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EDITORIAL CORRESPONDENCE: 1515 Massachusetts Ave., NW, Washington, D.C. 20005. Phone: 202-387-7171. Cable: Advancesci, Washington. Copies of "Instructions for Contributors" can be obtained from the editorial office. See also page 7, *Science*, 4 July 1969. ADVERTISING CORRESPONDENCE: Rm. 1740, 11 W. 42 St., New York, N.Y. 10036. Phone: 212-PE-6-1858.

Amchitka and International Regulation

The dispute over the AEC's plans for a series of high-yield underground explosions in the Aleutian island of Amchitka has focused on a variety of important questions. As is too often the case, however, one of the most important perspectives on the issue, that of the longer-term international implications of such activities in an increasingly technological environment, has been largely lacking.

The nation has been exposed to technical debates about the likelihood of triggering earthquakes or releasing radioactivity, the degree of confidence one should place in AEC calculations, the importance of the experiment to national security, and the relevance of the views of those protesting the shot at home or abroad. These questions are pertinent, but what we also should be discussing is how we can prepare for a world in which many nations, large and small, will have the power to cause sudden and perhaps irretrievable damage on a global scale. Today such power is reserved for a very small number of nations. But that period is rapidly passing (it has already passed if we include the power to change man's environment gradually through the side effects of technological civilization).

One can only imagine the fury and frustration in the United States if Communist China were planning similar underground explosions that carried some believable risk of destruction in this country. Yet it is precisely that kind of situation that will arise in the future, and that exists today from the perspective of other nations viewing the United States. Somehow, we have to begin to create the international mechanisms and the attitudes toward them that will allow necessary and safe work to go forward but will be able to prevent irresponsible or dangerous use of physical power. Such international mechanisms must have, at the least, available independent expertise, established norms, experience, and confidence of governments earned through objective actions over a period of years.

When are we going to begin to build such mechanisms? Notwithstanding the plethora of international organizations today, there exist only the rudiments of this international capability, and little interest on the part of governments to strengthen them. The United States has the greatest leverage and the greatest responsibility. It is time that we, in our own national interest, start to establish the international precedents to demonstrate that no nation should be allowed, on its own decision, to proceed with actions carrying an appreciable risk to others or to the global environment. If there is little risk in these planned tests, let that fact be established on an international basis, rather than nationally by a governmental agency that, by definition, is an interested party (and is essentially its own "regulatory commission" to boot). The political and technical problems of such international evaluation would be very great, but we must start sometime.

Thus, this Aleutian test program should be seen in context. It is not unique. Rather, it is one more illustration of why new technology must be paralleled by substantial changes in national attitudes toward the development of effective international machinery, and toward a real appreciation of the increasing constraints on independence of national action.—EUGENE B. SKOLNIKOFF, *Professor of Political Science, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge*