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The START and Khodorkovsky Bellwether

By Richard Lourie

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In Yokohama, Japan, at the end of his 10-day Asia swing, U.S. President Barack Obama made a point of reassuring President Dmitry Medvedev that Senate ratification of New START would be his "top priority" during the lame-duck session of Congress. The New York Times noted the "chummy tone" of the Obama-Medvedev public exchanges. There was even some chatter in the press that Senate Republicans might opt to ratify the treaty to demonstrate that they could be reasonable and bipartisan — particularly when the obvious good of the country was involved — which in turn would allow them to be unreasonable and partisan on other issues later on.

But no such luck. The Republicans just couldn't wait to start being unreasonable and partisan. After first indicating that funds pledged for the modernization of the U.S. nuclear arsenal removed the sole obstacle to ratification, they suddenly found too many other issues and problems with the treaty to deal with it in the crowded lame-duck session that will end sometime before the December holidays. The funds had been allocated, more than 900

questions posed by senators had been answered, and the treaty itself was hardly controversial. It reduces the number of warheads and delivery systems, allows for mutual inspections that lapsed a year ago, and perhaps most important it binds the United States and Russia closer politically in a relationship that has already yielded significant results in Afghanistan and Iran.

Now Obama has rolled out big Republican security guns like former U.S. Secretaries of State Henry Kissinger and James Baker and U.S. Republican Senator Richard Lugar. Obama is making this a showdown, a test of his presidency with his prestige and influence on the line at home and abroad. This puts the Republicans in a tough spot because national security is not like health care, which is subject to blurring and smearing. But all Republican actions are directed toward a single goal — recapturing the White House in 2012 at all costs, even if it damages the country's security.

Medvedev should not think that the Republicans are motivated by a contemptuous disregard for Russia. They are, in fact, primarily motivated by a wanton disregard for the United States.

The Republicans will probably decide to humiliate Obama during the lame-duck session, but "after careful deliberation" during the break, they will most likely ratify the treaty after the start of the new congress, taking patriotic and legislative credit for themselves. There is also a slight possibility that they will let the treaty wither on the vine, but that would seem too shamelessly negligent even for this latest bunch.

A similar suspenseful and significant drama is being played out in Russia. A verdict will supposedly be reached in the second criminal case against former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky on Dec. 15. It will be a hopeful sign if Moscow finds a reasonable compromise — enough jail time, say two or three more years, to satisfy the hard-liners and keep Khodorkovsky out of circulation until after Russia's 2012 presidential election, but not so much that spite will have triumphed over self-interest.

The resolution of the Khodorkovsky case and New START ratification are also indications of which forces in the society have the upper hand and which direction those dominant forces are heading. If ratification falls through and Khodorkovsky's sentence is longer than three years, the worst tendencies in both societies will have triumphed. This is a lose-lose situation any way you look at it.

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