Budget cuts cast shadows overseas

US agencies count costs of Reagan

Washington

The Reagan Administration, stung by criticism from Western allies of budget-based decisions to terminate or substantially withdraw from a number of international scientific projects, is taking a close look at ways in which it may be able to repair some of the damage and prevent further unnecessary friction in the future.

Of particular concern to the new Administration is that the foreign policy function of certain types of international scientific agreements — for example, a science and technology programme agreed with Spain in 1976 as part of an exchange for being allowed to place US military bases in the country — could be jeopardized if the projects are evaluated merely on the strength of their scientific merits and the vocal energy of their domestic constituency, often very small within the scientific community.

Already, Secretary of State Alexander Haig has written to Mr Reagan's budget director, David Stockman, complaining of the fact that cuts imposed either directly by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), or indirectly by internal decision within agencies such as the Department of Energy or the National Science Foundation (NSF), have been carried out in a manner which constitutes a unilateral abrogation of international commitments.

Among the projects listed by Mr Haig which appear to have been treated in this way is the international solar polar mission, planned jointly with the European Space Agency, from which the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) has proposed withdrawing its planned spacecraft (a decision which both congressional committees and NASA officials are busy trying to reverse, perhaps through a reduced NASA commitment which would involve the European Space Agency building the two spacecraft involved). Another is the possible cancellation of national energy assessments supported by the Department of Energy and already promised by embassies in countries such as Greece, Tunisia and Venezuela.

What concerns the State Department most is that the scientific attachés of foreign embassies in Washington are telling their capitals that US promises of scientific and technical collaboration should be looked at sceptically in the future. "While budget reductions are a clear goal for this Administration, one of its principal foreign policy objectives is to render the United States a reliable international partner," wrote Mr Haig — who had previously interceded with OMB to rescue foreign aid funds and NASA's Galileo mission to Jupiter, planned with heavy West German involvement — in his letter to Mr Stockman.

International collaboration in scientific programmes is seen by Washington science policy officials as falling into three categories: that carried out by individual scientists and their institutions as part of the normal process of science; that in which both sides receive the benefit of more cost-effective technical knowledge; and that carried out with some broader foreign policy goal in mind.

It is the last of these three which is particularly threatened, particularly when an international treaty or bilateral agreement has been arranged through the State Department, and then handed to another agency for execution.

One major dilemma now facing the Reagan Administration, for example, is what to do about the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA) in Vienna. Faced with the need to make cuts of over $300 million — almost 25 per cent — in its proposed 1982 budget by the new Administration, NSF decided to eliminate the $3 million US contribution to IIASA for which it is at present responsible.

Unless this decision is changed by the Administration, IIASA would have to close in 1983. Scientists claim that the institute has been carrying out some useful research, even though some express doubts about its full value. However, IIASA also provides an important channel for East/West communication.

Moves are therefore under way to discover whether the closure of the institute — which would anger the Austrian government considerably, since it has put a lot of money into providing facilities — can be averted. For the 1982 contribution, already committed under IIASA's constitution, NSF is working out whether it can provide money from other sources within the foundation.

Recognizing that the problems raised by the controversy over the international solar polar mission and IIASA contributions have deep roots in beliefs about the proper political role of the federal government in support for science, the State Department has set up an inter-agency committee to discuss possible guidelines for the future. Two suggestions it is likely to discuss are that OMB should be presented, early in its budget cycle, with an overall picture of overseas implications. The other is that the State Department itself might be given funds for supporting international scientific activities which it feels have important political functions, but might not generate the required support within an individual agency.

At the same time the agencies themselves are looking closely at their own policies and procedures. Few solutions are in sight, but one consolation to US scientists is that, as a result of recent events, the whole issue has been placed high on the State Department's agenda at an early stage and is already receiving close attention from what are usually described as the "top levels" of government.

David Dickson

Anxieties of Oslo secrets trial

Stockholm

A trial whose outcome could affect freedom of research is being held in Oslo. Two defendants are at present accused of revealing information prejudicial to Norway's security. But this is not a normal spy case: the defendants collected the information exclusively from public sources as part of a research project funded by the Norwegian Research Council for Science and the Humanities, and there is no suggestion that they intended to pass it on to any foreign power.

The two men are Nils Petter Gleditsch of the Oslo International Peace Research Institute (PRIO) and Owen Wilkes, a New Zealander formerly at PRIO and now at the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. They maintain that freedom of research should be upheld, and that they have not in any case revealed information which could damage Norway's security. They say that what they have discovered from open sources, a foreign power (that is, the Soviet Union) could investigate in far more detail with intelligence satellites. They conclude that the Norwegian government's reticence about military affairs is keeping secrets from the Norwegians themselves, not from the Russians.

The history of the case is this: Gleditsch and Wilkes published their research report, "Intelligence installations in Norway: their number, location, function and legality" in February 1979 as part of a PRIO project (still continuing) on the location and functions of military facilities in Norway. They timed the publication to coincide with another trial then being held, in which three Norwegians — a publishing house executive and two journalists who had collected the names of Norwegian secret servicemen — were accused of collecting information which could damage the country's national security. Gleditsch and Wilkes wanted to show how easy it is to obtain from open sources information considered to be very sensitive.

The prosecutor general ordered an investigation into the Gleditsch–Wilkes report, and in March 1979, the chief of

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