Japan's Answer on the SSC: Maybe

Washington and Tokyo—When the Japanese government finally announced its position on contributing to the construction of the Superconducting Super Collider (SSC), its answer turned out to be neither yes nor no. Instead of agreeing to fund as much as 20% of the $8.25-billion accelerator, as some Japanese press reports predicted, Prime Minister Kiichi Miyazawa said last week that Japan will join the United States in creating a working group that will study the project and help the government make a final decision by the end of the year.

SSC supporters and critics alike seized on this ambiguous statement to reinforce their own points of view. In a press release, Secretary of Energy James Watkins called the joint panel a "breakthrough," while an aide to Representative Howard Wolpe (D–MI) suggested the program might now face rough going in Congress, saying, "The proof is in the pudding, and so far there are effectively zero dollars in foreign contributions." Who is right, and whether or not Japan will eventually provide the $1.6-billion contribution expected by the United States are questions whose answers will depend both on the working group's success, and on some fundamental changes now brewing in the Japanese system for funding basic research.

One major challenge for the joint working group is the perception that, as Toshimitsu Yamazaki, director of the Institute for Nuclear Studies, put it, "the SSC is really an American project, not an international project." The working group will seek to "internationalize" the program—presumably by measures that go beyond the "management stake" in the SSC that presidential science adviser D. Allan Bromley offered the Japanese earlier this year.

But deep issues at home may also bear on Japan's decision. The debate over the SSC has had the unexpected effect of intensifying pressures for change in the Japanese basic research funding system. Although the jury is still out on whether such changes would benefit the SSC, they seem likely to transform the character of Japanese cooperation in international projects.

Currently, basic research in Japan is funded by a balkanized collection of government ministries that jealously reserve funds for their favored projects. "Nobody wants to give up any money," says a member of Japan's Science Council, a science policy body chaired by Miyazawa. "Everybody wants to have whatever funds are available." And there's not much money available in Japan for basic research, at least from the government: Such spending amounts to only .45% of Japan's gross national product, compared to 1.25% in the United States.

As a result, "[ministries] have been greatly afraid of using their own money for these types of international contributions," says Yoshitaka Kimura, head of the accelerator department at Japan's KEK high-energy physics laboratory. Now, Kimura and other Japanese officials and scientists are hopeful that the new SSC study group will presage a re-examination of the way all international research programs are funded. The Science Council member, who spoke on condition of anonymity, thinks there is a need for a powerful office that can set priorities on international projects across the various ministries. But increased support for international projects will require new taxes, a move bound to be opposed in the Japanese parliament.

Meanwhile, the SSC will have to make it through a difficult year in Congress. "We're losing support," says one appropriations staffer who favors the project, noting that an attempt to kill the project in the Senate last summer won 37 votes, nearly twice what it gathered the year before. Supporters take heart, however, from the fact that congressional leaders are beginning to talk about undoing the 1990 budget agreement that limits domestic spending, a move that would unlock money for programs such as the SSC.

Even so, the SSC remains dependent on the prospect of a sizable Japanese contribution. Restructuring the project to Japan's satisfaction and figuring out how to capitalize on any changes in Japan's funding system seem to be the next big challenges for the United States. ■ DAVID P. HAMILTON

With reporting by Fred Myers in Tokyo.

Thrust and Parry Over Indirect Costs

Indirect costs are back in the news, with, on the one hand, new allegations that research universities have abused the system and, on the other, the first signs of an organized counterthrust by the universities. The allegations emerged last week when the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) sprang a leak just as Representative John Dingell (D–MI) was preparing for another hearing on the federal payments, which are intended to reimburse universities for the overhead costs of doing scientific research (*Science*, 8 November 1991, p. 788). Dingell has scheduled his hearing for 30 January, where audit reports from HHS, the General Accounting Office, and the Defense Contract Audit Agency will be aired. But on the eve of this event—in one of Washington's time-honored traditions—someone leaked the HHS audit to *The New York Times*.

The report, prepared by Inspector General Richard Kusserow of HHS, lists more than $13 million in questioned billings by 14 universities, including the University of Michigan, the University of Pennsylvania, and Yale University. Many of the allegations sound familiar. For example, according to the *Times*, Kusserow's report finds that many universities have billed improperly for parties, airplane tickets for spouses on official trips, and even costs related to federal investigations.

However, representatives of major research universities have already taken issue with HHS's analysis. They first dissented last December, says Jerold Roschwalb of the National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges, when HHS officials presented some findings to a special study panel put together by Kusserow and Bernadine Healy, director of the National Institutes of Health. At that meeting, federal officials argued that universities could reduce indirect costs and increase the number of scientific grants they support. But the university leaders "roundly rejected" the analysis, says Roschwalb. What the auditors failed to appreciate, says Howard Gobstein, vice president of the Association of American Universities, is that until now, federal payments have been based on arbitrary, negotiated reimbursement rates, not on actual audits. No one, he says, really has a good idea of how much it costs to support scientific research at universities.

Now a group of university leaders is planning to fill that gap with their own study. A panel of academics chaired by William Danforth, chancellor of Washington University, is meeting on 18 January to lay out a strategy for the study. Gobstein says the group is negotiating with a respected former HHS procurement official—Henry Kirschenmann—to supervise the work, which could cost between $100,000 and $250,000 and which will be financed entirely with private funds. The "working idea," says Gobstein, is to look at 20 to 30 institutions and develop credible estimates for the "real costs" of university-based research. ■ ELIOT MARSHALL