LETTER FROM TOKYO

Japan and the NPT

Much must be settled before Japan ratifies the nuclear non-proliferation treaty

by Stuart Griffin

Japan's signing last week of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, like Germany's in December, is a big boost for the efforts to keep nuclear weapons in the relatively manageable hands of just a few countries. Both Japan and Germany have been symbolic leaders of the group of non-nuclear countries which have the capability of building a nuclear arsenal and are reluctant to give up the option.

But the signing in neither case represented a whole-hearted acceptance of the treaty in all of its aspects and ramifications. The treaty still has to be ratified, and both countries have made clear that ratification will depend on the clearing up of several points that displease them.

In Japan the reservations about the treaty revolve around the question of international inspections, or safeguards as the euphemism goes, to make sure that plutonium, a by-product of the ever-growing worldwide supply of nuclear power reactors, isn't sidetracked to bomb factories. Though according to the treaty, inspections will be carried out by the International Atomic Energy Agency, a special agreement is being worked out for the members of Euratom, the six-nation European atomic energy group which includes Germany. Euratom members already have an inspection system of their own, and want to keep it (SN: 10/25, p. 386).

The Japanese, along with the Soviet Union, argue that letting Euratom nations inspect each other amounts almost to self-inspection, and if the IAEA agrees to that, the Japanese will want similar self-inspection rights.

Japan at present has bilateral inspection agreements with the United States, Canada and Britain, from whom she has obtained nuclear power plants. The controls include careful physical checks of the flow of fissionable material. In a statement released at the time of the signing, the Japanese Government said that such stringent inspection procedures should be avoided.

Safeguards, the statement said, should be applied only at strategic points in the fuel cycle, presumably including the nuclear fuel reprocessing plants, where spent fuel elements are stripped down and the fissionable plutonium and remaining uranium removed for use in new elements. And care should be taken to "ensure that the application of safeguards does not cause the leakage of industrial secrets."

Japan's interest in the arrangements with the IAEA over inspection was in fact an argument for signing it now. States signing after the treaty is in force will not be allowed to take part in the discussions with the IAEA. Since the treaty is scheduled to take effect when 40 non-nuclear nations have deposited their ratification, and the total has reached 27, time is running out for Japan to sign.

Besides the question of inspections, Japan is also bothered by suspicions that the nuclear powers do not really mean it when they promise, in the treaty, to undertake substantive talks leading to a halt in the arms race. Japan's official nuclear policy—no possession, importation or manufacture of nuclear weapons—depends on the understanding that it will not fall so far behind that it cannot catch up if the situation seems to demand it. And that understanding cannot be maintained if the nuclear powers continue to build ever more sophisticated and massive weapons systems.

Despite these reservations, there were strong pressures on Japan to sign the treaty. Japan's Foreign Ministry would like the nation to play a larger political role in Asia and in the United Nations. And to pick up that influence—to gain, for instance, a permanent seat in the U.N. Security Council—Japan will need the support of the United States, which is pressuring for support of the treaty.

In addition, Japanese Prime Minister Eisaku Sato almost certainly used the treaty-signing as a quid pro quo in his negotiations with President Nixon at the White House in November over the question of Okinawa. Out of those talks came the agreement that Okinawa and the Ryukyu Islands would be returned to Japan by 1972, except for the nuclear weapons and bases operating there as they do in Japan proper.

In December Prime Minister Sato's Liberal-Democratic Party, which is pro-U.S. and conservative, won a resounding victory in the Lower House Diet elections, mostly at expense of the leading Socialist opposition party; Okinawa was an important issue in that campaign. The election may well have overcome the Liberal-Democrats' reluctance to agree to the treaty.

Also lending pressure to the signing was the lingering Japanese nuclear hangover resulting from the memory of Hiroshima. A recent poll by the Science and Technology Agency showed that Japanese think of atomic energy more in terms of nuclear weapons than as a means for producing nuclear power or other peaceful uses.