

US Senate rejection of test ban treaty heralds new eruption of American militarism

The Editorial Board
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Two critical aspects of American politics converged to produce last week's Senate rejection of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). The first is the virtual state of war that exists between the Republican Congress and the Clinton administration. Democratic Senator Robert Torricelli was close to the mark when he called the treaty defeat "a second vote on impeachment."

Both the White House and Senate Democrats assumed that the Republicans would not push their tactic of precipitous debate on the treaty—which clearly lacked the two-thirds support required for ratification—all the way to a vote, once the president, citing national security needs, officially requested that a vote be delayed.

At stake, after all, was a central component of American foreign policy, Washington's relations with its European and Asian allies, and the international prestige of the American head of state. Not since the rejection of the Versailles Peace Treaty that followed World War I had the Senate voted down a major international agreement signed by the president. The potentially explosive implications of a rejection of the test ban treaty were underscored by a military coup in Pakistan one day before the Senate vote.

Only a month earlier Pakistan and India, both of which tested nuclear weapons in 1998, were locked in battle in the disputed Kashmir region. Clinton had centered his diplomacy in the volatile Indian subcontinent on the demand that India and Pakistan sign the test ban treaty.

But the underlying crisis of the American political establishment—which consumed all of 1998 in the form of the Monica Lewinsky sex scandal and impeachment drive, culminating less than eight months ago in the Senate trial of Clinton—continues unabated. A powerful element in the refusal of the Senate Republicans to defer to the White House on a critical matter of foreign policy was the determination of the party's extreme right-wing core to humiliate Clinton and undermine his administration.

Nevertheless, the Senate vote was not simply an expression of amorphous partisan antagonisms. It registered a definite shift within the US political and foreign policy establishment away from the consensus for international arms control diplomacy that has been a fixture of American imperialist policy since the late 1950s. The bitterness of the battle over the treaty reflects sharp divisions at the highest levels of the state, but the outcome demonstrates that the consensus is shifting toward an even more militaristic and unilateralist pursuit of American interests around the world.

Jesse Helms, the North Carolinian whose extreme right-wing and chauvinist views once relegated him to the "lunatic fringe" of official politics, now heads the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Only a few years ago Helms publicly warned Clinton against setting foot on any military base in the senator's state, saying the president's life would be in danger. During the floor debate on the test ban treaty, Helms impersonated Clinton pleading with British Prime Minister Tony Blair for help, and Blair replying: "Oh, yes, I'll do that. And give Monica my regards."

Helms may have orchestrated the defeat of the test ban treaty, using his

influence to scuttle an effort by prominent senators within his own party to put off the vote, but he was joined by the entire leadership of the Republican Party and well-known representatives of the foreign policy, military and intelligence establishments in opposing ratification. In the ultimate vote on the Senate floor, only four Republicans voted for the treaty.

Among those on record opposing the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty are former President George Bush, the Republicans' 1996 presidential candidate Robert Dole, all of the aspirants for the Republican presidential nomination in the 2000 election, six former secretaries of defense, four former CIA directors (including two Clinton appointees), four former national security advisers, three former energy secretaries, three former directors of the national nuclear laboratories, and several former chairmen of the military's joint chiefs of staff.

Senator Richard Lugar of Indiana, known as a moderate Republican, an "internationalist" and advocate of nuclear arms control, campaigned against the treaty. Henry Kissinger, while supporting efforts to delay the vote, came out against the treaty. He sent a three-page letter to Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott outlining his arguments against the agreement on October 13, the day of the vote on the Senate floor.

Among those who testified in support of the treaty were the current chairman of the joint chiefs, General Henry Shelton, and the current secretaries of defense and state. Former Joint Chiefs Chairman Colin Powell issued a statement calling for ratification.

Proponents of the treaty said it was a culmination of American policy going back to the Eisenhower administration. It would, they argued, strengthen the global dominance of the US by isolating so-called "rogue states" with nuclear ambitions, while locking in America's nuclear superiority over the rest of the world.

Those opposing the treaty argued there were no ironclad means of enforcing it, and the US could neither maintain its current nuclear arsenal nor develop new atomic weapons if it foreswore the option of conducting underground tests. Such objections, quite clearly, could be marshaled against any arms control agreement, and many opponents of the test ban treaty see its defeat as only the first step in repudiating most, if not all, previous arms limitation pacts.

A common theme of the treaty opponents, stated more or less openly, is that the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War have rendered such agreements as the 1970 nuclear non-proliferation treaty and the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM) obsolete.

Typical were the comments of Robert Gates, CIA director under President Bush, who published an op-ed piece in the *New York Times* declaring: "We are burdened by older treaties—like the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty—that no longer fully serve our security interests because they have been overtaken by political and technological developments."

Two weeks ago, in his first major statement on foreign policy and defense issues, Texas Governor George W. Bush, the front-runner for the Republican presidential nomination, suggested that the ABM treaty with

Russia had to be changed because it belonged to the past era of the Cold War.

The Clinton administration has adapted itself to such criticisms. Last January Clinton shifted his position on Republican-led demands for the construction of a missile defense system in the US, allocating funds for research into such a system, which is explicitly prohibited under the terms of the ABM treaty. Since then the White House has been pressing Russia to accept revisions of the 1972 treaty.

The demise of the Soviet Union is a critical factor in the shift within American ruling circles away from the arms control diplomacy of the Cold War period. The US adopted arms control and multilateral security agreements as a tactic in its strategy of containment of the USSR. But it did so reluctantly, as a concession to the reality of a politically and militarily formidable rival in the form of the Soviet Union.

