegie Cor-

poration of New York who also helped organize the conference, says that given the terrible state of U.S.–Soviet relations, "any exchanges that can help avoid a nuclear war must go ahead no matter what the context."

A senior Administration official who briefed reporters on the President's speech denied that the principal motivation behind it was political. "Well, I think it, in fact, is a coincidence that these things are coming in a year divisible by four," the official said. But it was clearly made against a backdrop of increasing congressional and public alarm about the sorry state of U.S.–Soviet relations. The possibility of a summit, or high-level U.S.–Soviet exchange, received a flurry of attention last month, but has since faded and is now privately dismissed by many senior Administration officials. One official recently told a private symposium on arms control that "there has not been one scintilla of direct evidence" that the Soviets are sincerely interested. In any event, Reagan has not abandoned his claim that any summit must be "carefully prepared"—a demand that effectively rules out any meeting before November. (The U.S. Senate recently passed a resolution favoring a presidential summit "without preconditions or assurances of success," but it is not binding, and Reagan's advisers are urging him to ignore it.)

Several days after the President's speech, the Soviets proposed to begin negotiations in September on a halt to the development and deployment of antisatellite and antiballistic missile weapons in space. Reagan, briefed by telephone at a weekend retreat, accepted the offer but proposed to discuss limitations on intermediate and long-range nuclear missiles as well. The Soviets dislike this idea, and jockeying over the agenda could substantially delay any agreement. Both sides still charge that the other has violated existing agreements. And acrimony between government spokesmen remains unusually thick, with charges of terrorism and Nazism flung about like greetings.

Seen in this context, the timing of Reagan's proposal on low-level contacts suggests that its motivation is at least partly to garner popular approval. If so, it represents a continuation—not an end—to the long-standing manipulation of scientific and technical exchanges to make a political point. Hamburg, for one, is sanguine about this possibility. "If the election year helped him say what he did, then that's fine, but the important thing is that he said it."

—R. JEFFREY SMITH

OTA Questions Space Station

In a wide-ranging study due for official release this August, the Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) seriously questions the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's (NASA's) current plans for a permanently manned space station, and suggests that the agency could better serve the nation's interests with some fundamental changes in philosophy.

While none of the criticisms are new in themselves, the study as a whole does crystallize concerns about the space station heard in Congress, in the space science community, in the business community, and even occasionally within NASA itself.

The report emphasizes from the beginning that there is a strong case to be made for a permanent "infrastructure" in space. Examples include pressurized laboratories for hands-on experiments in life sciences and materials sciences; unmanned, free-flying platforms for telescopes and other sensitive experiments; orbital drydocks for the repair and maintenance of facilities such as Space Telescope; and reusable "Orbital Transfer Vehicles" to ferry payloads from low-altitude space shuttle orbits to the 35,900-kilometer geosynchronous orbit.

NASA, of course, includes all these infrastructure elements and more under the general rubric "space station." However, NASA's particular approach is also by far the most expensive way to get the job done, says OTA. The $8-billion plan calls for developing habitation modules, laboratory modules, and unmanned platforms from scratch, and starting with a permanent crew of six to eight.

As an alternative, OTA contends that many of the missions proposed for the NASA space station could be done more cheaply with existing hardware, or hardware already under development. It points to such unmanned instrument platforms as the SPAS pallet developed by MBB/ERNO in West Germany, the Fairchild company's Leasecraft, and several others.

Options for what the OTA calls "inhabited infrastructure" include the Spacelab pressure modules, modified Spacelab modules attached to a space station core, and orbiters modified for flights of 20 days or more.

The private sector seems ready and eager to cooperate with such an approach, the report notes. Examples range from Fairchild and its Leasecraft platform to Space Industries, Inc., of Houston, which will soon begin marketing a pressurized laboratory module designed for materials processing, and suitable for docking at the shuttle or at a space station.

Given this activity in the private sector, together with the space efforts of Europe and Japan, OTA suggests that NASA's philosophy and operating style may well be outmoded. In the early days, when space really was a frontier, it was appropriate for NASA itself to do everything that needed to be done up there. In the 1980's and 1990's, it may be appropriate for NASA to take on a more managerial role—seeing to it that things get done. In short, rely more on the private sector for routine hardware, and focus the agency's own efforts on projects that are truly at the cutting edge: the orbital transfer vehicle, for example, or advanced planetary missions.

In conclusion, OTA calls for a new public debate on the nation's goals and objectives in space. Colonies on the moon and Mars? A network of satellites to monitor the global environment? The infrastructure that is built depends on what the country wants to do, says OTA.

NASA officials have had a decidedly mixed response to the OTA study, at least in its draft form. Deputy associate administrator Philip E. Culbertson praises it for putting the NASA space station in perspective among other "infrastructure" options, but he points out that NASA is already working quite closely with Fairchild, Space Industries, and other commercial ventures. "I think there are a lot of pieces of the space station that we should procure [from private sources]," he says. And as for a grand set of national goals, "There are lots of things to be done in space—most of which seem to require a space station of one form or another. That's actually comforting, because if I go ahead and build a space station now, I don't have to make a decision about what we're going to be doing in the year 2020."—M. MITCHELL WALDROP