Senate Approves Flawed Nuclear Treaty; Arms Experts Say U.S. and Russia Need to Do More to Reduce Nuclear Dangers

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Press Contacts: Christine Kucia, Research Analyst at (202) 463-8270 x103; Daryl Kimball, Executive Director at (202) 463-8270 x107

(Washington, D.C.): The Senate today unanimously approved the U.S.-Russian Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT), also known as the Moscow Treaty, after two days of debate during which several proposals to strengthen the accord were withdrawn or rejected.

“Democratic and Republican senators have missed a vital opportunity to add practical conditions to the flawed Moscow Treaty to keep the nuclear risk reduction process on track,” said Daryl G. Kimball, the executive director of the Arms Control Association. “As a result, the treaty is little more than a gentlemen’s agreement that will allow each country to continue deploying and storing thousands of nuclear warheads more than two decades after the end of the Cold War,” he noted.

Sorted May 24, 2002 by Presidents George W. Bush and Vladimir Putin, SORT requires the United States and Russia to each reduce its number of deployed strategic warheads from today’s 5,000-6,000 to no more than 2,200 by the end of 2012, when the treaty will expire. The agreement requires that the warheads be removed from their delivery systems, but does not require their destruction, permitting both sides to keep as many warheads and delivery vehicles as they want for future use. For its part, Washington intends to store enough warheads that it could field up to 4,600 warheads in as little as three years after the treaty ends. Moscow’s plans for the warheads it will remove from service under the treaty are unclear.

Secretary of State Colin Powell acknowledged in Senate testimony last July that the accord does not limit the amount of warheads either country can possess. “The treaty will allow you to have as many warheads as you want,” Powell stated.

Moreover, the treaty provides no new verification measures to confirm that both parties are carrying out the pledged reductions. As a result, the U.S. intelligence community has determined that the United States will not be able to verify Russian compliance with high confidence.

“Under the treaty, neither country can know for certain whether the other is fulfilling its promises, nor if nuclear warheads and materials are being stored safely to prevent their illicit transfer to or theft by terrorists or unfriendly governments,” said Wade Boese, research director of the Arms Control Association.

“Given warming U.S.-Russian relations and existing concerns about Russia’s ability to properly secure its nuclear materials, the greater threat to U.S. security may well be the warheads Russia keeps in storage instead of those it deploys on its missiles, bombers, and submarines,” Boese cautioned.

In his July 2002 Senate testimony, former Senator Sam Nunn contended that the treaty by itself would not accomplish much, stating: “If it is not followed with other substantive actions it will become irrelevant at best and counterproductive at worst.”
To help remedy the treaty’s shortcomings, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee added two modest conditions February 5 to the agreement. One mandates an annual report by the administration on U.S.-Russian Cooperative Threat Reduction programs, which provide U.S. assistance to help secure and destroy Russian weapons of mass destruction. The other requires a yearly update on the status of U.S. and Russian treaty implementation, including strategic force levels, planned reductions each calendar year, and verification or transparency measures that have been or might be employed. The Senate approved both conditions today.

“While the added conditions provide some increased accountability and transparency of U.S. and Russian nuclear arsenals, the treaty still falls far short of enacting permanent, meaningful reductions in a verifiable manner that can help build the trust needed to liquidate the legacy of the Cold War, as President Bush envisioned,” said Christine Kucia, the Arms Control Association’s strategic analyst.

Recognizing SORT’s flaws, several senators offered amendments to the resolution of ratification to strengthen the pact. Senator Carl Levin attempted to amend the resolution of ratification by requiring that the Senate is informed at least 60 days in advance of any decision to terminate or extend the treaty. It was defeated 50-44. Senator John Kerry (D-MA) proposed that the intelligence community annually report on its ability to verify Russia’s compliance with the treaty. It was defeated 50-45.

Moscow deploys an estimated 4,000 tactical nuclear warheads and Washington is currently estimated to have approximately 1,000 tactical nuclear warheads. In addition to their tactical and deployed strategic nuclear arsenals, the United States is believed to have more than 5,000 nuclear warheads in spare and reserve stockpiles and Russia is estimated to have another 11,000 warheads stockpiled.

“The flaws in the Moscow Treaty require that the Bush administration pursue additional measures with Russia to reduce the dangers posed by Cold War nuclear arsenals,” Kimball stated. He suggested, “In the coming months, the United States and Russia should resume discussions on additional transparency and verification measures, methods for verifying excess warhead and missile dismantlement, and begin talks on controlling the thousands of smaller, more portable, tactical nuclear weapons.”

“SORT should be seen as a beginning—not an end—for further U.S.-Russian nuclear arms reductions,” Kimball said.

For more information on the SORT agreement and nuclear weapons, see the Association’s Web site at http://www.armscontrol.org/subject/ussp/ or http://www.armscontrol.org/subject/sr/.

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The Arms Control Association is an independent, nonprofit membership organization dedicated to promoting public understanding of and support for effective arms control policies. Established in 1971, the Association publishes the monthly journal, Arms Control Today.

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