Prompt New START Ratification Essential to Reducing Nuclear Threat

Published on Arms Control Association (https://www.armscontrol.org)

Volume 1, Number 14, July 30, 2010

The signing of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) between the United States and Russia in April was an important step toward reducing the dangers posed by Cold War-era nuclear weapons, but the potential benefits to U.S. security can only be realized if the treaty is ratified. Until it is ratified, our focus on the most lethal potential threat to our nation will become increasingly blurred.

Consideration of New START by the U.S. Senate and Russia's Duma are well under way, but we are now in a race against the clock to get the job done. Ever since the original START expired in December of last year, the United States has been losing ground in understanding Russian strategic forces through the window of that treaty's comprehensive verification regime. In order to regain access to such vital information and to further reduce the huge nuclear arsenal left over from the Cold War, New START must be ratified.

The U.S. Constitution requires that two-thirds of the Senate concur in treaties made by the executive branch. Always daunting, this requirement is especially so in light of the highly partisan climate currently afflicting the Congress. The Foreign Relations Committee has the lead in providing Senate "advice and consent." Committee Chairman Sen. John Kerry (D-Mass.) and Ranking Minority Member Sen. Richard Lugar (R-Ind.) have presided over a series of thorough and balanced hearings on all aspects of the treaty. A long list of current and former senior security officials from both Republican and Democratic administrations have delivered testimony in support of ratification of the agreement, including President George H.W. Bush's Secretary of State James Baker and George W. Bush's National Security Advisor Steve Hadley, as well as former Defense and Energy Secretary James Schlesinger.

New START has bipartisan support because the treaty would keep Washington and Moscow on track to reduce their bloated Cold War nuclear arsenals by about 30 percent below current limits, continuing negotiated reductions launched in 1991 under START. New START would still leave a powerful and flexible U.S. nuclear force, more than enough to deter the extremely unlikely possibility of a nuclear attack by Russia or any other nation. Under New START, neither Russia nor the United States would deploy more than 1,550 strategic nuclear warheads - hundreds below Russia's current level.

New START would also enhance U.S. and global security by re-establishing a robust system for verifying each side's warhead and missile deployments. Gen. Kevin Chilton, U.S. Strategic Forces commander, explained in Senate testimony June 16 that: "Without New START, we would rapidly lose insight into Russian strategic nuclear force developments and activities, and our force modernization planning and hedging strategy would be more complex and more costly."

In a July 14 letter to senators, seven former U.S. military commanders of U.S. Strategic Command or its predecessor, Strategic Air Command, wrote that they "strongly endorse [New START's] early
ratification and entry into force" and that "we will understand Russian strategic forces much better with the treaty than would be the case without it."

These hard-headed military assessments are very much in accord with my own conclusions from analyzing Russian strategic forces in the State Department's intelligence bureau and monitoring U.S. intelligence capabilities as a senior staffer on the Senate Intelligence Committee. For following Russian nuclear forces, there is no substitute for the information acquired through implementation of strategic arms control treaty verification provisions.

Moreover, approval of New START will maintain the momentum behind U.S.-Russian cooperative programs to secure nuclear weapons-usable material and open the way for reductions of Russia's arsenal of smaller, more portable battlefield nuclear bombs, which are the most vulnerable to theft or loss to terrorist organizations.

The Senate should complete its careful examination of the treaty before coming to judgment, but it should not succumb to delaying tactics motivated by partisan politics. The benefits of New START for U.S. national security are too important. - GREG THIELMANN

- Greg Thielmann
- New START

Source URL: https://www.armscontrol.org/issuebrief/STARTessentialtoreducingnuclearthreat