

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 65NEWSWEEK
14 May 1979orig SALT

THE SALT DELAYS

During a visit to Iowa sixteen months ago, Jimmy Carter ventured the guess that a SALT II treaty with the Soviet Union would be completed "in a few weeks." Last week, the President was off to Iowa again, and again he declared that "we are at the final stages of negotiation [on] SALT."

In what has become a familiar litany, other American officials said that an agreement in principle was nearly at hand. But although Washington and Moscow clearly wanted a new accord on strategic arms limitation, taking the last step had proved to be far more difficult than either side expected.

The basic provisions of the new treaty have been established for two years, ever since President Carter abandoned his futile attempt to make major changes in the 1974 treaty outline agreed to at Vladivostok by Gerald Ford and Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev. In essence, SALT II will initially set a ceiling of 2,400 missiles and bombers for each side, of which 1,320 can have multiple nuclear warheads (MIRV's). But the treaty is more than ten times as long as SALT I and is vastly more complicated, since it attempts to restrict the quality of nuclear weapons, not just the raw numbers. And in recent months, a number of unexpected last-minute problems have cropped up. Among them:

THE FINE PRINT: "The last 10 per cent is always the toughest to negotiate, especially with the Soviets," a veteran Western diplomat in Moscow said last week. Just when the treaty seemed to be finished in December, the Russians proposed that cruise missiles be limited to one warhead each. The U.S. finally agreed, but by then a number of items that had once been considered wrapped up began to come untied. When Secretary of State Cyrus Vance and

Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin meet this week, they will try to resolve what appears to be the last issue. SALT II limits MIRV's to ten warheads each. The Soviets want to exempt from that limit dummy warheads used to confuse defenses. Even if that question is laid to rest, however, there is no guarantee that some new problem won't emerge.

VERIFICATION: The loss of two U.S. monitoring stations in Iran has persuaded many senators that the Russians can cheat on SALT II if they want to. The verification issue got fresh attention last week, when U.S. officials confirmed news reports that two Americans convicted of spying in 1977 had sold Moscow data on U.S. satellite systems that monitor Soviet strategic moves.

At a news conference, Carter promised again that SALT II would be "adequately verified from the first day it is effective." The Soviets know, he added, that "if we ever detect any violation . . . it might very well escalate into a nuclear confrontation." As it happens, the Soviets are being unusually cooperative these days (box, page 65). Recently, they promised that they would not encode electronic data from their missile tests if that impedes U.S. verification of SALT II.

BREZHNEV'S HEALTH: Strangely, the Soviet President's recent illness has not slowed down the arms negotiations; in fact, responses to U.S. proposals are arriving more quickly than ever before. "It used to take a week or so, and now it's been taking only two or three days," says a top Administration official. But Brezhnev's fragile health has added a fresh complication: when and where he can hold a summit meeting with Carter to initial the treaty.

In the past two decades, Brezhnev has suffered at least two heart attacks and a stroke, according to Soviet sources. This year, he has failed visibly. His speech is so badly slurred that it is often incomprehensible, even to his longtime interpreters. His walk is a stiff-legged shuffle, and aides are constantly at his elbow, alert for a possible stumble. Brezhnev's eyes appear to have difficulty focusing. His mind seems to wander and his attention span in official meetings is said to be less than an hour. "In my opinion," said one Western diplomat in Moscow last week, "Brezhnev is in no condition to negotiate with the President of the United States or any other high official."

Originally, Carter wanted to hold five days of wide-ranging talks with Brezhnev. Now, one Administration planner frets: "Everything you hear about Brezhnev is that there's no one home upstairs. Who Carter's going to have the discussions with, I don't know." No one, apparently. The summit will probably last only two days—in mid-June, most likely—and will be limited to formalities.

The last two superpower summits occurred on Soviet soil, but now Brezhnev is incapable of a return visit to the U.S.; his doctors will not allow him to fly. For weeks, both sides have been considering neutral ground in Western Europe. Vienna is a possibility, and recently Stockholm has emerged as another front runner. In either case, Brezhnev would be assured of a relatively easy trip—and a perfunctory ceremony that could be his last hurrah.

FAY WILLEY with LARS-ERIK NELSON and
ELEANOR CLIFT in Washington
and FRED COLEMAN in Moscow