

OLD WORLD

European Space Out of the Wood?

LAST week's meeting in Brussels of the European aerospace ministers, in spite of its long hours and histrionic delays, could prove a major advance in European space history. But the ministers and their civil servants are not yet out of the woods.

The agreement that finally emerged provides for Mr Michael Heseltine's European Space Agency to come into existence on April 1 next year (three months later than originally planned) and sets out—at last—which projects are going to be supported and by whom. Spacelab, L-3S (the French launcher), and MAROTS, the maritime satellite that the European Space Research Organization has been studying, are the projects that have been given the European blessing, and in the end all the nations agreed to contribute to all three projects—the only reservations being that Italy, Denmark, Sweden and Norway have still to decide on the amount of their contributions.

Feeling in the European aerospace industry is chiefly one of relief that a clear programme is finally emerging. It has been said, however, that in working to get the new agency set up, Mr Michael Heseltine, Britain's Minister for Aerospace and Shipping, has given too much away in terms of real projects. The British proposal to build a Geostationary Technology Satellite as a prototype maritime satellite was dropped in favour of MAROTS (see *Nature*, 243, 181; 1973), and Britain has even agreed to contribute a largely nominal sum (2.6%) to the French launcher programme. The feeling in Whitehall, however, is that the establishment of the agency is the key point, and any contribution to the L-3S is less an important change of principle than a minor concession made to ensure that the agency gets off the ground. When the project gets under way Britain will not be a formal partner to the programme. Britain's attitude through the last few ministerial meetings has been that it is more important to plan for a rational future than to win short term victories over particular projects that may damage the long term interests of a concerted European space effort.

British expenditure in space in fact is going to be small over the next few years—a mere £30 million or so—and a large share of that—about £17 million—will be spent on MAROTS as Britain is to pick up 56% of that bill.

The problems left to be resolved are the extent of the Italian and Scandinavian contributions, the precise machinery under which the new agency will

operate, and—most importantly—the way in which new projects, which in the old days would have been national projects, are to be integrated into the new organization.

The agreement for Europe to go ahead with the £130 million Spacelab project will now be signed on August 14, although there will be a reservation written in that the agreement is void if the countries that have still to decide their contributions to the overall package fail to provide the necessary funds by September 18, the deadline that was set for them at Brussels. There is, however, surprising confidence in European space circles that the money will be found. Considerable pressure will be put on the Italians in particular not to destroy an agreement that has taken months to negotiate. Even if there is a

shortfall, it is felt that the countries that are already committed will increase their contributions.

The precise machinery of the new agency has still to be worked out, but it is already clearly understood that it will have a strong central management on the lines of ESRO rather than on the lines that helped lead ELDO to ruin.

Britain's chief aim in all this will be to see that all new projects dreamt up in the future will be offered to the new agency. This is one of the reasons why the national GTS programme was dropped in favour of the admittedly British dominated MAROTS programme. Another reason is that if money is to be made out of applications satellites they need to be run on a multi-national basis.

SCIENCE POLICY

Dahrendorf's Solution

PROFESSOR Ralf Dahrendorf, European Commissioner for Scientific Research and Education, has produced his plans for coordinating the science and technology policies of the nine community members. Headstone of the six point plan is a new committee for Scientific and Technical Research (CREST) to add to the other acronyms that already litter the European research scene.

If approved by the council of ministers at their October meeting this committee—whose recommendations in its early years at least will not be binding—will have the task of coordinating national policies by pinpointing the areas into which each country should put more, or less, effort. The precise form the committee will take is still under discussion. If the ministers do accept the proposals—and given the fate that met Commissioner Spinelli's proposals (see *Nature*, 243, 128; 1973) this can by no means be certain—it will mean that Europe finally will have a common research policy.

The other chief points in the plan allow for the commission to take a share in the proposed European Science Foundation that is currently being put together by the academies and research councils of Europe. Although no sum has been mentioned it is possible that the commission will put a small amount of money into the new body each year—perhaps 200,000 units of account (£80,000)—in order to gain the right to be involved. Professor Dahrendorf has

also highlighted a series of projects that he is asking the council of ministers to approve. These include studies on medical and social research, energy policy—including direct conversion, the transport of energy and environmental and regional energy policies—as well as an industrial policy that includes work on materials and computers.

Where this work is to be done has not yet been decided, but possibly contracts would be placed in industry, national research institutes and the community's Joint Research Centre.

The programme includes some old favourites of proposed European cooperation such as a community-wide scientific information network and the setting up of a European bureau of standards based around the existing Bureau of Nuclear Standards at Geel in Belgium. The new bureau, however, would have far wider interests, covering for example standards in pharmaceuticals and medicine, in food conservation, pesticides and telephone and telecommunications links.

The final point in the proposal is that the commission should join the futures business by setting up a group to examine likely developments in the next thirty years along the lines of the MIT and Club of Rome studies. The group has been dubbed "Europe+30".

If the council of ministers accepts the proposals it is likely that the PREST group that advises the council of ministers will be dissolved, but the recently set up CERD group, whose purpose is to advise the commission on the policies it should adopt, will continue in existence.