Comecon research

Moscow merely the centre

SOVIET science planners and publicists have taken to emphasizing that much happens outside Moscow, and that the fourteen academies of science of the non-Russian republics exist. And now increasing emphasis is being placed on the role of the republic academies in international collaborative projects within Comecon.

Until recently, Soviet writing on Comecon science stressed mainly the big international agencies and projects such as the Interkosmos space programme. The first hint of a policy shift came with the public announcement in February that the Vega (Venus and Halley's comet) programme was being coordinated from the Kiev observatory of the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences.

Although the reasons for choosing Kiev as the coordinating centre seemed obscure, this might have been a one-off event, with the main emphasis remaining on the Comecon role of the prestigious research institutes in Moscow, Leningrad and Novosibirsk. Last month, however, *Pravda* printed an extensive report on the Minsk Institute of Heat and Mass Exchange, the tone of which suggests that decentralization of Soviet Comecon work is in the ascendant. The article had only marginal topicality and appears to have been written solely as the result of a policy directive.

The Byelorussian Academy of Sciences has a long history of research on heat and mass exchange, and, in the past 20 years, has hosted a number of "All-Union" conferences in this field which included participants from the Comecon bloc. The *Pravda* article, however, stresses the role of the special Comecon centre there — an establishment which, in the diamond jubilee book of the academy in 1979, merited only a two-line mention.

The institute itself has an extensive theoretical programme on matters such as inter-phase heat exchange, the dynamics of combustion and mathematical modelling of diffusion and convection. The *Pravda* reporter, however, while giving credit to the "high authority" of the international centre, seems to have had difficulty in describing the work of an institution more remarkable for a steady programme of research and training than for any spectacular "big" science. He did his best, however, to allude to current Soviet priorities (the food programme and space) by informing his readers that the centre's programme ranges from the drying of food grains to the theory of spacecraft thermal shielding. Computers and lasers, both Byelorussian specialties, rated a mention while proper political emphasis was given to the trainees from two of the less developed Comecon countries (Cuba and Mongolia) and Yugoslavia. **Vera Rich**

US nuclear physics

Argonne picks a fight

Washington

ARGONNE National Laboratory, outside Chicago, has taken to fighting fire with fire in its bid for a new electron accelerator. Having failed to persuade the Department of Energy's Nuclear Science Advisory Committee (NSAC) to forgo an endorsement of the proposal from Argonne's competitor (see *Nature* 28 April, p.743), the laboratory and an assortment of midwestern universities and corporations have taken their case to the political powers that be. Last week, Senator Charles Percy (Republican, Illinois) arranged a meeting with Secretary of Energy Donald Hodel to allow the group to present their claim for the accelerator in a last-ditch attempt to oust the favoured proposal, developed by 23 universities calling themselves the Southeastern Universities Research Association (SURA).

SURA from the start has used all the political leverage it could. Senator John Warner (Republican, Virginia) and others from Virginia in Congress have been particularly active in their support of SURA, a possible magnet for attracting high-technology industry to the region.

Argonne is not shying away from pulling political strings either. Although the recommendations of NSAC, which consists of prominent academic researchers, have usually carried considerable weight, the ultimate decision rests with Hodel. Hence the meeting arranged by Percy, and Argonne's unusual strategy that emerged last week: in a report presented at that meeting (and printed only the day before), Argonne argues that if the SURA design is what NSAC wants, then fine — Argonne will build it, and cheaper, too. According to Argonne's figures, the cost of building and operating the SURA-design machine over its lifetime of 15 years would be \$42 million lower at Argonne than at the proposed SURA site, a vacant laboratory structure in Newport News, Virginia. Argonne claims these savings would accrue from using Argonne's existing support staff, physical facilities and services.

Hodel emerged noncommittal from the closed-door meeting last week. But he did concede a key point in Argonne's strategy: he said that although NSAC is well-suited to make technical judgments, it was not up to NSAC to decide where that design should be constructed.

Percy made much of the alleged monetary savings of building at Argonne and a recommendation last year by the Energy Research Advisory Board that no new national laboratories should be built. He also said that the University of Chicago and the "Big 10" midwestern universities were prepared to offer faculty positions in conjunction with the new accelerator. NSAC, in choosing the SURA proposal,

gave some weight to SURA's commitment of 35 new faculty positions for researchers associated with the facility.

Percy also noted, as did the Argonne report, that the midwest has received a disproportionately small share of federal contracts. "We do not at all begrudge the ship-building efforts in Virginia", Percy said, referring to the considerable naval facilities in Newport News.

An aide to Senator Warner of Virginia said "it was a little late in the game" for Argonne to be presenting a new proposal. And she dismissed Argonne's complaint that it could not have known that so much weight would be given to such criteria as new faculty posts. "Everyone when they're writing a proposal tries to make it innovative", she said, and Argonne had just as much chance as anyone else to put together an attractive package. "It's a little like sour grapes" she said. **Stephen Budiansky**

Trad natural history

THE impact of man on British wildlife is the subject of a permanent exhibition at the British Museum (Natural History) in London, which looks at the general effect that man has had on the land since his first arrival in Britain 20,000 years ago, including the organisms that he has introduced as well as those that he has destroyed. Exhibits are "traditional" museum fare (such as stuffed foxes), not

the more exciting and controversial style of the museum's popular human biology hall. The new exhibition is aimed at the informed amateur and gives an introduction to the techniques of classification and how to apply them. Costing a total of £150,000, the exhibition took almost all of the museum's available cash for 1982, and is intended to last for 15 years. This should give an overall cost of between 1 and 2 pence per visitor, according to its operations manager, Malcolm McBratney. □