

Soviet Antarctica

When will the miners move south?

LAST month's meeting in Wellington, New Zealand, of representatives of the fourteen signatory states of the Antarctic Treaty reported "good progress" towards the establishment of an authority to control future commercial activity in Antarctica. But some of the most important problems have yet to be solved. According to Mr Chris Beeby, chairman of the New Zealand meeting, the greatest difficulty is that of reconciling the positions of the seven states which claim sovereignty over some sector of the Antarctic both among themselves and with those which do not. Some spirited clashes must be expected on the way to a final formula before the treaty falls due for renewal in 1991.

Before then, an agreement will also have to be reached on the exploitation of mineral resources in Antarctica, on which the treaty as it stands says nothing. Although the exploitation of Antarctic marine resources, krill for example, is regulated by a convention signed in 1980, the simple extension of this precedent to the regulation of mineral exploitation of land will be complicated by territorial claims but also by arguments such as those which dogged the Law of the Sea negotiations.

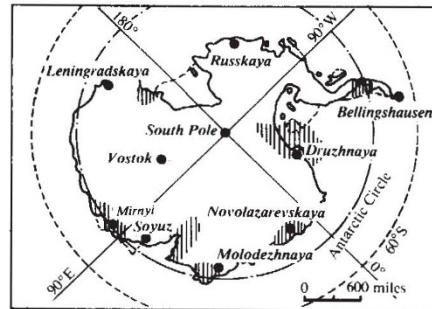
Neither the Soviet Union nor the United States claims territorial rights, but the Soviet delegation at the Law of the Sea negotiations consistently opposed US views on seabed mining beyond the continental shelf on the grounds that the "capitalists" were seeking to stake their claims before the developing countries had evolved the necessary technology. Similar reasoning is likely to dictate the Soviet stance on Antarctica. If seeking to become the guardian of the developing countries, by espousing the status of Antarctica as part of the common heritage, however, the Soviet Union will face competition from within the developing world now that India has become so active in Antarctic affairs (see *Nature* 3 February, p.362).

The Soviet Union was a relative latecomer to Antarctic exploration, although as successor to the tsarist empire, it can claim a link with the first definite

sighting of the Antarctic continent, by Bellingshausen and Lazarev in 1821. The first Soviet expedition was not despatched until 1956, but for the past 27 years, the Soviet Union has maintained a permanent presence in Antarctica. It now has seven permanent bases (see map), supplemented by occasional "summer" bases. The latest of these, Soyuz, was established last December in an area which is of "particular geological interest", according to Dr Garick Grikurov, one of the main organizers of the Soviet Antarctic programme. Dr Grikurov has said that the area contains promising deposits of commercially important minerals.

During the past 25 years, Soviet teams have mapped and carried out geological surveys of a sizeable area of Antarctica, paying particular attention to the "oases" — regions of ice-free rock. But the large size of the Soviet expeditions — the present one has a staff of more than 1,000, although this may include the crews of the five research and support ships and aircraft pilots — means that the mineralogical

surveys are only one part of a broad research spectrum. One major project due to be completed this year is a deep drilling experiment designed to take ice cores from a site near the Vostok icecap station down to bedrock (a depth of some 3,500 m).



Areas where the Soviet Union has carried out detailed geological surveys

Although the Soviet emphasis remains scientific, it is unlikely that Soviet planners are blind to the commercial possibilities of their mineralogical and geological findings. And when the time comes for the commercial exploitation of Antarctica, experience gained in mining in Siberia and the far north should give the Soviet Union a flying start.

Vera Rich

Sizewell B inquiry

Appeal fund swelled by dignitaries

THE Sizewell B Appeal Fund, set up in a flurry of activity only three weeks ago, now has seven distinguished trustees to oversee applications for financial support from objectors at the public inquiry now taking place at Snape in Suffolk into the proposal to build a pressurised water reactor at Sizewell, also in Suffolk. Among the trustees are Professor Sir Hans Kornberg, master of Christ's College, Cambridge, and Professor Paul Matthews, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Bath.

The Appeal Committee has set itself the task of raising "at least" £0.5 million to support objectors at the inquiry. Bitter protests followed the decision in September by Energy Secretary Nigel Lawson not to allow the use of government funds to support objectors to the plans of the Central Electricity Generating Board (CEGB) to build a reactor at Sizewell, and some groups were forced to drop their case. On the first day of the inquiry, CEGB chairman Sir Walter Marshall, during a remarkable spontaneous walk-about debate with demonstrating protesters, said he would be "delighted" if a public appeal to fund the objectors succeeded in raising money.

Mr Edward Irving, a barrister and a Suffolk county councillor, took up the gauntlet, and on the 15 January Lord Kearton, former chairman of Courtaulds and a Fellow of the Royal Society, agreed to act as a trustee. Since then, some of the trustees have made it clear that they support CEGB's case, but feel the chronic



lack of funds for the objectors is a denial of natural justice. CEGB has already spent an estimated £5 million in preparing its case.

Mr Irving admits that, with the inquiry already under way, it is probably rather late in the day to start raising funds for the objectors, but he is confident that although no further basic research will be possible, the fund will enable protesters to raise some additional points. Professor Kornberg pointed out that at no recent important public inquiry had objectors won the day, and that the massive imbalance of funds between the sides could have had something to do with it. There is also the hope that a better organization for the objectors could actually speed up the inquiry — which is likely to last for at least six months.

Tim Beardsley

Oil search denied

SOME consternation was caused at the Wellington meeting by the news that Sir Peter Scott son of explorer Captain Robert Scott, and a naturalist, had accused the governments of Australia, France, Japan and West Germany by telex of making plans to search for oil on the Antarctic shelf, a charge hotly denied by the government of Australia. Scott said on the telephone last week that his information had come from a confidential source, and that he was "delighted" to be told that it was wrong. □