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# SALT Prospects Enhanced By Hearings, Both Sides Feel

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Four weeks of hearings on the new strategic arms limitation treaty appear to have enhanced prospects for eventual approval of SALT II, in the view of many in the Senate on both sides of the issue. But the treaty still needs 67 votes, and its supporters con-

## News Analysis

cede they still cannot see exactly where they will come from.

A month ago, the treaty's supporters anticipated the hearings with some dread, but in fact the intervening time has brought a number of surprises that all seem to help their cause. Issues that once looked ominous have been defused, and the debate about the merits of the treaty document has been largely supplanted by a debate over American defense spending.

Even some of the treaty's opponents acknowledge that the Senate now appears much more likely to grant its approval of SALT II.

"I smell ratification," one of the Senate's best head-counters observed—and this is a conservative who probably will vote against the treaty. "I wouldn't have said that five or six weeks ago," he added.

In the highest reaches of the Carter administration, these first weeks of hearings have produced a sense of relief and some optimism. "We still have to get 67 votes," one senior official observed, noting that the basic political challenge posed by the SALT ratification fight remains to be met. But, like others, this man believes that the treaty is in far better shape today than it was a month ago.

Just five weeks ago, Minority Leader Howard H. Baker Jr. (R-Tenn.) announced his strong opposition to SALT II as submitted to the Senate. Baker's statement alarmed the White House and raised doubts about the prospects for winning two-thirds support for the treaty.

Baker was seen as a key figure five weeks ago, but today in the Senate his star seems to be on the wane, at least in terms of the SALT debate. That is one of the changes that have occurred during the Senate hearings.

Baker tied his opposition to specific treaty provisions, particularly the one that would allow the Soviets to maintain 308 "heavy" supermissiles that the United States could not match in its arsenal.

But when the hearings began Baker had trouble arguing his case against the treaty. He was sharply rebutted by administration witnesses and fellow senators, and soon retired from active participation in the Foreign Relations Committee's hearings. The leadership role he had hoped to play did not materialize.

A month ago "verification" looked like a potentially decisive issue. The

word refers to America's ability to monitor Soviet compliance with the detailed provisions of the treaty, and for a time it looked as though the recent loss of spy stations in Iran might lead many senators to conclude that the treaty could not be monitored.

Instead, Sen. Barry Goldwater (R-Ariz.) has stated publicly that he thinks the verification problems are manageable. Adm. Stansfield Turner of the CIA has hardened his support for the verifiability of the treaty. The issue still concerns some senators, but now seems unlikely to determine many—if any—votes.

Opponents of SALT II were saying privately in June that, when the hearings began, numerous new loopholes and shortcomings in the treaty would be revealed. But this hasn't happened.

Instead the critics have complained about alleged inequities in SALT II that have been public knowledge for months. Their very familiarity may

have detracted from their impact in the hearings.

The Carter administration feared that Sen. Henry M. Jackson (D-Wash.), the dominant senator in the 1972 debate on the first SALT agreements, would have a bag-full of embarrassing surprises when the Armed Services Committee began hearings last month. Instead Jackson's points were familiar and predictable, to the administration's relief.

In private conversations this week, senators of many different persuasions agreed that one unforeseen factor has worked to SALT II's advantage—the total absence of public interest in the proceedings.

"There is absolutely no interest in this issue in the country," one senior Democrat observed. "When I go home, no one talks about SALT."

"The lack of public interest is unbelievable," added a conservative Republican from the West. And both of

them agreed that public indifference tends to help the treaty's prospects.

"This isn't like Panama at all," one senator said, a comparison to the intense public sentiment that developed in many states against the Panama Canal treaties. Once the SALT II debate looked like something of a replay of the Panama fight; now the parallel seems less clear.

The emergence of the military spending issue last week changed the nature of the SALT II debate, and probably transformed it. Sen. Sam Nunn (D-Ga.) set the new course, and Henry A. Kissinger tacked his personal ship-of-state in the same direction. The specific terms of the treaty are no longer in dispute for those who have taken this line; instead the question is whether the United States will pursue an aggressive defense buildup to match the Soviets in time for SALT III.

The sudden popularity of this ap-

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