

## House Panel Approves Limited Reduction of Arsenal

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The House Armed Services Committee voted yesterday to allow the elimination of 50 Peacekeeper missiles, a first step toward fulfilling President Bush's campaign pledge to reduce the U.S. nuclear arsenal while introducing missile defenses.

At the same time, the committee voted to block the administration's plan to reduce the number of B-1 bombers, which were designed during the Cold War to carry nuclear weapons but now fly only conventional missions.

Bush and Vice President Cheney, meanwhile, met at the Pentagon with Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld to discuss America's nuclear posture. They and their top aides were given a 90-minute briefing by Adm. Richard W. Mies, head of the U.S. Strategic Command.

The congressional actions and Pentagon consultations come at an important moment, as the Bush administration tries to decide how radically to cut the U.S. arsenal of about 7,000 strategic warheads.

Bush and Russian President Vladimir Putin agreed last month in Italy to move forward with talks on nuclear disarmament and missile defenses. Bush has said repeatedly that he intends to reduce the U.S. arsenal, unilaterally if necessary. Doing so could help win Russian assent for scrapping the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, which forbids nationwide missile defenses.

But any major disarmament initiative will face obstacles. One such obstacle is resistance from some quarters of the Pentagon; Mies, for example, cautioned against deep cuts in congressional testimony July 11. Another is resistance from Congress.

In 1997, Congress tied the Clinton administration's hands by prohibiting any unilateral reductions in U.S. strategic nuclear weapons until the second Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, or START II, enters into force.

Both the U.S. Senate and the Russian Duma have voted to ratify the 1992 treaty, which calls for each side to reduce its strategic arsenal to 3,500 warheads. But because the Russian parliament attached conditions that have not been met, the treaty has not gone into effect.

Yesterday, the House Armed Services Committee, by 31 to 22, defeated an effort to repeal the 1997 prohibition on U.S. unilateral reductions, even though Rep. Tom Allen (D-Maine) argued that it was "a relic of hostility toward the Clinton administration."

The committee then approved an amendment to the fiscal 2002 defense authorization bill specifically to permit dismantling the Peacekeepers, each of which carries 10 warheads.

The panel also voted 33 to 26 to block an Air Force plan to reduce the number of B-1s from 93 to 60 and move them to bases in South Dakota and Texas. The plan, when first announced, outraged lawmakers from Kansas and Georgia, where the planes are based. Yesterday's amendment blocking the changes was sponsored by Reps. Jim Ryun (R-Kan.) and C. Saxby Chambliss (R-Ga.).

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