

content of any agreement that may emerge is still a matter for conjecture. What is going on?

The straws in the wind are several. The Soviet Foreign Minister in London last week referred to the summit meeting as if it had already been arranged, apparently anticipating events. At the Stockholm meeting within the framework of the Helsinki agreements on European security, the Soviet Union has dropped its previous demands that air movements should be notified as part of the package of "confidence-building measures" on which the negotiators have been working since the beginning of 1985; now there is a chance of something to be signed at Vienna in November. Less formally, the Pugwash organization seems to have had a constructive meeting in Moscow earlier in the month, leaving many of the participants with the impression that the Soviet side is both eager for a test ban and willing to be flexible about the terms in which it might be drawn. Then President Reagan has made an encouraging speech, saying that there is much that might be done with the most recent set of proposals to the bilateral negotiations at Geneva, suggesting that an agreement may in due course emerge. Why all this sweetness and light?

The simple explanation is that both the Soviet and the US leaders wish there to be a summit, but that the Soviet side is determined that it will not allow itself this time to return empty-handed, as in many ways it did from last year's meeting at Geneva. And the practical question is whether there is a deal of some kind that would satisfy Mr Gorbachev without sticking in Mr Reagan's throat (or the throats of his colleagues in the US administration). In many ways, guessing what the package will contain is like a children's nursery game, except that it seems clear that there can be no substantial agreement on the main issues at Geneva — reductions of strategic weapons, regulation of intermediate-range missiles and the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI). So what else? Agreement to ratify unratified treaties, such as the threshold test-ban treaty whose provisions require the exchange of seismic data relevant to the monitoring of tests, would be a sensible step forward — one that should have been taken several years ago. But the Soviet Union, with its unilateral moratorium on testing still in force after nine months, seems anxious to secure substantial improvement in this field. That is apparently why so much attention is being paid to the several variations on the test-ban theme suggested at an informal meeting in Washington earlier in the year — comprehensive test bans whose start is delayed, or which may be interrupted occasionally. It should not hurt either side to put together a package of proposals along these lines. The obvious snag is that such a package would, by definition, not touch the centre of the problem of arms control, the regulation of major strategic weapons already deployed.

That is why the two participants in the summit should be most of all concerned to reach a new understanding on the principles by which future arms negotiations will be conducted. Too much has changed in the past few years for most people's comfort. President Reagan, who came to office nearly six years ago with a long string of cogent complaints against the then existing agreements (SALT II in particular), but who found himself forced by events and pressure from his electorate to take arms control more seriously, has now further muddied the waters by suggesting that SDI seriously offers a way round the present strategic doctrines based on mutual deterrence by the threat of a catastrophic nuclear exchange. But the plain truth is that SDI will never be as effective as its enthusiasts claim, and will probably yield nothing more than a space-borne early warning system whose existence will not substantially change the present strategic balance (if that is what it is). So the summit will be a wasted opportunity if it does not yield an understanding of the ways in which SDI has changed (or, rather, left unchanged) the rules of arms control. For pride's sake, President Reagan would need such an understanding to be limited in time, but that should be no problem. □

Research directions

The British government plans to evaluate its research. But there are pitfalls.

NOT much has yet been heard from Mr Kenneth Baker, the successor in the British government to Sir Keith Joseph at the Department of Education and Science, about his plans for the administration of research. Perhaps inevitably, most of his time seems to have been spent on the urgent problems of how to restore contentment and achievement to the schools, whose bruising dispute with the government over pay, working conditions and career prospects has left deep scars. Yet Mr Baker cannot overlook the problems thrown up in the past few years by the government's insistence that the costs of reorganizing (or cutting) the research councils should be met from within a static budget. Already, the political calendar has reached the point at which final estimates for the next financial year are being drawn up. Moreover, unless Mr Baker is careful (and quick), he may find that this important part of his parish has been taken away from him.

That is one implication of the decision, announced at the end of last month, that there will be a unit within the Cabinet Office for the assessment of science, technology and the relationship between them. The plan is that there should be a small group of people, run by a senior (but not too senior) civil servant, with the task of throwing light on the relationship between research spending and such benefits as may ensue. The hope is that the government will then be better placed to decide which expenditures on research will yield the greater benefits. Although the unit will be chiefly concerned with what government departments at present spend on research on their own account, and may thus be a means by which some external appraisal of the civil value of defence research is at last attained, it is inevitable that the boundaries will be fuzzy, and that the new unit's opinions will overlap with those of other organizations, the Advisory Board for the Research Councils in particular. Given its place within the bureaucracy, the new unit could powerfully influence the pattern of all publicly sponsored research.

So will the unit come to sensible conclusions? Even the passage of time may not be enough to tell, for the new unit (which still lacks a head) will almost certainly operate behind closed doors. And because its existence springs from the British government's well-known impatience with the notion that there is no way of telling in advance what investments in research are likely to be profitable, there can be no assurance that the unit will recognize as impediments to its work the two serious objections to over-closely directed research: the circumstance that successful innovation requires that companies should be both technically well-equipped and well-placed in the market and the temptation (from which civil servants are not immune) to be swept up by fashion. Mr Baker's own first claim on public attention, his advocacy of information technology as a means not merely of making Britain prosperous but of curing unemployment at the same time, was plainly timely in the early years of this government, but has not produced the expected benefits for the simple reason that Britain lacks sufficient technical skill to make full use of the opportunities that abound in information technology. It is especially shocking that the University Grants Committee, in its recent set of circulars to British universities, should have had to explain that the annual intake of students to engineering schools cannot be increased more quickly for lack of suitable school-leavers.

That is but one illustration of the truth that there is more to the problem of winning benefit from research than the backing of good ideas with sufficient funds. The most obvious pitfall for the new Cabinet Office unit is that it will be blind to pitfalls such as these. The danger is especially great because the unit's work will not necessarily be public. Even at this late stage, there may be a case for changing that. □