New START Good for U.S. and International Security, Deserves the Senate's Support

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Statement of ACA Executive Director Daryl G. Kimball

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Today in Prague, Presidents Barack Obama and Dmitry Medvedev signed the most important nuclear arms reduction treaty in nearly two decades. The New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) puts Washington and Moscow back on the path of verifiable reductions of their still-bloated Cold War nuclear arsenals and renewed cooperation on other vital nuclear security priorities.

The treaty limits each side to no more than 700 deployed strategic nuclear delivery vehicles and 1,550 deployed strategic warheads, which is 30 percent below the existing warhead limit. Just as importantly, New START would replace the 1991 START verification regime, which expired last December, with a more effective and up-to-date system to monitor compliance for the 10-year life of the new pact.

New START will restore strategic stability and predictability. It is a concrete example of U.S. and Russian action on disarmament that will bolster support for measures designed to strengthen the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) at the May review conference.

The conclusion of the treaty after a year of intensive, up-and-down U.S.-Russian negotiations is a significant diplomatic achievement for the Obama team. Yet, the signing of New START is only the first step toward the president's goal of reducing "the number and the role of nuclear weapons" worldwide.

New START will only modestly reduce U.S. strategic warheads and strategic delivery systems below current deployment levels and will still leave the United States and Russia with thousands of excess nuclear weapons that are liabilities in the effort to curb proliferation and combat terrorism. As President Obama said following the signing of the treaty, the United States is ready to pursue further consultations on the next round of nuclear arms reductions. This effort, he said, should include verifiable reductions of all warhead types: deployed and nondeployed, strategic and nonstrategic.

Most immediately, the President and his team must undertake a smart, government-wide effort to mobilize the Senate to consider and approve the new treaty before year's end—a task made all the more difficult by partisan rancor on the president's domestic agenda.

To succeed, the overwhelming national security value of New START and the dangers of delay or defeat of the treaty must be made clear. The White House already demonstrated the strong and visible backing for the treaty from Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and Adm. Michael Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, as well as key Republican national security figures, including former Secretaries of State George Shultz and Henry Kissinger. Sen. Richard Lugar (R-Ind.), the ranking member of the Foreign Relations Committee, has said he will help the committee "work quickly to achieve ratification of the new treaty."

The administration must continue to make it clear that concerns raised by other Republican senators, including Jon Kyl (Ariz.), about limitations on U.S. missile defense programs and the verifiability of the new treaty have already been addressed. Obama resisted 11th-hour Russian
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proposals for limitations on U.S. plans for missile interceptor deployments designed to counter Iran's short- and medium-range missiles; New START limits only U.S. and Russian strategic offensive weapons. As previous U.S.-Russian nuclear arms control agreements did, New START will merely acknowledge the offensive-defensive relationship in the nonbinding preamble.

Kyl, who in 2003 praised the brevity of the 2002 Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty and called START and its monitoring provisions a "700-page behemoth" that "would not serve America's real security needs," now bemoans the loss of certain START verification practices. In reality, New START features a more effective, transparent verification method that demands quicker data exchanges and notifications than its predecessor. It modifies or eliminates costly practices not directly relevant for today's post-Cold War needs. New START will also include new and innovative techniques to identify each side's strategic delivery vehicles and verify with high confidence actual warhead deployment levels.

Despite a 10 percent increase in the administration's funding request for nuclear weapons infrastructure modernization, Republican senators have also suggested that verifiable U.S.-Russian strategic arsenal reductions would be imprudent without even greater funding increases and the pursuit of a "modern warhead."

In fact, the U.S. nuclear weapons labs have more than enough resources to maintain the reliability of all major warhead types through their ongoing Life Extension Programs. This approach has bipartisan support, and as Defense Secretary Robert Gates wrote in his preface to the Nuclear Posture Review, it is a "credible modernization plan necessary to sustain the nuclear infrastructure and support our nation's deterrent." As the new Nuclear Posture Review concludes, new-design warheads and the renewal of nuclear testing are technically and militarily unnecessary and would undermine the U.S. nonproliferation effort.

New START promises to enhance U.S. and global security by further reducing excess Cold War strategic nuclear weapons. It deserves the full and unconditional support of the Senate.

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