Issue and Debate

Serious Trouble Develops for Arms Treaty With Soviet

By RICHARD BURT
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WASHINGTON, Sept. 27 — The Carter Administration's drive to win Senate approval of the nuclear arms treaty with the Soviet Union has run into serious trouble.

Only a month ago, as senators returned to Washington from the August recess, White House aides spoke confidently about winning a two-thirds vote for the agreement as early as October. In five weeks of hearings before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Administration witnesses, in the view of the White House, were able to refute the numerous technical arguments that had been directed against the accord.

But to the surprise of treaty supporters and critics alike, the arms debate in the last few weeks has bogged down on several fronts.

To begin with, the political furor set off earlier this month by the discovery of Soviet combat troops in Cuba has led some prominent proponents of arms control, such as Senator Frank Church, the chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, to insist on deferring action on the treaty until the dispute with Moscow is resolved. At the same time, more conservative senators, particularly Sam Nunn, Democrat of Georgia, are saying that the treaty should not be considered in isolation and that, before any vote is taken, President Carter must demonstrate his willingness to increase military spending for the fiscal year 1980 and beyond.

The controversies surrounding the issues of military spending and troops in Cuba have led some senators to announce their opposition to the accord and others to call for a delay in the vote until January or later. This state of affairs has forced the Administration, for the first time since the debate got under way, to confront the real possibility that the treaty, Mr. Carter's most important foreign policy priority, may either be rejected outright or allowed to wither through Senate inattention.

While the treaty's defeat would come as a direct blow to Mr. Carter, a heated debate is developing over what the wider consequences of the accord's demise would be for the American-Soviet military balance and political relations, the long-term position of the Presidency and the image of the United States in the world.

The Background

Long before the completed arms treaty was presented to the Senate in July, it was clear that the Administration faced a tough fight. In addition to doubts over whether it imposed sufficient constraints on Soviet missile power, critics challenged the ability of the Administration to monitor adequately the complex agreement.

Also, in contrast to the debate over the first strategic arms accords in 1972, the prospects for approval were clouded by growing skepticism in the Senate over Moscow's military motives and its intervention in conflicts in the Middle East and Africa.

Despite this, when treaty hearings got under way last summer, Secretary of Defense Harold Brown and other senior officials were judged to have done a good job in arguing that the treaty would not undermine American security in the 1980's. As a result, Senator Robert C. Byrd, the majority leader, was quoted earlier this month as saying that the treaty debate could be concluded by the end of October.

However, Senator Byrd is now saying that the debate may not end until early next year. In part, the delay is caused by the situation in Cuba, with several senators waiting to see how the dispute over the Soviet troops is resolved. However, White House aides also acknowledge that a short delay in the debate is probably in the Administration's interest, because if a vote on the treaty was held in the near future, it would probably be rejected.

But some political forces would like to defer a vote on the treaty for much longer than a few months. Earlier this week, for instance, former President Gerald R. Ford said the Senate should not consider the treaty until Mr. Carter unveils detailed military spending plans for 1981 and 1982, which would not be ready for six months or so. In a similar move, Senator Henry Bellmon, Republican of Oklahoma, has said that a Senate vote should be put off until after a panel of experts studies the country's future military needs.

Senator John W. Warner, Republican of Virginia, went further than either Mr. Ford or Senator Bellmon this week when he proposed in a speech that a vote on the treaty be deferred until after next year's Presidential election.

The Case for Defeating Or Delaying the Treaty

Those favoring rejection of the accord acknowledged that such a move would create political shock waves in Moscow and many other capitals. But they contend that adverse reaction would be short-lived and that it would be a huge mistake to let political considerations force the United States into an accord that could give the Soviet Union real military advantages in the next decade.

Some treaty critics, such as Senator Henry M. Jackson, Democrat of Washington, say that Moscow has a strong interest in arms control and that rejecting the treaty would not spell the end of future negotiations. Mr. Jackson and others go so far as to suggest that if the Senate turned down the accord, the United States would be placed in a stronger position to get a better agreement in new talks.

Treaty opponents also maintain that rejection would be received favorably by allied countries, particularly in Western Europe, where governments are said to retain serious doubts over Washington's commitment to maintaining the military balance of power. Senate rejection, it is asserted, would send a signal to American allies that the United States had put the Vietnam experience behind it and was ready to compete with Moscow around the globe.

Case Against Defeating Or Delaying the Treaty

Those opposed to defeating or shelving the arms treaty offer a long list of reasons for rejecting such a course. First, they maintain that without the treaty, Moscow over the next few years could probably exceed the limits laid down on missiles and bombers. They also doubt whether scuttling the treaty would cause the country to embark on a new, aggressive program of arms modernization. Senator Gary Hart, Democrat of Colorado, for example, says that the demise of the treaty would lead to deep political divisions on Capitol

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Hill that would rule out the possibility of forming a new consensus for a larger military effort.

Secondly, Administration specialists fiercely reject the contention that Western Europe would welcome the treaty's defeat. They note that every major government in Western Europe has endorsed the accord and they say that treaty rejection would undermine a number of American initiatives in the Western alliance, including the current effort to gain the approval of the Atlantic alliance for a plan to deploy several hundred medium-range missiles in Europe in the early 1980's.

While some Pentagon officials are concerned about the possible military impact of a treaty defeat, State Department aides are much more concerned about the political consequences. The treaty, they said, is not simply a Carter initiative, but was pursued by three different Administrations. As a result, a decision to abandon the accord, it is contended, would appear to both allies and adversaries as a sign of weakness and incoherence, which could cause governments to question the credibility of American commitments on other matters.

The Outlook

Opinions differ widely over whether the Administration can somehow salvage its chances of winning treaty ratification. The immediate issue confronting the White House is the Cuban affair and aides are agreed that the problem must be resolved quickly. If the Administration is able to gain some concession from Moscow on the Soviet troops, the prospects for ratification would quickly improve.

Even if the Administration succeeds in clearing the Cuban hurdle, it will still have to address the concerns of Senator Nunn for further increases in the military budget. Mr. Carter has already agreed to add $4 billion to the current Pentagon budget and Secretary Brown has not ruled out future increases. If, as now seems likely, the arms debate will extend into early next year, the Administration could use this time to put together an arms package to satisfy Senator Nunn and his like-minded colleagues.

But any delay in the Senate debate imposes risks for the Administration. By continually deferring a vote, many senators together may be able to kill the treaty without taking a public stand on the complicated issues bound up in the debate.