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On Working with the Soviets

Out of the Brezhnev-Nixon handshake cementing détente in Soviet-American relations in 1972 has come a brisk traffic of shuttle diplomacy in science and technology. A wide array of agreements for joint studies and exchanges of information are being carried out, each with counterpart Soviet and American working parties. As the original bilateral agreement comes up for renewal next year, how should the American scientific and technological community assess the value of the work accomplished to date, and the merits of Round Two?

One way to go at it is to total the runs, hits, and errors and announce which side is "ahead." This is how the politics of Soviet-American relations have been played since World War II, and it is questionable whether the world is safer or happier. If détente in scientific and technical affairs is to be treated as an arena for competition and scored by the rules of competition, then we have strayed from the announced motive of cooperation. Whatever may be said for competition in the spheres of defense and power politics, it is no standard for judging a *process* designed to find common ground between two powerful systems.

As one casts a critical eye over the universe of the cooperative projects in science and technology, it becomes clear that the majority have progressed quite well, while a few others are struggling. In some cases it has been hard to find a handle, in others there arose semantic and conceptual problems which took time and patience to iron out, and there were the difficulties which always arise when busy people on each side can give only fractional time to the work.

The basis for the agreements was equivalency. From the start, it was to be a fifty-fifty proposition, with each side getting comparable benefits. The U.S. side has not relaxed that rule, and the result is that the accounts appear to be balanced. But equivalency is in large measure a matter for judgment rather than precise scoring, and the bottom line can always be a subject for argument. Moreover, when two such different systems try to get together, they come to the table with different premises and constraints. These do not disappear with a handshake. Equivalency comes slowly, stage by stage. It is a point to be kept in mind by détente-watchers.

The exchange has been especially lively with respect to the comparisons of national science policies. While the Soviet practice is to build scientific research and development into their macroeconomic plans for periods of as much as 15 years, keying it to upwards of 200 priority problems in each 5-year planning segment, their R & D is not locked in so firmly that goals and strategies cannot be changed on short notice. The Soviet passion for planning provides more continuity and stability for science than we do, and their policy recognizes the investment nature of R & D in a way that ours never has. Where we seem to do better is in applying research results under conditions of market choice and risk, even without the help of an explicit emphasis on large doses of R & D in macroeconomic policy. With all the basic differences, both systems seem to produce very good research and innovation.

As the American and Soviet working groups have learned how to get along, the momentum has picked up. Experts are traveling in both directions, previously unavailable data are being gathered and evaluated, and case studies of comparative technologies, research and innovation, and problem-solving are being exchanged. Recent meetings in both countries have been unusually productive, suggesting rising confidence on both sides. It is not all a bed of roses, for there are some bare patches. But the prognosis is decidedly better than it was even a year ago. All things considered, the case for Round Two is a good one.—WILLIAM D. CAREY