

WebMemo



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START Follow-On Treaty: Balance Arms Control with Nuclear Modernization Progress

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As his Administration pursues a path toward nuclear disarmament, President Obama has stated that, in the meantime, he will seek to maintain an effective U.S. nuclear arsenal. A stepping stone in the path toward nuclear disarmament is a new treaty with Russia, currently under negotiation, to reduce strategic nuclear armaments on both sides. This treaty is to replace an expiring Cold War treaty called the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START).

President Obama's approach is problematic because it does not make clear what steps are required to sustain an effective nuclear arsenal. While President Obama is pursuing his arms-control objectives, the U.S. nuclear arsenal and the weapons infrastructure have already begun to atrophy and are in dire need of modernization. National security requires that the Senate not consent to the ratification of the START follow-on treaty until after there is sufficient nuclear modernization progress.

Linking Nuclear Modernization to START. Congress is so concerned about the state of the U.S. nuclear arsenal and weapons infrastructure that it included a provision in this year's Defense Authorization Act requiring the Administration to submit a report on its plan to modernize both the nuclear arsenal and the supporting nuclear weapons complex either before or at the time the START follow-on treaty is submitted to the Senate for advice and consent.¹

This provision, which is now law, was bolstered by a July 23 letter to President Obama from six senior Senators making the same demand for a nuclear modernization plan from the Administra-

tion. Thus, the issues of nuclear modernization and START follow-on treaty ratification are now linked.

Nuclear Atrophy. That the U.S. nuclear force and its supporting infrastructure are declining is beyond dispute. The following are just several of the many observations regarding the current state of the nuclear posture made by the Strategic Posture Commission in its May 6 report:

- “The infrastructure that supports two-thirds of the strategic deterrent triad—the SLBMs [submarine-launched ballistic missiles] and the ICBMs [intercontinental ballistic missiles]—is not being sustained”;
- “The process of remanufacturing [nuclear weapons] now underway introduces some uncertainty about the expected operational reliability of the weapons”;
- “The physical infrastructure [of the nuclear weapons complex] is in serious need of transformation”;
- “The intellectual infrastructure [behind the nuclear weapons complex] is also in serious trouble.”

Toward an “Effective” Nuclear Arsenal. Given that President Obama has pledged to maintain an effective U.S. nuclear arsenal for as long as nuclear weapons exist, it is critical that the Senate use the

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START follow-on treaty ratification process to define what the word *effective* means.

First and foremost, *effective* should mean that the U.S. nuclear arsenal, along with other elements of the broader strategic posture, serves to protect and defend America and America's allies against strategic attack. A worldwide set of targets representing the means of strategic attack must be held at risk, such that any nation contemplating such an attack understands that the likelihood of achieving the applicable political or military goals is low.

This definition of *effective* recognizes that the Cold War concept of deterrence based on mutual vulnerability and the threat of retaliation is not appropriate in either today's or tomorrow's world.

Fashioning the U.S. nuclear posture to support this protect-and-defend strategy requires a number of steps. Among them are:

- Sustained funding to maintain the nuclear weapons stockpile, including activities such as surveillance, certification, weapons production and modernization, and new plans to improve the safety, security, and reliability of nuclear warheads;
- Steps to modernize and strengthen the nuclear weapons complex, including initiatives to build new facilities, expand existing facilities, strengthen science and technology research, and preserve the nuclear weapons workforce;
- Modernize nuclear weapons delivery systems across the triad of ICBMs, SLBMs, and long-range bombers and build a nuclear-weapons-capable version of the F-35 aircraft.

A Problematic Approach. The Obama Administration's approach to arms control carries significant dangers for the already tenuous future of the U.S. nuclear weapons complex and arsenal. Specifically, there are three possible dangers that the Senate must be prepared to address:

1. The Obama Administration submits a plan for modernizing the U.S. nuclear weapons complex and arsenal that is insufficient to sustain an effective nuclear arsenal. Congress is requiring the Administration to submit a report on its plan to modernize both the nuclear arsenal and the supporting nuclear weapons complex for a reason:

to secure an effective nuclear arsenal. Therefore, Congress should not pretend that just receiving any plan from the Obama Administration will satisfy its policy objectives.

2. The Obama Administration submits a plan that is sufficient to sustain an effective nuclear arsenal but, after the ratification of the START follow-on treaty, abandons its strategy. The relevant provision of the Defense Authorization Act makes it clear that, in order to serve its purpose, the Administration's modernization plan must extend for 10 years. There is little value in a plan—even if the plan is well designed—if its sole purpose is to gain Senate consent for the ratification of the START follow-on treaty.
3. Congress refuses to fund a nuclear modernization plan submitted by the Obama Administration. Even if the Obama Administration submits a sufficient modernization plan and remains committed to it for the long term, there is no guarantee that the U.S. nuclear arsenal will be effective in the future. After all, Congress is responsible for funding the program and can abandon it following ratification of the START follow-on treaty. It can do so by simply refusing to fund the program.

What's the Rush? Given the risks inherent to producing an effective nuclear arsenal, the Senate should not be in a rush to consent to the ratification of a START follow-on treaty. The treaty will carry unacceptable risks to U.S. security if it is not accompanied by the necessary nuclear modernization steps.

Until there is irreversible progress in modernizing the nuclear weapons complex and arsenal, America's national security interests demand that the Senate not grant consent to a START follow-on treaty—even if it otherwise merits support.

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1. Defense Authorization Act of 2009, Public Law 111–84, Section 1251.