NATO and civil science

Peter J. Smith, who once accepted a NATO Fellowship because it was the only support available for work in a nonuniversity research institution in the United States, discusses NATO's involvement in civil science.

WHAT is the connection between stress and anxiety in modern society, the chemistry of insects, cosmological models, and the mooring and berthing of ships? The answer is that in common with more than 50 other science-based activities they were the subjects of well financed conferences during 1972. On the face of it, of course, there is nothing very strange about that; it is a common enough occurrence for scientists to congregate with their colleagues around the world to discuss new results and ideas, and some of them even find it useful. But there is something a little odd about it in this case, for all 56 meetings were sponsored and paid for by a single organisation which has nothing directly to do with academic science at all—the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). The question is: why?

Scientists do pretty well out of NATO, and not just in the matter of conferences. The total budget of the NATO Science Committee in 1972 was \$4.83 million of which only \$0.93 million went on scientific meetings. Well over half was spent on the Fellowship Programme. Research grants then accounted for a further \$0.61 million, and a few specialised programmes (such as operational research, oceanography and human factors) and administration took the rest.

The mandate for all this involvement in basic science is Article 2 of the North Atlantic Treaty (1949) by which "the Parties will contribute toward the future development of peaceful and friendly international relations by strengthening their free institutions, by bringing about a better understanding of the principles upon which those institutions are founded, and by promoting conditions of stability and well-being". For the first eight years of NATO's existence the emphasis was clearly on "defence"; but in 1957 Paul Henri Spaak, the second Secretary General, made a serious attempt to widen the field to include ostensibly nonmilitary collaboration. One result was the establishment in 1958 of the

NATO Science Committee to "strengthen the Alliance and its political substance"—a form of words whose deeper meaning has apparently never been in doubt, for NATO has never made any secret of the fact that it sees its support for science as contributing, however indirectly, to its military and political aims.

In view of the often violent reaction against the military sponsorship of university science in recent years, a basically military organisation which not only publicises its involvement in civil science but also extols the virtues of it in print may appear at first sight to be either remarkably honest or incredibly naive. In fact, NATO is neither. It is not genuinely honest to be completely open about a participation which would surely be discovered in any case; and the charge of naivety would only be substantiated if it could be shown that members of the NATO Science Committee were unaware of the strength of feeling already expressed on the issue of military sponsorship. Moreover, to the extent that the sort of science sponsored by NATO furthers military aims no more nor less than it would if sponsored by an overtly civil body, financial aid from NATO as such would seem to have little relevance to that organisation's stated aims. One can only conclude, therefore, that NATO's public stance is designed to conceal motives which are altogether more subtle.

Indeed, what NATO has really been after from its large scale support of basic science—and what it has to a large extent achieved—is a sort of social respectability and prestige among a community containing elements who are decidedly touchy over the relationship between science and the military. Since 1959 over 10,000 NATO Fellows have written tens of thousands of legitimate scientific papers, each of which records gratitude for NATO support; every moderately sized scientific library in the world now contains hundreds of volumes bearing witness on their title pages to NATO's generosity; and every conference announcement implicitly proclaims NATO's apparent concern for disinterested scientific scholarship and culture. In addition, the NATO Science Committee has always gone out of its way to attract to membership established and high-ranking scientists or government scientific advisers who are able to confer their own brand of legitimacy on NATO's activities.

As might be expected, some scientists have argued that none of this matters—that given that the relevant activity is essentially nonmilitary, who pays for it is of no concern. Unfortunately, however, there is evidence that NATO's scientific involvement is

not entirely beneficial to science itself, even if motives are ignored. For one thing, although the Science Committee is always quick to point out that up to 20% of the participants in its conferences come from non-NATO countries, including the communist nations of eastern Europe, it is less ready to publicise the fact that non-NATO delegates are forbidden to attend on NATO funds. And in spite of boasts about participants from the Soviet Union and elsewhere, it is doubtful whether scientists from, say, Cuba or North Vietnam would be able to attend a NATO conference in the United States. In fact, as far as I know (and certainly up to the end of 1972), no scientist from either of these countries has ever attended any NATO conference anywhere.

Thus although scientists pride themselves on their international outlook, they are not above doing less than justice to their ideals for the sake of a quick buck. And it is because of this sort of opportunism—not to mention the skilful casuistry displayed in rationalising it—that NATO science has been given little opposition.

Few would suggest that military sponsorship is the most important problem facing civil science today. At the same time, however, this is far from saying that it is of no concern at all; and there is clearly a significant minority which feels sincerely that NATO involvement in particular is a blot on the scientific landscape. The irony is that the whole NATO sponsorship scheme is totally unnecessary, except perhaps as perceived by NATO itself. The fact is that the Fellowship programme, which accounts for about 60 per cent of the NATO science budget, is administered not by NATO but by agencies in the constituent countries (the Science Research Council in Britain, the National Science Foundation in the United States). A large proportion of NATO science money is thus returned directly whence it came (and almost all of it is repatriated to the constituent nations in one form or another), NATO's sole contributions being the use of its name and, as one cynic has pointed out, an addition to bureaucratic overheads. Since most of the national agencies concerned now have parallel programmes of their own, there seems to be little point in perpetuating NATO's involvement any longer. Alternatively, if an overtly international programme of science support is felt to be desirable, it would be far preferable to make it truly international and hand over the whole NATO scheme to some clearly nonmilitary organisation such as UNESCO. Presumably this would keep everyone happy—including NATO, if it really means what it says.