

U.S. Concerns Could Stall New START

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WASHINGTON — U.S. Senate Republicans have renewed their objections to the New START treaty with Russia, raising concerns that could delay efforts to hand President Barack Obama a foreign policy victory ahead of November elections.

At a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing, Republicans said the accord could impede U.S. plans for an anti-missile defense system and pressed the Obama administration to release the full treaty negotiating record to answer their questions.

"We originally were told that there would be no references to missile defense in the treaty and no linkage drawn between offensive and defensive weapons," Senator John McCain said Thursday, adding that one section included a "clear, legally binding limitation on our missile defense options."

"Why did the administration agree to this language after saying they would do no such thing?" he asked. "We're insisting on an opportunity to review the negotiating record for ourselves, specifically those parts dealing with the ambiguous references to missile defense."

With U.S. midterm congressional campaigns heating up ahead of the Nov. 2 vote, some

Republican groups have moved to put the New START on the broader national agenda, hoping to use the issue, along with health care, to fire up voters against Obama's Democrats.

Mitt Romney, a potential 2012 Republican presidential contender, called the treaty Obama's "worst foreign policy mistake yet" in a Washington Post opinion piece. Heritage Action for America, a conservative group, is rallying opposition to the treaty with an online petition.

Assistant Secretary of State Rose Gottemoeller, chief negotiator for the treaty, told the Armed Services Committee that the New START would "enhance U.S. national security by stabilizing the strategic power between the United States and the Russian Federation at lower levels of nuclear forces."

"The choice before us is between this treaty and no treaty governing our ... nuclear security relationship with Russia, between this treaty and no agreed verification mechanism on Russia's strategic nuclear forces," she said.

Gottemoeller resisted pressure to provide lawmakers with the full treaty negotiating record, saying it had been done only rarely before, generally to clarify the treaty after its approval and not as part of the ratification process.

She said the treaty would not impair U.S. plans for an anti-missile defense system. The only prohibition on missile defense in the treaty bars both sides from converting ballistic missile launchers for use as defensive missile launchers.

Administration officials have testified that it is cheaper — by about \$20 million — to build a launcher for a defensive missile than to convert an offensive launcher for use with missile defense.

They also have questioned the prudence of placing defensive missiles at an intercontinental ballistic missile site, where a launch of defensive missiles in a tense situation could be misconstrued by Russia as an attack.

Although the Armed Services Committee holds hearings on the treaty, it is the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that ultimately will vote on whether to send the treaty to the full Senate for a vote.

That vote could come as early as this week. Senator John Kerry, who chairs the Foreign Relations Committee, has put the treaty on the panel's agenda for Tuesday.

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