

Long Beach Naval Base Goes to Communist China

By Rowan Scarborough
The Washington Times

The Senate has struck a compromise that would allow a Communist Chinese ocean carrier to operate a terminal at the old naval base in Long Beach, Calif., if President Clinton certifies it is not a security threat. The deal in the 1998 defense-authorization bill blunts a House measure to ban the Chinese Ocean Shipping Co. (Cosco) from Long Beach. The new compromise language of a House-Senate conference would block Cosco only if Mr. Clinton failed to exercise his waiver authority. Such a move seems unlikely because the White House supports Long Beach's efforts to woo Cosco.

An aide to Sen. James M. Inhofe, Oklahoma Republican, who led the Cosco resistance in the Senate, said yesterday the senator either had to accept the loophole or get no language at all. "I don't think it's meaningless. There's no doubt it's weaker. And the senator is not happy with that," the staffer said.

He said Mr. Inhofe has been assured by Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott, Mississippi Republican, that he will be given floor time to introduce and debate a stand-alone bill to bar Cosco.

Mr. Inhofe heads the Senate Armed Services subcommittee on readiness, which handled the Cosco issue. The panel's senior Democrat, Sen. Charles S. Robb of Virginia, opposed blocking Cosco, as did many other Democrats. He argued local communities should be free to dispose of bases abandoned by the Pentagon. Rep. Duncan Hunter, California Republican and the sponsor of a Cosco ban that won House approval, expressed disappointment in the Clinton waiver. But he said at least the amendment requires the president to certify that security agencies will face no additional burden by Cosco's presence at Long Beach.

"I think it's easier for some Clinton aides to say Cosco hasn't delivered a nuclear bomb in the last 10 days," Mr. Hunter said. "However, I think it's more difficult for them to say this isn't going to increase the burden when you have this very large facility with the intelligence-gathering apparatus that China can install.

"This is the equivalent of a new, huge Chinese embassy on our soil, with all the intelligence problems that attend such a facility," he added. He says Cosco is an arm of China's People's Liberation Army and a threat to conduct espionage in Southern California.

But it is uncertain whether Cosco will ever operate the Long Beach site, regardless of what action Congress takes. Through court action, environmentalists forced the port of Long Beach to terminate its Cosco lease and conduct a second impact study. Officials

say they are now considering tenants other than Cosco for the 144-acre track. The Navy closed the base in 1994 on orders of a base-closure commission.

Before certifying Cosco as a nonthreat, Mr. Clinton must request assessment reports from the FBI and the Pentagon. However, the Pentagon already has told lawmakers Cosco is not a national-security threat. The FBI has provided private briefings on Cosco's intelligence-gathering skills.

Allowing Cosco to control a large piece of strategic coastline that once held a historic naval base is unpalatable to many conservatives. When Mr. Inhofe last month appeared to back off a fight over Cosco, callers complained loudly on radio talk shows.

Cosco is one of the world's largest carriers and is fast expanding operations in the Atlantic. Last year, U.S. inspectors discovered a Cosco ship, Empress Phoenix, carrying an illegal shipment of 2,000 AK-47 rifles to the San Francisco area. Mr. Hunter says Cosco also transports destabilizing weapons to Syria, North Korea, Iran and Pakistan.

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