



BULLETIN

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COMMENTARY

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Prospects for US Ratification of Disarmament Treaty with Russia

by Bartosz Wiśniewski

Republican criticism of some provisions of the disarmament treaty with Russia poses no threat to its ratification by the United States. But success with ratification diminishes the Obama administration's chances of pushing through its other nuclear policy measures.

For the treaty of April 8, reducing US and Russian nuclear arsenals, to be binding on the United States, the ratification motion requires the consent of the US Senate, by a majority of two thirds of the senators present. The Obama administration may count on all Democratic senators (57 out of 100), but it needs at least 67 votes to rest assured of success, which means it will have to woo Republicans (41) and independents (2).

Already during the negotiating stage, influential Republicans such as Senators John McCain and Jon Kyl declared they would withhold their support if the treaty restricted US freedom to develop missile defence capabilities. Consequently, the criticism during the ratification debate will focus on (i) the fact that the parties gave up installing missile defence interceptors in intercontinental (including submarine launched) ballistic missile launchers or placing ballistic missiles in interceptor silos (Art. V-3) and (ii) the contents of the preamble which recognises the existence of the interrelationship between strategic offensive arms and strategic defensive arms. The Republicans may also present as an impediment to ratification the Russian declaration accompanying the treaty which links its validity to the US refraining from a "quantitative and qualitative" expansion of its missile defence capabilities and which reserves for Russia the right to revoke the treaty if such expansion poses a threat to the effectiveness of its nuclear arsenal. Finally, some Republican senators may wish to use the ratification vote to manifest their opposition to the administration's other strategic arms decisions, e.g. on abandoning research and development of new types of nuclear warheads.

But these objections are unlikely to derail ratification. The administration needs the support of a relatively few Republican senators—and the approval of treaty by some Republican leaders, such as Senator Richard Lugar, will certainly bolster these attempts. The reluctance of other Republicans can be mitigated by investments in the modernisation of the existing nuclear arms, already announced by the Obama administration. With US political debate highly polarised, it may be that some in the opposition will be willing to reject the treaty so as to ruin the Obama administration's greatest international success so far—but the Republicans would then risk charges of undermining the traditional bipartisan consensus around strategic arms reduction for political gain. Treaty ratification is thus unlikely to become a major issue in the campaign before the Congressional election in November, expected to be dominated by domestic and economic topics.

It is not inconceivable, though, that while getting the Republican consent to treaty ratification, the Obama administration will be forced to forego seeking Senate backing for the ratification of the comprehensive nuclear test ban treaty (CTBT). This issue provokes much more controversy in the US that the strategic arms reduction, as reflected in the 1999 fiasco of CTBT ratification and the circumstance that even those Republicans who back strategic arms reduction tend to be opponents of a US formal commitment to abandon nuclear tests.