In a continuing battle over U.S. policy toward China, President Bush yesterday vetoed a bill that would link U.S. arms sales to Beijing with progress on human rights, weapons proliferation and trade. Officials said the White House has more than enough votes to win if Congress tries to override the veto.

While House press secretary Marlin Fitzwater said the president stands behind the legislation, the Senate's vote would likely establish that link favorably for Beijing with progress on human rights, weapons proliferation and trade. Officials said the White House also has more than enough votes to win if Congress tries to override the veto. 

Bush vetoed the measure over what he termed a "substantial" disagreement about the "comprehensive and non-negotiable" nature of the legislation. Bush's veto was a victory for China, which had threatened to pull out of the GATT trade talks unless the U.S. dropped the measure.

A last-minute White House effort to win Bush's support collapsed when Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole rejected a plan to exclude human rights from the legislation.

The Senate vote was 59-41, with 15 Democrats voting with Republicans and 36 Democrats voting against the measure. Senate strategists said it was not clear whether Bush would try to override the Senate vote if the House votes to override the veto.

When asked yesterday what the administration would do if the House overrode his veto, a White House official said: "We'll look at it." The official declined to speculate on the president's reaction.

For three other Democrats — Idaho, Minnesota and Washington — and American Samoa hold their Democratic caucuses Tuesday, bringing the total number of Democratic delegates at stake to 38. Whoever wins the biggest chunk of those delegates will establish himself as the leader in the race. For three other Democrats — Sens. Bob Kerry of Nebraska and Bob Dole of Kansas and former California governor Edmund G. "Jerry" Brown, Jr. — Tuesday's results pose a test of financial and political clout.

Kerry, with only a win in South Dakota to his credit, has concentrated on winning the western states and national delegate contests in hopes of finding enough delegates to persuade his colleagues he still has a chance. Harkin, who has fared badly except in his home state, hopes for a victory in the Minnesota caucuses to encourage his labor and liberal contributors.

Brown, who came close to upsetting Tsongas in the Maine caucuses but has trailed badly elsewhere, needs a better showing to continue to compete for the nomination. Dole, who has not attempted to win in any of the first four contests, needs a victory to increase his chances and avoid a rout.

In a draft copy of the measure, the administration proposed a series of "substantive" amendments to the legislation that would ensure the bill's passage over Bush's veto. The amendments would be inserted in the Senate's version of the bill as it is considered today.

The Senate Finance Committee begins work today on its own version of the legislation. The measure would require China to make "substantial progress" on human rights, arms control, and the reduction of weapons proliferation.

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