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Disunited nations in outer space

The UN conference on space technology opened in Vienna earlier this week is certain not to ask the questions that need answering. So should conferences like these take place at all?

The United Nations conference on the peaceful uses of outer space, which opened this week in Vienna, seems to have set off on a familiar track (see page 595). It is right and proper, but also predictable, that the Austrian Foreign Minister, Dr Willibald Pahr, should have opened the proceedings with a declaration that the most urgent need is somehow to rid what the United Nations calls outer space of all military connotations. Better this, it may be thought, than that the keynote address should be yet another plea that the benefits of remote sensing satellites (whatever they may be) should be made freely accessible to all sovereign states that think they have a need of them, or which are just curious to know what they look like from aloft. Certainly it is far better than that the members of the group of seventy-seven, the developing countries whose interests in development are a part but only a small part (witness present anxieties about the Lebanon) of the proper objectives of the United Nations, should set up a howl that they do not have the direct-broadcasting satellites to put into the geosynchronous orbits with which the United Nations (through the International Telecommunications Union) endowed them in 1979. Even so, it is a serious question for the United Nations to consider whether conferences like these should continue to be held.

None of this is to suggest that the military use of space technology is not a serious problem. The past few years have shown all too well that the contrary is the truth. The major powers, principally the United States and the Soviet Union, are already dependent on satellites for much of their military intelligence. Quite soon there may be systems for putting other systems out of action (see *Nature* 15 July, p.211). And the process seems destined to catch on. Other states (France, for example) will soon be up there too. Other systems, perhaps laser weapons, will be added to the orbital ironmongery. Moreover, there seems no doubt that once these systems have multiplied the danger that they will be used provocatively if not in anger will be substantial. The trouble, unfortunately, is that no amount of speech-making at United Nations conferences will bring the perpetrators of these new devices to an agreement on restraint. Only hard-headed negotiations between parties willing that negotiations should take place could arrive at such a conclusion. Some international organization could, it is true, help to bring those who now use orbits for military (but not destructive) purposes to heel by keeping a close watch on what they are about, and then publishing the results. This is what governments such as that of Sweden have been urging. Unfortunately, for the United Nations to act in such a sense, either the political backing of the major powers or the financial backing of the others would be necessary. Neither is likely to be forthcoming.

So what, in these circumstances, can the latest conference hope to accomplish? By the end of next week, the delegations will no doubt be hard at work on the draft of a declaration so stuffed with anodyne pieties that even hard-headed governments will be shamed into endorsement. One certain ingredient in the communique — would that this prediction were proved wrong — will be that the benefits of telecommunications by satellite, the only commercially proven benefit of these devices, should be more freely available and more widely shared. Ever since the disastrous United Nations Conference on Science, Technology and Development (also at Vienna) in 1979, the notion has become entrenched that it is somehow inequitable that high technology should be exploited first by highly developed industrialized states. But this clamour is entirely mistaken. If industrialized states are to be persuaded not to win some commercial benefit from their high technology, how can they be asked (as they should be asked) to throw open their domestic markets more freely to imports from the developing countries?

This contradiction lies at the heart of much of what the United Nations seeks to accomplish in these periodic and increasingly gigantic conferences. Their form ensures that all parties go away frustrated — the high-technology states because they have been shamed into promises whose only saving grace is that they are empty, the others because they believe (or pretend) that the promises mean what the words say. The outcome, mutual despair, may be as dangerous as the militarization of space over which Dr Pahr wrung his hands this week. Has the time come when somebody should say no to the next conference (on nuclear energy next year) or at least to the one after that?

Gamekeeper turned poacher

The British need a new university boss; herewith some nominations and a job description.

Dr Edward Parkes seems a glutton for punishment. Most of his spell as chairman of the University Grants Committee has been spent in forcing arbitrary government economies on British universities. His decision now to quit is understandable, and would have been forgiven at any time in the past few years. His decision to be instead the next vice-chancellor of the University of Leeds is more surprising. Is it self-sacrificing heroism, a wish to be seen lying on the bed of nails that universities accuse him of having fashioned for them? Or bravado, an ambition to show that the economies are not so bad after all? Either way, the University of Leeds, already distinguished among British universities not merely for its academic strength but, these days even more important, for the strong regional loyalty that sustains it, must count itself lucky. For a university to have as its chief officer someone who knows how the grants committee functions must be an advantage of some kind. Parkes is unlikely to use his position to win extra leverage for Leeds with the grants committee, although many of his new colleagues are hoping that he is not that straight. But at the worst, he will be able to help his new university to understand more readily than others what may lie behind the inscrutable instructions that issue from time to time from the committee he is now leaving.

For the British government, Parkes's departure now is probably more of an embarrassment than an opportunity to fill the empty office with a kind of stool-pigeon or Uncle Tom. Not that there is a shortage of potential successors to Parkes. Sir Alec Merrison, vice-chancellor at Bristol, would suit quite well, even if Sir Peter Swinnerton-Dyer from Cambridge would be more interesting. Lord Flowers, rector of Imperial College London, would be a strong appointment, but would the government welcome a grants committee chairman free to speak his mind in the House of Lords? Lord Swann, under-employed since quitting as head of Oriel College, Oxford, a year ago, is similarly

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