

Lavrov Wants START Passed in 2010

November 12, 2010

The  **Moscow Times**

SEOUL, South Korea — Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Friday that Moscow hoped U.S. political infighting would not sink the New START treaty and called for ratification of the nuclear arms limitation pact this year.

Lavrov, speaking a week before President Dmitry Medvedev meets NATO leaders, also said Moscow could cooperate with the alliance on missile defense — an issue that has long divided Russia and the West — if the partnership were equal.

Ratification of the New START treaty and cooperation on missile defense are crucial milestones in efforts to improve relations between Russia and the West, which hit a post-Cold War low with Moscow's 2008 war against Georgia.

Lavrov, speaking to reporters on the sidelines of the G20 summit, expressed concern that the nuclear pact, signed by Medvedev and U.S. President Barack Obama in April, could fall prey to partisan politics in the United States after the major gains made by Republicans in the Nov. 2 elections.

"I can only express our sincere hope that a desire to defeat a competing party in the U.S.

Congress and in the domestic political sphere on the whole will not prevail over U.S. understanding of its deep-rooted national interest," he said.

The treaty, which would cut the number of deployed nuclear weapons allowed in Russian and U.S. arsenals by about 30 percent and revive verification procedures, requires ratification by the 100-seat Senate and the State Duma to take effect.

Obama wants the Senate to approve it during a "lame-duck" session due to start next week, because the Republican party's Senate gains could make it harder to secure the 67 votes needed when the newly elected Senate convenes next year.

Medvedev has made clear that the Kremlin-controlled Duma should not ratify the treaty until Senate approval is certain.

The nuclear arms treaty is a major element of Obama's campaign to "reset" relations with Russia, which had deteriorated under his predecessor George W. Bush.

The Kremlin has embraced the efforts and reciprocated by stepping up pressure on Iran over its nuclear program and opening transit routes aiding U.S. operations in Afghanistan.

Lavrov staked out Russia's position ahead of Medvedev's meetings with NATO leaders on Nov. 20 in Lisbon, the first such summit since the war with NATO aspirant Georgia.

He said Russia wanted to leave the Cold War behind and forge a "strategic partnership" with NATO, but stressed that Moscow sees itself as an equal and criticized the alliance's global reach.

"We can state that the period of uncertainty after the Cold War is over," Lavrov said. "We will not only draw a line under this period but formulate tasks for a strategic partnership."

"NATO is not a threat, but one of the dangers is NATO's desire to project its military potential outside its territory," Lavrov told reporters.

Lavrov also said Moscow would only accept the alliance's proposal for cooperation on a shield to protect against missile attacks if it has a strong say throughout the process.

"If it is interaction based on equality, beginning with joint assessments of all the risks that exist in the area of missile proliferation, then such cooperation is entirely possible," state-run RIA-Novosti quoted him as saying.

Obama pleased the Kremlin by scrapping Bush-era missile defense plans that Moscow saw as a threat, but Russian officials have complained that the United States is pushing ahead with its revised plans unilaterally despite the cooperation offers.

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