There was always an undercurrent of frustration and bitterness over the need to strike deals with the Soviets. The US had emerged from the Second World War as the global hegemon, and the consensus within the American bourgeoisie was to use its economic and military might—including its monopoly of nuclear weapons—to establish a Pax Americana. But the vision of unchallenged US domination of the world was dashed by the emergence of the Soviet Union as a world power, especially after Moscow began to build its own nuclear arsenal.

With the end of the Cold War, the conception has grown within the American political establishment that the US can achieve in the twenty-first century what it failed to achieve in the twentieth. There is an increasing inclination to reject any international restrictions on US foreign policy and all limitations on the buildup and use of America's military forces. This trend toward American unilateralism found its most explicit expression to date in the Senate repudiation of the test ban treaty.

The *Wall Street Journal* editorially supported the hard-core opponents of the test ban treaty around Helms and campaigned against any delay in the Senate vote to reject the pact. Its editorial of October 15, entitled "The Grand Delusion," gives a fair sampling of the outlook that is growing within the American bourgeoisie.

A diatribe against arms control, the editorial declares: "The history of arms control is in fact a history of failure.... There is no better example than the 1972 ABM Treaty, which has ensured that the US remains without defense of any sort against ballistic missile attack."

The *Journal* goes on to indicate its alternative to arms control diplomacy: "The only undeniably successful nonproliferation effort of recent decades was achieved without a treaty: That was Israel's 1981 bombing of the Osirak nuclear reactor in Iraq."

Three days later the *Journal* published a column by Jesse Helms, in which the senator gives vent to his contempt for America's overseas allies. Helms refers derisively to an October 8 op-ed piece in the *New York Times* jointly authored by German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, British Prime Minister Tony Blair and French President Jacques Chirac, which urged the Senate to ratify the CTBT. He goes on to mock later statements from European leaders condemning the Senate's rejection of the treaty.

"With all due respect to Mr. Chirac," Helms writes, "the last time I checked, no nation was counting on the safety and reliability of the French nuclear arsenal to guarantee its security.... Our European friends fail to understand that the US has unique responsibilities in the world. Unlike smaller powers, America is not free to ratify fanciful treaties like the CTBT...which do no good, but restrict our ability to meet our international commitments" (emphasis in the original).

A common plank of those opposing the test ban treaty is the demand for a US missile defense system. The unstated perspective of the most vocal proponents of this project is a Fortress America, protected by a hi-tech nuclear shield from behind which the US can lob missiles at its international foes. The Republicans denounce Clinton's belated support for missile defense research as weak and tentative. They want an

extensive system built, and hope that a Republican victory in 2000 will launch the project in earnest.

Commercial interests play no small role in the opposition to arms control diplomacy and the accompanying campaign for a new and massive buildup of US nuclear arms. The vast hi-tech military industry in America was shaken by the end of the Cold War and subsequent cutbacks in strategic arms contracts. It is determined to recoup lost profits and make far greater sums in the coming years, and has the political support of a small army of politicians who depend on campaign contributions from nuclear and aerospace industry giants.

A new version of Ronald Reagan's "Star Wars" system will not only mean tens of billions in government contracts directly related to the project, it will spur other nations around the world to increase military spending, providing a further justification for increased military outlays at home.

It is not possible here to consider in any detail the international ramifications of the Senate's vote on the test ban treaty. Suffice it to say that it will be taken as a signal by every ruling class, whether presently allied to the US or not, that the American bourgeoisie is embarking on a new, even more belligerent and reckless course. Relations between the US and Europe will become more strained and greater urgency will be given to the need for an independent and modernized European military force. In their October 8 column in the *New York Times*, Schröder, Blair and Chirac made the pointed observation that "rejection [of the CTBT] would also expose a fundamental divergence within NATO."

The Russian response to the Senate's rejection of the treaty has been even more blunt. The Foreign Ministry charged the US with attempting to "destabilize the foundations of international relations." Such sharp language is understandable, given the fact that over the past two years the US has organized the expansion of NATO to include Russia's former Warsaw Pact allies, has spearheaded a NATO war against Russia's ally, Serbia, and is now demanding a major revision of the ABM treaty.

China, which announced it would withhold ratification of the CTBT pending US action, will obviously take the Senate's action into its military calculations; India and Pakistan will likely step up their nuclear weapons programs; and the pressure will intensify for Japan to drop its pacifistic pretensions and begin openly developing its own nuclear weapons arsenal.

From the standpoint of exposing America's posturing as a bulwark of world peace and stability, the Senate vote will have a salutary effect. By becoming the first nation to officially reject the test ban treaty, the US has undercut the "weapons of mass destruction" propaganda it employs to despoil Iraq and threaten other countries which it designates as "rogue" states. The Senate's action clarifies the fact that the world's most dangerous nuclear menace is not Iraq, Iran, North Korea, Pakistan, India or China, but the United States.

It would, however, be utterly mistaken to believe that the growing danger of nuclear war has its source in the defeat of a test ban treaty. The CTBT and the arms control agreements that preceded it are themselves elements of the imperialist foreign policy of the most powerful capitalist nations, above all the United States. They were designed to reinforce the domination of the world by the great powers and defend capitalist property relations. The old multilateral framework of arms control and security agreements is breaking down under the weight of the mounting contradictions of the world capitalist system, concentrated as never before in the conflict between world economy and the nation-state system.

The only social force that can provide mankind with a way out of the catastrophe being prepared by capitalism is the international working class, basing itself on a political struggle to overcome national divisions and class exploitation in the fight for a socialist future. The very turn by the US to a more aggressive and unilateralist policy insures that great social upheavals are on the agenda, in which the working class will have no lack of opportunities to develop its own revolutionary policy against

imperialist war and militarism.

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