

Obama Says New START Remains 'Top Priority'

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Presidents Barack Obama and Dmitry Medvedev embracing at an APEC leaders retreat in Yokohama on Saturday. **Jim Young**

YOKOHAMA, Japan — U.S. President Barack Obama commended President Dmitry Medvedev on Sunday for moving Russia forward and for condemning attacks on journalists and offered assurances that getting the Senate to ratify the New START nuclear weapons treaty is a "top priority" of his administration.

"I reiterated my commitment to getting the START treaty done during the lame-duck session," Obama said, noting that Congress returns in days for its post-election session.

In talks with Medvedev on the sidelines of the summit of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, Obama also reiterated his support for bringing Russia into the World Trade Organization, calling Russia "an excellent partner."

His one-on-one talks with Medvedev took place on the final day of Obama's 10-day Asian tour, his longest trip away from the White House. He left Washington still reeling from a

stunning electoral defeat on Nov. 2 in balloting that allowed the Republicans to recapture control of the House from Obama's Democratic Party.

Obama and Medvedev discussed the plodding pace of the treaty ratification process, a problem that threatens to undermine U.S.-Russian relations and bleed into other issues, a senior Obama official told reporters shortly after the meeting.

There is an uneasiness within Russia on this issue, and Medvedev is being well briefed about the dynamic of the Senate, said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss details of the closed-door meeting. The official said that if there is progress in the lame-duck session, Russian lawmakers would be likely to quickly follow suit.

The treaty has drawn resistance, principally from minority Republicans. A congressional aide briefed on White House plans for getting it ratified said last week that the White House was adding \$4.1 billion in funding for the U.S. nuclear arsenal in an effort to pick up the necessary votes.

Asked during his picture-taking session with Medvedev whether his administration was putting more money on the table for the nuclear program to get New START through the Senate, Obama declined to answer.

On other issues, Obama praised Medvedev for strongly condemning the beatings of journalists in Russia, and the U.S. president pushed for prosecution. The two leaders also discussed containment of Iran in its purported pursuit of nuclear weapons, and Obama and Medvedev have no disagreement about how to proceed, according to the Obama official's account.

Obama said, on another matter, he believes that Medvedev is bringing about reforms and is moving the country forward.

He said he supports Medvedev's pursuit of membership in the World Trade Organization, where negotiations face an impasse over a possible Georgian veto.

Georgia, whose relations with Russia are tense since the two fought a brief war in 2008, is a member of the WTO accession working group for Russia and has publicly said it wanted to block Russia's entry.

WTO members cannot execute veto rights for political reasons, but Georgia says it wants to station its own customs officials at the border between Russia and two Georgian breakaway regions that declared independence after the 2008 war.

Kremlin economic aide Arkady Dvorkovich said Medvedev and Obama discussed the Georgian veto issue. Russian officials said they believed that the United States could push Georgia into backing away from its demands.

Dvorkovich said the working group report, which will serve as a foundation for membership, would be ready next spring and Russia aimed to become a member next year.

Both Obama and Medvedev touted a close working relationship and friendship.

Obama extended thanks to Moscow for cooperation on Afghanistan and on a host of

international issues ranging from the Middle East to Sudan.

Medvedev said: "It has been very pleasant for me to have this meeting and discuss a whole range of bilateral and multilateral issues with my colleague. Indeed, we have a very good relationship. We understand each other very well. It's very important to attain agreement on a whole range of issues."

At the photo session with Medvedev, Obama said he looked forward to seeing him at a NATO summit in Portugal within days and said the pair has scheduled "a host of consultations so that we can reduce tensions and increase cooperation on various security matters in the European theater."

"Both he and I are racking up a lot of miles on our aircraft these days," Obama said, "but there's a lot of work to do, and I'm glad to have him as an excellent partner on a whole range of these issues."

Medvedev told reporters he wishes Obama "success" in reinvigorating the ailing U.S. economy, saying, "the status of the U.S. economy quickly affects the general state of the international economy."

(AP, Reuters)

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