

Test ban treaty faces make or break in the US Senate

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A tough time lies ahead for the US administration in its push to achieve the two-thirds Senate majority needed to ratify the treaty banning atomic weapons testing. Republican senators are digging in with a complicated set of conditions and will prove hard to shift.

[WASHINGTON] The fate of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) at the hands of the US Senate is likely to be decided within the next month, as the Clinton administration begins its bid to overcome strong Republican opposition and get the treaty considered and ratified.

Senior administration officials — including President Bill Clinton himself and the Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright — are expected to begin their long-awaited drive for ratification as soon as the Senate completes its deliberations on the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). This is likely to happen within days.

But many Senate staff on both sides believe that, even if the debate takes place, the treaty will not be ratified this year. “I don’t give it much of a chance,” says one aide to the Senate Democratic leadership. “A handful of people are able to hold this up, and we haven’t been able to devise a way to put pressure on them.”

The treaty to ban atomic weapons testing was approved by the United Nations General Assembly in 1996, but will not take effect until it has been ratified by 44 specified signatories; it requires a two-thirds majority in the US Senate. It has been the goal of many nuclear weapons scientists for four decades,

and is strongly supported by several scientific organizations.

Advocates argue that the administration is in a good position to force — and win — a public debate on the treaty, and to get Republican senators to bring it forward to a vote. They are confident of obtaining the necessary two-thirds majority in such

a vote, because of strong public sentiment against nuclear testing.

But political opponents of the treaty, including in particular Senator Jesse Helms (Republican, North Carolina), chair of the powerful Foreign Relations Committee, are



Will he play ball? Secretary of State Madeleine Albright has to win round Republicans such as Senator Jesse Helms if test ban is to progress.

well entrenched, and a complex set of conditions must be met if the treaty is to be ratified.

At least five Senate committees have an interest in the treaty. But three of the most powerful — the Armed Services, Intelligence and Foreign Relations committees — have yet to hold hearings on it.

In January, Helms informed Clinton that his committee would not consider the CTBT until it had been given an opportunity to review two other foreign policy items, the Kyoto protocol on greenhouse-gas emissions and a set of proposed modifications to the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty.

Clinton responded in February, saying that there would be no movement on Kyoto, but implicitly raising the prospect that the ABM protocols may be on offer as part of some sort of deal. Clinton said he wanted the CTBT ratified in time for his planned visit to the Indian subcontinent later this year.

According to lobbyists for the treaty such as Daryl Kimball of the Coalition to Reduce Nuclear Dangers, the prospects for ratification will improve if Russia’s Duma, the lower house of its parliament, ratifies the START 2 treaty limiting the number of nuclear weapons held by Russia and the United States. It may do this in the next two months.

But the Duma’s ratification of START 2 will probably be conditional on the retention of the ABM treaty in its existing form. Republicans in the Senate are keen to modify the ABM treaty in ways that would offend Russia — for example, by allowing deployment of ballistic missile defence in ‘small theatre’ conflicts.

Helms has given no hint of what will shift him. Lobbyists for the treaty say that any progress is likely to depend on a deal between Clinton and Trent Lott (Republican, Mississippi), the leader of the Senate Republicans, which might force Helms to modify his position.

Last year, in analogous circumstances, an agreement between Clinton and Lott effectively forced Helms to release the Chemical Weapons Convention, which was duly ratified by the Senate. But sources close to Helms say that whereas Republicans were split on the convention — which had been negotiated by President George Bush — they are relatively united in their opposition to the CTBT. The only prominent Republican senator who has publicly supported it is Pete Domenici (Republican, New Mexico).

The key question for treaty advocates is whether the administration’s pending publicity offensive will raise the profile of the treaty sufficiently to fracture that unity. Spurgeon Keeny, for example, president of the Arms Control Association, says the administration cannot lose by vigorously pursuing the treaty.

“If they get it, it is an important accomplishment for the administration; if the Republicans fight it, it is good politics,” says Keeny. “A lot of Republicans don’t want to be put on the spot on this issue. But I don’t think they are going to have that luxury, because the administration is going to stick it to them.”

Officials at the White House National Security Council decline to comment on their strategy. Clinton sent the treaty to the Senate last September, and announced in his January State of the Union address that he wanted it ratified during 1998. The chances of that are probably better than they will be in 1999, when the Republicans are likely to have a larger majority, and the president may be weakened by the approaching end of his tenure.

Only countries that have ratified the treaty will be allowed to take part in a conference in late 1999 which will decide the future of the treaty if, as expected, India, Pakistan and North Korea have failed to sign it by then. □

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