Curbs on Technology Exports Hurt by Gaps in Enforcement

By EDWARD T. POUND
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WASHINGTON, Oct 13 — Despite the growing concern of Government officials that sophisticated American technology and arms are being illegally shipped to unfriendly nations, including the Soviet Union, the Federal agencies charged with administering the export control laws remain understaffed and their enforcement efforts are spotty.

According to Reagan Administration officials, the Government makes relatively few inspections of outbound shipments, prosecutions are rare, penalties are comparatively light and there is a backlog of unfinished investigations.

The problem of controlling illegal exports has been underscored recently by reports of the activities of Edwin P. Wilson and Frank E. Terpil. Mr. Wilson and Mr. Terpil, former agents of the Central Intelligence Agency, were indicted last year on charges of illegally exporting explosives to Libya and are under investigation for other suspected violations of the export laws.

Problem for Several Decades

Officials in the Commerce Department and the Customs Services said that the problem dated back several decades. But they said it had become more severe because of transfers of "critical" technology that could be used to improve the military abilities of unfriendly nations.

The officials said that they were especially worried about illegal sales of restricted technology to the Soviet Union because the military strength of the United States rests to a large extent on its technological superiority over the Russians.

Accordingly, they said, the Government is developing new ways to stop the flow of illegal exports. Measures include better coordination, improved sharing of intelligence and staff increases. Nonetheless, they said the effort continued to be plagued by insufficient investigative and inspection resources.

Administration officials said that the Soviet Union had stepped up covert operations in this country and abroad in an attempt to obtain technology that can be used for military purposes. Among

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