

New START Faces New Hurdles

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WASHINGTON — A U.S. congressional panel approved a defense bill early Thursday that would limit President Barack Obama's authority to implement the New START arms control treaty overwhelmingly approved by the Senate last December.

Over the objections of the Defense Department and Democrats, the House of Representatives Armed Services Committee approved a series of amendments directly related to Obama's ability to make nuclear weapons reductions as required by the U.S.-Russian treaty.

The Republican-controlled panel approved an amendment that would prohibit money to take nuclear weapons out of operation unless the administration provides a report to Congress on how it plans to modernize the remaining weapons.

The panel also adopted an amendment that says the president may not change the target list or move weapons out of Europe until he reports to Congress.

The votes are mostly symbolic because they are unlikely to pass the Democratic-controlled Senate. House Republicans, who have no constitutional authority to vote on a treaty, said they were ensuring the link between the treaty cuts and Obama's promise to modernize

the remaining weapons. They also complained that the treaty did not cover tactical nuclear weapons.

New START, signed by Obama and President Dmitry Medvedev in April 2010, would limit each country's strategic nuclear warheads to 1,550, down from the current ceiling of 2,200. It also would establish a system for monitoring and verification. U.S. weapons inspections ended in 2009 with the expiration of a 1991 treaty.

The Senate approved the treaty on a 71-26 vote, with 13 Republicans breaking with their party leaders.

The provisions added by the House panel to the \$553 billion defense-spending bill for next year are unlikely to survive in the Democratic-controlled Senate. Still, they elicited a fierce and lengthy debate in the committee.

Democrats criticized the measure for tying the president's hands now and in the future on reducing nuclear weapons, and trying to rewrite the treaty through the defense bill.

"If we stop implementation, Russia stops implementation," said Democratic Representative Rick Larsen.

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