

Fact Check: Half-Truths in New START Debate

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Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov following President Medvedev, Portugal's prime minister, front left, and NATO's secretary-general at Lisbon talks Saturday. **Daniel Ochoa de Olza**

WASHINGTON — In their showdown over the New START treaty with Russia, Democrats and Republicans are charging each other with undermining national security.

Who's right?

President Barack Obama's administration is pushing for a vote this year on New START; Republicans want a delay until a new Congress convenes in January. A closer look at the claims in the debate:

THE CLAIM: Opponents say it will limit U.S. options for future missile defense. "New START could hamper our ability to improve our missile-defense system — leaving us unable to destroy more than a handful of missiles at a time and vulnerable to attacks from around the globe," Republican Senator Jim DeMint wrote in the National Review in July.

THE FACTS: The treaty doesn't place any practical constraints on missile defense. The document's preamble, which is not legally binding, acknowledges a link between nuclear weapons and missile defense. It's an assertion that was accepted by former President George W. Bush's administration: The point of missile defense is to counteract nuclear-tipped missiles.

Opponents also point to Russia's assertion in a signing statement that it reserves the right to withdraw from the treaty if the United States significantly boosts its missile defenses. In fact, both sides have the right to withdraw from the treaty for any reason they believe is in their national interest.

The Soviet Union made a similar assertion when leaders signed the original 1991 START treaty, warning the country might withdraw if the United States did not respect the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. But when Bush withdrew from the ABM Treaty in 2001, Russia did not pull out of START. The START treaty held for the same reason it was signed: It was in each country's national interest.

The treaty does prohibit the conversion of offensive missile launchers to missile defense launchers and vice versa. But military officials say this does not pose any substantive restriction because it would be cheaper to build new missile defense launchers than convert existing offensive ones.

THE CLAIM: Opponents say Russia is likely to cheat and its compliance will be hard to verify. "I think the treaty is weak on verification, especially compared to previous treaties," Senator Kit Bond, the top Republican on the Senate Intelligence Committee, said on a radio program last month. "We will have much greater trouble determining if Russia is cheating and given Russia's track record, that's a real problem."

THE FACTS: Bond has said that a classified report raises concerns about Russian cheating. That's impossible to evaluate without seeing the document. But without the treaty, it would be even harder for the United States to make sure Russia is not covertly expanding or improving its nuclear or ballistic missile capabilities. The United States has not had inspectors in Russia checking its nuclear assets since the 1991 START treaty expired in December. The only quick way of getting them back is to bring a new treaty into force.

It's debatable whether U.S. treaty negotiators got the best terms on how they can conduct inspections, but the treaty followed hard-fought talks. The Soviet Union for years resisted allowing inspections at all. Without inspectors, the United States would have to rely on espionage and satellite monitoring, which are much less effective and more expensive than onsite inspection.

THE CLAIM: The treaty's backers say getting inspectors back on the ground in Russia is so urgent that the United States cannot afford to wait until next year. "This is not about politics," Obama said Thursday. "It's about national security. This is not a matter than can be delayed."

THE FACTS: The urgency is political. Next year the Republican ranks in the Senate will expand by six and it will be much more difficult to ratify the treaty. Even the administration concedes that the security risk is not immediate. "I am not particularly worried, near term," Obama's

top adviser on nuclear issues, Gary Samore, said Thursday. "But over time, as the Russians are modernizing their systems and starting to deploy new systems, the lack of inspections will create much more uncertainty."

Intelligence officials have expressed concerns that have sounded less than urgent.

"I think the earlier, the sooner, the better. You know, my thing is: From an intelligence perspective only, are we better off with it or without it? We're better off with it," the director of national intelligence, James Clapper, said recently.

THE CLAIM: Republicans, led by Senator Jon Kyl, say they won't consider the treaty until the Obama administration budgets adequate money for the nation's nuclear arsenal and the laboratories that oversee them. The treaty would reduce the limits on U.S. and Russian warheads, and Kyl says he needs assurances that the remaining nuclear arsenal is modernized and effective.

THE FACTS: The Obama administration has pledged \$85 billion to maintain the nuclear arsenal over the next 10 years, including a \$4.1 billion boost recently, in an attempt to address Kyl's concerns.

The president cannot guarantee Congress, which controls spending, will go along with those figures. Kyl has not said whether he thinks the pledge is enough. But it would lift average spending over the five years beginning 2012 nearly 30 percent over 2010 levels. Even before the administration's new pledge, Linton Brooks, who oversaw the nuclear laboratories as director of the National Nuclear Security Administration during the Bush administration, told an audience at a Washington think tank that he "would have killed for" the amount in this year's budget.

THE CLAIM: The treaty favors Russia because it does not deal with Russia's much larger arsenal of smaller tactical nuclear warheads intended for use on the battlefield in a conventional war. "New START gives Russia a massive nuclear weapon advantage over the United States. The treaty ignores tactical nuclear weapons, where Russia outnumbers us by as much as 10 to 1," former Massachusetts GOP governor and 2012 presidential hopeful Mitt Romney wrote last summer in The Washington Post.

THE FACTS: New START is intended to replace the 1991 START treaty, which also did not deal with tactical nuclear weapons. Russian and U.S. officials have both said that issue would be addressed in subsequent negotiations, along with the large number of U.S. warheads now in storage. Those U.S. warheads also were not addressed by New START.

Russia has maintained a large number of such weapons to address weaknesses in its conventional forces. But military analysts are dismissive of the military usefulness of these weapons, given the small chance that the United States and Russia would face off in a conventional war of tanks and combat forces. Talks on tactical nuclear weapons are unlikely to occur unless New START is approved.

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