Faltering steps towards European/US cooperation

- Commission vice-president jumps the gun
- IBM feeling unwanted in Europe

Washington

IN an announcement that left both US and the European Communities (EC) officials at a loss for details, the EC's commissioner for research said last week that he had called on the White House to join in plans for a new US-EC science task force. EC commission vice-president Filippo Pandolfi told participants at a two-day meeting at the US National Academy of Science on EC science that he had asked the President's Science Advisor, D. Allan Bromley, to consider establishing a permanent joint committee to set standards for scientific cooperation between the United States and the EC.

Bromley said he had "agreed to look into" the proposal, but pointed out that he has already set up his own advisory structure to coordinate cooperation between the United States and the EC. Because of the different and sometimes contradictory ways that Europe and the United States run science, Bromley said he "suspects that we will end up with slightly different mechanisms on both sides of the Atlantic". Soon after taking office last summer, Bromley decided to revamp the Federal Coordinating Council on Science, Engineering, and Technology (FCCSET) to include, among other things, an inter-agency working group on EC science and technology issues. Although he did not shut the door on the possibility of a joint task force, Bromley emphasized that he was counting on his own advisory and policy-setting groups to "play an important role in developing an effective bridge" between the United States and the Communities.

EC officials generally distanced themselves from Pandolfi's initiative. Gilbert Fayl, the EC's science and technology counsellor in Washington, says that Pandolfi "expressed his own views" in offering the proposal and was not necessarily reflecting EC policy. The possibility of formal cooperation has come up in the past, but is not clear if the EC have been given the authority by the members to make such an agreement.

Other issues discussed at the academy meeting included the impact of the changes in Eastern Europe on EC programmes. EC officials say that rebuilding the "science infrastructure" will be a substantial part of an evolving initiative known as the Poland-Hungary Assistance for Economic Restructuring (PHARE) which includes economic stabilization support of \$1,000 million to each of the

two countries.

Bromley said that several Eastern European science delegations have recently visited the White House to review current scientific agreements. But he stressed that significant scientific exchanges between the United States and Eastern Europe must still cross a cultural and economic divide.

The movement of scientists and technology between East and West is expected to throw off the balance of many EC programmes in the coming years. Many researchers are already abandoning the neglected universities of Eastern Europe in favour of Western institutions. Meanwhile, EC nations are gearing up to ship industrial technology to the newly democratized Eastern European nations. The consequence of more researchers competing for scarce basic science resources in the West, while increasing amounts of money move East, is that EC science may be hard-pressed to show any real gains in the near future, says National Science Foundation analyst Richard Bradshaw. But although EC-supported research accounts for only four per cent of the total research and development spending of the EC nations, the spending is "leveraged" by its concentration on consortia and collaborative ventures where a modest investment allows access to broad areas of state-of-the-art research. In microelectronics especially, EC projects are becoming increasingly attractive to US companies, according to Bradshaw.

To get full, equal-partner access to EC-supported research, a US company must have established manufacturing, marketing, and research and development operations within the European Communities. So far, it has been primarily US electronics companies that have made that commitment.

But at the academy meeting, Jean-Jacques Duby, science and technology director for IBM-European, complained that meeting the criteria has not translated into equal-partner status for IBM.

Duby said that although IBM is now allowed to compete for access to projects, it finds that many of its proposals are being rejected. "The EC asks outside experts to decide on proposals, but most of them come from European-held companies, and none come from IBM", he said. Foreign-owned companies have "slightly less equal rights" to participate in EC research, he claimed.

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FUSION RESEARCH

New panel to decide future of US programme

Washington

THE US fusion research programme, which includes both traditional 'tokamak' reactor designs and more novel laser-driven 'inertial confinement' devices, is to be re-evaluated by an advisory panel set up last week by the Department of Energy (DOE). The panel is expected offer its advice on recent controversial attempts to shift the balance between research on the two techniques.

Former DOE energy research director Robert Hunter caused trouble in Congress and the fusion physics community last year by proposing to shift money from the magnetic fusion programme in order to accelerate research into laser-driven inertial-confinement designs, which evolved out of nuclear weapons research. Hunter's move was angrily interpreted in Congress as an attempt to change national policy without proper consultation (see *Nature* 341, 476; 1989). James Decker, now acting energy research director in Hunter's place, assured a House appropriations subcommittee last week that DOE secretary has an "open mind" on the future of fusion research, and "is not married to the Hunter plan". H. Guyford Steyer, who has served as both presidential science adviser and director of the National Science Foundation, will chair the DOE panel. For the time being, Decker told the congressional committee, the present balance between magnetic and inertial-confinement would be maintained. But when the DOE review was completed in September this year, the 1991 fusion budget would "be revised as appropriate," Decker said.

Last month a National Academy of Sciences (NAS) panel released an interim report on the DOE programme that recommends against the immediate pursuit of energy production with laser-driven fusion techniques. The NAS report, produced at the request of Congress, is a review only of the technical progress and prospects of the US fusion effort; the DOE panel, on the other hand, is being asked to make policy recommendations based on economic, political, and scientific considerations.

The NAS panel believes that inertial confinement techniques have a long way to go before they can form the basis of an energy-production technology, and therefore encourages DOE to maintain laser fusion research as part of a weapons programme. Although that conclusion would seem to discourage DOE from running a direct competition between inertial-confinement and magnetic fusion to find the most promising approach to energy production - the strategy Hunter had proposed - the NAS panel stopped short of making a comparison between the programmes.

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