The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
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State Duma Ratifies New START

January 25, 2011

The State Duma on Tuesday ratified in a third and final reading the New START nuclear arms pact with the United States, clearing the way for the passage of an agreement U.S. President Barack Obama has described as the most significant arms control deal in nearly two decades.

The State Duma voted 350-96 with one abstention to pass a bill to ratify New START, which was approved by the U.S. Senate late last year. The treaty will now go to the Federation Council for final approval.

The treaty's passage has never been in doubt in the Duma, but deputies wanted to counter a U.S. Senate resolution raising some Republican concerns that accompanied the December ratification by adding on a similar motion.

While the Senate resolution said the treaty shouldn't restrict U.S. plans to develop a missile defense system, the Duma ratification bill states that the treaty can only be fulfilled if emerging missile defenses don't erode the Russian nuclear deterrent.

The Russian draft bill also mimics the Senate resolution's concerns that the remaining nuclear arsenal is effective by emphasizing the need to modernize Russia's nuclear forces.

The Duma deputies said they felt obliged to present their view of the treaty's provisions, given the Senate interpretation.

"The State Duma proceeds from the assumption that the New START treaty can be functioning and viable only in conditions when there is no quantitative and qualitative buildup of the U.S. missile defense systems, developed independently or jointly with other countries," the Duma said in a statement accompanying the passage of the ratification bill.

NATO has approved a plan for a U.S.-led missile defense in Europe last fall and invited Russia to join. President Dmitry Medvedev was receptive of NATO's proposal but didn't make a definitive commitment.

Medvedev has warned that the failure to reach agreement on a joint European missile shield with Moscow may force Russia to deploy new offensive weapons and trigger a new arms race.

In its statement on Tuesday, the Duma also turned a cold shoulder to the U.S. push for a quick start of U.S.-Russian talks to cut short-range nuclear weapons.

Following similar statements from Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, the deputies said in their statement that such talks should also include missile defense, potential deployment of space-based weapons and conventional armaments. They also urged the United States to withdraw its tactical nuclear weapons in Europe.

New START would limit each country to 1,550 strategic warheads, down from the current ceiling of 2,200 and also re-establish a system for monitoring that ended in December 2009 with the expiration of the 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty signed by Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev and President George H.W. Bush.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2011/01/25/state-duma-ratifies-new-start-a4489