

Off to a New START

By [Daryl Kimball](#)

December 23, 2010



Against tough political odds, the administration of U.S. President Barack Obama has squared the circle on a number of long-running domestic and international nuclear policy debates. Beginning in 2009, Obama recommitted the United States to the goal of a “world without nuclear weapons,” beginning with overdue reductions in U.S. and Russian stockpiles. Within a year, he successfully negotiated the New START treaty with President Dmitry Medvedev that will reduce the number of deployed strategic warheads and delivery vehicles and reestablish a robust onsite inspection system.

Despite stiff opposition from some hard-line Republican senators, Obama and his Republican and Democratic allies in the Senate convinced a large, bipartisan majority to vote in favor of U.S. ratification of New START by a margin of 71-26.

The strong vote for the treaty is remarkable at this time of hyper-partisanship in Washington. As Democratic Senator John Kerry, head of the Foreign Relations Committee, has noted of this Senate, “70 is the new 95.”

Kerry and Republican Senator Richard Lugar, along with Obama and Vice President Joe Biden,

pursued a smart, patient plan to consult with Republican senators and take Republican concerns about the treaty into account. They turned back treaty-killing amendments from obstinate treaty opponents that would have required renegotiation with Russia.

In the end, New START won the Senate's support because it makes sense. The treaty will reduce the still enormous U.S. and Russian strategic nuclear deployments by nearly 30 percent. It will also further enhance U.S.-Russian cooperation on key issues, including containing Iran's nuclear program, securing vulnerable nuclear material from terrorists and opening the way for further reductions in all types of Russian and U.S. nuclear arms — strategic and nonstrategic, deployed and nondeployed.

To implement New START, the State Duma must now ratify the treaty. As Russia's leaders chart the course ahead, it is important to recognize that after years of simmering tensions under the administration of former President George W. Bush, Obama has sought to reset relations with Russia. The positive vote on New START is recognition that Russia is a vital partner, especially when it comes to Moscow's role in helping to contain Iran's nuclear ambitions and strengthen the global nonproliferation effort.

While the Senate debate demonstrated that Republican and Democratic senators are committed to pursuing "effective" missile defenses against nations like Iran and North Korea, the Obama administration abandoned the controversial Bush-era plan to deploy unproven strategic missile interceptors in Central Europe mainly because its effectiveness was extremely limited and because Iran is still years away from fielding long-range missiles.

The new U.S. "phased, adaptive approach" for missile defense over the next decade is better equipped to address Iran's short- and medium-range missile threats as they emerge, and it clearly does not threaten Russia's strategic nuclear retaliatory potential. Obama's missile defense plan is much smarter and could lead to cooperation rather than confrontation with Russia.

The next steps in U.S.-Russian arms control won't be easy, but they must be pursued. New START is vital, but it will leave the United States and Russia with far more strategic warheads — both deployed and stored — and strategic missiles and bombers than what is needed to deter nuclear attack.

Twenty years after the end of the Cold War, it is in the best interests of both Russia and the United States to further reduce their huge strategic nuclear stockpiles, phase out their Cold War-style targeting plans, tackle the problem of accounting for and reducing tactical nuclear weapons and, as Obama has said, engage the other nuclear-armed states in a dialogue on nuclear disarmament.

Further reductions should ideally be secured through a follow-on treaty, or, in the interim, through unilateral reciprocal reductions. Whatever the formula, it is clear that there is still more to be done. In the post-Cold War 21st century, nuclear weapons are much more of a liability than an asset. For all practical purposes, they are useless in deterring or responding to nuclear terrorism, and their use against conventional threats is unnecessary and unjustifiable.

In the coming months, the U.S. and Russian governments should begin high-level discussion

on how to accelerate the reductions mandated by New START and explore how they might reduce their arsenals to 1,000 or fewer deployed nuclear weapons of all types and restrict their role solely to deterring nuclear attack by others.

The message coming from the U.S. Senate is clear: Doing nothing or delaying action on pragmatic nuclear risk reduction steps is not a prudent option. It is now Russia's turn.

Daryl G. Kimball is executive director of Arms Control Association, an independent, nongovernmental organization in Washington, and publisher of the monthly journal, Arms Control Today.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2010/12/23/off-to-a-new-start-a3993>