

Cooperation in Space

Moscow's decision to participate in next month's international conference on satellite communications is another of the growing number of recent signs that the Kremlin is seeking to improve its relations with the West, and particularly the United States. The Soviet Union will limit itself to sending an observer to the Washington meeting; yet, in the context of the conditions set for the conference, even that degree of representation suggests that Moscow is having second thoughts about its earlier project for creating a world-wide Intersputnik satellite network to rival the existing Intelstat system.

It was evident from the outset that the Soviet project, if realized, would create needless duplication and expense. It was also apparent that political rather than economic motives lay behind the Intersputnik scheme. The present hint of a retreat therefore has political as well as economic significance.

There have been other recent signs of a new Kremlin look at the wisdom of space cooperation. Last month's Apollo 8 was treated more generously in the Soviet press than any earlier American space accomplishment, though Pravda and Izvestia still have a long way to go before they match the extended treatment

American newspapers routinely accord Soviet space advances. And published Soviet discussions now show more awareness of the enormity of the task facing all humanity in seeking to explore the cosmos and to exploit the possibilities that exist in space for serving earth's needs.

These indications of a positive shift in Kremlin thinking seem to enhance hopes that President Nixon will have an opportunity for creative diplomacy and action of the kind he envisaged in his Inaugural Address. Thought might be given, for example, to inviting Moscow to designate a Soviet astronaut to participate in an Apollo flight late this year or early next year. Or Washington might suggest that the United States and the Soviet Union coordinate their programs of planetary exploration with one nation, say, having primary responsibility for studying Venus and the other Mars. With the landing of men on the moon now probably only months away it is certainly not too early for the two nations that have pioneered most actively in space to discuss concrete means for involving the United Nations directly in the future exploration and exploitation of the moon, as well as of the planets when men reach them.