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Scientists Urged to Ease Threats of Global War

May 27, 1985 | LEE DYE, Times Science Writer

The threat of global war is so great that people all over the world need to rethink their ideas about national security, scientists were told here Sunday as the 151st national meeting of the American Assn. for the Advancement of Science got under way.

The role of the scientist in matters of war is a major theme in the weeklong conference.

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John D. Marks, executive director of the Washington-based Search for Common Ground, chaired a workshop session designed to challenge scientists to think more deeply about the causes of international conflict. The free-swinging discussion brought spirited rebuttals, however, from some participants who questioned the value of such discussions in this country if the people of the Soviet Union do not have an equal opportunity to bring about change in their country's posture.

"Nothing can happen as long as the Iron Curtain remains in place," one scientist said with more than a little hostility.

Marks, however, said that the thirst for peace is universal and that the greatest obstacle lies in attitudes toward how that goal can be achieved.

"If you scratch deep enough, people want the same thing," said Marks, who has presented the same program in several countries. "But our political process doesn't get us there."

The political process, however, can have a major impact, he said.

Marks cited the change in attitudes toward China after President Richard M. Nixon's historic visit to that country in 1972. Before the President's trip,

Marks said, China represented the "yellow peril." After the trip, China was viewed in this country as an ally that could do no wrong.

China has not changed, he said. Only our perception of it has changed.

"We were looking at it through a new prism," he said.

"How can we do that with the Soviets?" he asked.

An anthropologist in the audience suggested that although the process worked with China, it might not work with the Soviet Union. It worked with China, she said, because the President's trip helped turn China against a much more powerful enemy, the Soviet Union.

Common Enemy

It might be more effective, she added, to find a common enemy that would unite the United States and the Soviet Union in the need to overpower a far greater threat.

Perhaps, Marks suggested, that threat could be the possession of nuclear arms by radicals in such countries as Iran.

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