LETTER FROM FRANKFURT

Action on the NPT

Germany's new Government will probably sign the non-proliferation treaty

by Ted Shoemaker

Germany's new liberal regime, with Socialist Willy Brandt as chancellor, is expected to be just as science-minded as its predecessor. But there will be shifts in emphasis as a result of the Sept. 28 election.

One of its most conspicuous early actions probably will be the signing, after long postponement, of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty (SN: 2/22, p. 184).

This move could have far-reaching results. It could bring other recalcitrant European nations into line. It could damage or destroy EURATOM, the European agency that promotes nuclear development. And it could be worrisome to German science and industry.

The NPT has been a thorny problem for the Germans, and was a hotly debated election issue. It is not that Germans are eager to have their country join the nuclear club. And they certainly don't want club membership extended to any other non-nuclear nation. But they also know they must approach this treaty with great care; they have a lot to lose if they don't.

This is an unusual situation. Most countries have little to lose. They either already have a good nuclear deterrent or probably can't get one.

But there are a few countries without nuclear weapons—Germany, Italy, Holland, Sweden, Japan, India and several others—in a unique position: They have nuclear-based industries and research programs, potentially of great importance to them.

Their positions thus are somewhat like those of France and Red China, the two club members that aren't signing the NPT. They are afraid the treaty will hobble their nuclear advancement.

Germany's outgoing science minister, Gerhard Stoltenberg, complains that the treaty is too vague and inexact. He particularly objects to the lack of a clear definition of just what is, and what is not, banned under the treaty. Under Stoltenberg and former Chancellor Kurt Georg Kiesinger, the treaty would not have been approved without first settling all of the questions Brandt is willing to approach after signing.

Fissionable material is a good example of such a question. It is peaceful when used in a research reactor, warlike when used in a bomb. As far as Bonn is concerned, fissionable material is peaceful, and Germany has joined forces with Britain and Holland to build a facility for uranium enrichment (SN: 2/8, p. 150).

Germans also fear that the treaty's ambiguities will give the Russians a propaganda weapon. Unless everything is crystal clear, Moscow will be able to label just about any German nuclear activity war-like.

Then there is the question of cost. The treaty doesn't say who is to pay for the expensive monitoring system. Many countries, including Russia, feel the inspected country should foot the bill within its own territory. That means countries with numerous nuclear facilities, like Germany, must bear the lion's share of the cost of what they think is snooping that may prove detrimental to them.

The whole question of inspection is sticky and complicated. Under the treaty, the International Atomic Energy Agency in Vienna would do the monitoring. But Germany would object to such inspection within the six EURATOM countries.

The reason for the German objection is simple: France, the only club member in EURATOM, has no intention of signing the NPT. Thus, unlike its five partners, it would not have to submit to inspection. This would be a discriminatory practice, advantageous to France and out of harmony with the Common Market spirit.

And EURATOM, France included, has its own inspection system, which Germany would like to see continued. The NPT allows control by existing international bodies, subject only to verification by the IAEA. But verification is another of the vague terms Kiesinger didn't like. Some countries might interpret it to mean a second inspection.

The NPT problem is only the latest to beset EURATOM. France has been reluctant to enter new international projects, partly because it is anxious to use its idle nuclear capacity to the fullest, and partly because of its continuing economic difficulties. There has been other bickering among other members, many of whom think the NPT could be fatal to EURATOM.

Despite all the problems, Germany is expected soon to sign the treaty.

This will not be Germany's only new direction in science policy. The new Government wants to build new bridges to the East, and this will no doubt result in greater scientific cooperation with Communist countries. The Federal Government probably will also try to play a greater role in science, avoiding the duplication that has sometimes been noted between Federal and state controlled programs. (SN: 9/20, p. 252).