

Key U.S. Lawmaker Noncommittal New START

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WASHINGTON — A Republican senator who holds pivotal sway on the fate of the New START arms treaty with Russia called a proposal by President Barack Obama's administration aimed at winning his support "a step in the right direction."

But Senator Jon Kyl of Arizona remained noncommittal on New START and cast doubt on whether it could be considered for ratification this year.

The administration is pushing to get enough Republican support for a vote before the Democrats' majority shrinks by six in January. In a meeting in Japan over the weekend, Obama reassured President Dmitry Medvedev of his commitment to winning approval in the so-called lame duck session before most new lawmakers take their post in January.

Last week the administration sought to satisfy Kyl's conditions for supporting the treaty with a proposal to significantly boost funding for the nation's nuclear weapons complex. A congressional aide briefed on White House plans told The Associated Press last week that the White House was proposing to add \$4.1 billion that would go to maintaining and modernizing

the arsenal and the laboratories that oversee that effort. U.S. government officials traveled to Kyl's home state to make the proposal.

Asked following an awards ceremony honoring him Monday night whether the offer was sufficient to win his support, Kyl said: "I don't know, but it certainly is a step in the right direction."

Kyl called the prospects for ratifying the treaty this year "less likely than originally thought," because of other pressing demands on the Senate schedule including tax and government funding issues. But Democrats are likely to bring up the treaty for a vote during the lame duck session if they believe that they have enough votes to approve it.

Kyl's support is crucial because a number of his Republican colleagues have said they will follow his lead on the treaty. So his approval could push support beyond the 67 votes the administration needs for ratification in the 100-member Senate.

Kyl has maintained that boosting funding for the stockpile would ease Republican concerns about the treaty by demonstrating that the administration is serious about maintaining a robust U.S. nuclear deterrent. The treaty would reduce U.S. and Russian limits on strategic warheads to 1,550 for each country from the current ceiling of 2,200. It also would set up new procedures to allow both countries to inspect each other's arsenals to verify compliance.

Some Republicans have argued that the treaty would limit U.S. missile defense options and does not provide adequate procedures to verify that Russia is living up to its terms. Advocates dispute both charges.

The administration is worried that ratification could slip out of reach if a vote were delayed until the new Senate is seated next year.

Failure to win passage could trip up one of the administration's top foreign policy goals: improving relations with Russia. The treaty, signed in April by Obama and Medvedev, has been the most tangible sign of success, and failure to get it ratified could be viewed as a rebuke in Moscow. It also would leave Obama's push for even greater restrictions on the world's nuclear arsenal in doubt.

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