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(verif.)

Spies in the Sky

The fate of SALT II may depend on "verification"

Will the U.S. be able to catch the Soviets if they cheat under the SALT II treaty? The answer may determine the fate of the arms limitation accord in the Senate. As the Foreign Relations Committee ended its second week of hearings on the pact, Delaware Democrat Joseph Biden said last week: "Verification is going to be the cutting issue of the committee's vote on the treaty and ultimately on the Senate floor."

What has made verification so controversial was the loss early this year of two important CIA listening posts in Iran, close to the U.S.S.R. border. From these sites, U.S. computers and other electronic devices in tandem with spy satellites had been able to monitor most Soviet missile test firings and hence learn, among other things, the weapons' length, diameter and launchweight. This is precisely the kind of information that will be essential for determining whether Moscow abides by a crucial SALT II restriction: increasing or decreasing key characteristics of an existing intercontinental ballistic missile by more than 5% would classify that ICBM as a "new missile." SALT II allows each side only one "new" ICBM.

Despite the loss of the Iranian sites, the Administration insists that the U.S. can adequately verify the arms pact. At last week's hearings, Defense Secretary Harold Brown emphasized that U.S. spy satellites and other means of gathering intelligence keep close tabs on the development, testing and deployment of all Soviet strategic arms. He even claimed that every new Soviet ICBM is detected while still on the Kremlin's drawing boards, presumably a rare public allusion to U.S. cloak-and-dagger activities inside the U.S.S.R. Pointing out that development of a new missile system takes about a decade and requires some 20 to 30 test flights, Brown said: "It is inconceivable to me that the Soviets could develop, produce, test and deploy a new ICBM in a way that would evade this monitoring network." (Even as Brown was discussing Soviet testing, the deadly U.S. air-launched cruise missile was beginning a crucial phase of development. See SCIENCE.)

Brown's assurances did not satisfy Senator John Glenn, the Ohio Democrat who has devoted hundreds of hours to studying the complex verification issue. As a former astronaut with some firsthand knowledge of how highly sophisticated electronic devices work—or fail—Glenn is looked to for guidance on verification by many of his Senate colleagues. "I don't want to vote for SALT, but I want to know that the Soviets are living up to it." He

believes that the loss of the Iranian posts left the U.S. with no way of sufficiently monitoring Soviet missile testing. He fears that the U.S. will have more trouble intercepting Soviet telemetry, the performance data beamed back to earth by the test missile. Noted Glenn: "Brown tends to minimize the importance of telemetry, while analysts say that telemetry is key."

To allay his doubts, Glenn is considering proposing three reservations to be attached to the Senate bill approving the arms pact. One would urge Moscow not to encrypt any of its telemetry. The second would require the Administration to inform Congress whenever it brought complaints about possible Soviet cheating to the Standing Consultative Commission,



Skeptical Senator John Glenn

Still worried about Russian cheating.

a U.S.-Soviet body that deals with charges of treaty violations. Because neither of these reservations would be binding on Moscow, they probably would not require new negotiations with the Kremlin.

That almost certainly would not be the case with Glenn's third reservation: a requirement that Moscow give advance notice of all its ICBM tests. The U.S. already gives notice, primarily because American test missiles fly over international waters. Advance Soviet notice, argued Glenn, would enable the Pentagon to get the maximum number of satellites, planes and ships in place to monitor the Soviet tests, thus significantly compensating for the capabilities lost in Iran. But it is very likely, according to State Department aides, that Moscow would balk at such a condition. Glenn's reservation could become the kind of jinxed amendment that SALT advocates fear may doom the treaty.