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U.S. Can Detect Major SALT Violations By Soviets, Brown Assures Senate Panel

By a WALL STREET JOURNAL Staff Reporter

WASHINGTON – The U.S. will be able to catch any militarily threatening Soviet violation of the new Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty, although minor infractions might go undetected, Defense Secretary Harold Brown said.

"Any cheating serious enough to affect the military balance would be detectable in sufficient time to take whatever action the situation required," Mr. Brown told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

The U.S. ability to verify Soviet compliance with the SALT II provisions is one of the most sensitive issues in the Senate debate over the treaty. The pact must win a two-thirds vote for ratification. The treaty limits to 2,250 the number of long-range nuclear weapons each side can deploy through 1985 and places various restrictions on force improvements.

In response to some Senators' assertions that the U.S. won't be able to spot possible Soviet violations, Mr. Brown conceded that "no one can pretend that our intelligence collection capability is perfect." But, he added, the treaty is "adequately verifiable. Our impressive monitoring capability doesn't mean that we can be certain of detecting every conceivable treaty violation – or every conceivable change in Soviet strategic forces – as soon as it occurs," he said. However, "to go undetected, any Soviet cheating would have to be on so small a scale that it wouldn't be militarily significant."

Further, Mr. Brown said that SALT agreements make it easier to monitor Soviet strategic forces because they ban "deliberate" interference with the photographic satellites, giant radars and signal collection gear the U.S. trains on Soviet strategic programs. They also establish a number of rules and standards that make monitoring easier, he said. "All of the uncertainties we face in SALT II would be far worse without an agreement because Soviet concealment practices would then be unconstrained," Mr. Brown testified.

Some Senators were bothered by the ambiguity of adequate – rather than absolute – verification. "I guess Mrs. Brown would be a little suspicious if you were to come home tonight and say you'd been adequately faithful," Sen. Jesse Helms (R., N.C.) quipped. Mr. Brown, quickly seizing a chance to stress his point that verification will be easier with SALT than without it, replied: "In that case, as in this, I suppose it would depend on the alternative."

Part of the verification controversy involves a section of the treaty that allows each side to deploy one new land-based missile but attempts to limit the conversion of existing intercontinental ballistic missiles into new, more powerful ones. The provision bars changes of more than 5% in an existing missile's diameter, launch weight and payload weight. Some Senators, such as John Glenn (D., Ohio), say they don't believe the U.S. can monitor changes that small, particularly after the loss of intelligence outposts in Iran earlier this year.

Mr. Brown conceded that small violations of the 5% limits on launch weight or payload weight may go undetected. If there's an increase in one of these factors, Mr. Brown said, "I don't think it matters whether it's 5% or 10%. It doesn't affect our security."

Major violations of the rules, however, could be detected, Mr. Brown asserted.

Mr. Brown also repeated President Carter's assertion that the U.S. would abrogate the treaty if it discovered significant violations but he didn't list the type of infractions he considers major. "It depends how serious a violation is and how clear," he said. But he added that the U.S. should challenge the Soviets "early and strongly" when it suspects a violation.

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