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Henry S.

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FOCUS Hope for Early SALT Accord

Has All But Vanished

By Henry S. Bradsher
Washington Star Staff Writer

President Carter said the other day that he has "gotten to know (the Soviets) and their attitudes much better than before on SALT" and other subjects.

Such greater understanding has inspired the new administration to postpone once again hopes for the new strategic arms limitations treaty that the Ford administration had originally planned to sign in the summer of 1975.

Carter came into office hoping that Soviet leader Leonid I. Brezhnev would make his repeatedly delayed visit to the United States for the treaty signing last summer. That happened, but Carter said in October that "within a few weeks, we will have a SALT agreement that will be the pride of this country."

But one of his negotiators in Geneva said last week that "next thing would be reasonable, but by no means certain," for concluding an agreement. Then Carter made his remark about knowing Soviet attitudes better at a news conference last Thursday.

CARTER CAME INTO office with hopes of getting a better SALT treaty than the one the Ford administration had been trying unsuccessfully to conclude.

The new president sought substantial reductions in the numbers of strategic weapons that had been tentatively agreed upon by Brezhnev and then-President Gerald R. Ford in a divostok in November 1974. Carter wanted cuts made in ways that would reduce the threat of huge Soviet land-based missiles to the inuteman force of U.S. missiles based underground across the Great Plains.

But there is now skepticism in the new administration about what can be agreed, written into a treaty, and ratified.

Much of the skepticism has developed out of attitudes in the Pentagon that find a loud echo in some Capitol Hill offices. The most active office has been that of Sen. Henry M. Jackson, D-Wash., but enough other senators are concerned about the developing SALT II agreement to raise serious questions of a treaty's winning approval by two-thirds of the Senate.

A PRELIMINARY OUTLINE of the new treaty came out of Secretary of State Cyrus R. Vance's third round of SALT negotiations with Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei A. Gromyko last September. Although it was fairly close to the 1974 agreement, thus representing an administration retreat from many of its early hopes, it contained enough controversial points to raise warnings of opposition.

Despite those warnings, however, the administration has pushed ahead on the September outline. Work on it in Geneva provided the basis for optimistic headlines in last week's papers, based on a news conference by Carter's chief arms negotiator, Paul C. Warnke.

Warnke said he was "quite hopeful we can reach effective treaties" on SALT and two other arms control subjects: a nuclear explosion ban and limiting military forces in the Indian Ocean.

Such hopefulness has been repeatedly voiced by Warnke. He added a warning that "very serious problems" remain in negotiating a SALT treaty, a warning that he has also routinely tacked onto his optimism.

But Warnke declined to answer reporters' questions about when a treaty seemed likely to be concluded. It was his deputy, Ralph Earle, who suggested next spring or later.

Informed sources say difficult negotiations have been under way on a number of complex points that are

hard to reduce to agreed treaty language. One point is pinning down definitions of weapons to be covered. Another is specifying workable ways for one side to verify that the limitations are in fact observed by the other side.

The negotiations are now in Christmas recess. They will resume Jan. 9.

THE CARE IN getting precise language is explained by some sources as being at least partially a reaction to the skepticism. But it also reflects the experience of the SALT I agreement. That treaty was informally extended beyond its expiration last Oct. 3.

A controversy developed in 1975 over Soviet adherence to the 1972 treaty. They were accused by a number of leaks from within the Ford administration and other sources of violating the spirit and sometimes the letter of the treaty.

Melvin R. Laird renewed and expanded in the current issue of Reader's Digest charges that he first made in June 1975 of Soviet cheating on SALT I terms. Laird was secretary of defense when the Nixon administration concluded that treaty in an urgent rush in order to have a signing ceremony during then-President Richard M. Nixon's May 1972 visit to Moscow. The haste to sign left a treaty with imprecise language.

The original Laird accusations included building missiles larger than expected and testing radar for use with defenses against ballistic missiles. A separate treaty signed with SALT I limited missile defenses. In his latest article, Laird added charges of concealing weapons production, contrary to SALT I.

When a State Department spokesman was asked about these charges on Nov. 22, he replied: "Most of the issues raised by former Defense Secretary Laird were raised during the previous administration and effectively rebutted."

REPORTERS WHO DID not recall any effective rebuttal — who actually recalled that then-President Gerald R. Ford dismissed the charges of his old friend without any substantive answer — asked the spokesman for details of the rebuttal. The spokesman promised to get it.