

U.S. Poised to Ratify New START

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The U.S. Senate was poised to approve the New START nuclear arms pact with Russia on Wednesday, handing President Barack Obama a huge victory on his top foreign policy priority.

Passage of the treaty appeared assured after 11 Republicans joined Democrats in a 67-28 procedural vote Tuesday to end debate on the pact. That signaled that Obama should have the two-thirds majority he needs when the Senate votes on final approval of the treaty Wednesday.

Its ratification would mark a big comeback for Obama's arm controls efforts after the treaty appeared all but dead just weeks ago. It also would allow Obama to continue efforts to improve relations with Russia.

"We are on the brink of writing the next chapter in the 40-year history of wrestling with the threat of nuclear weapons," Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman John Kerry, a Democrat, said after the procedural vote.

Obama and President Dmitry Medvedev signed New START in April. It would limit each country's strategic nuclear warheads to 1,550, down from the current ceiling of 2,200. It

would also establish a system for monitoring and verification. U.S. weapons inspections ended a year ago with the expiration of a 1991 treaty. "START" stands for Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty.

Medvedev has signaled that the State Duma would ratify New START as soon as the U.S. Senate had given its approval.

Medvedev, visiting Mumbai, India, on Wednesday, wished Obama luck on ratifying New START.

Obama's administration was adamant that it be ratified this year because the Democrats' majority in the Senate is set to shrink by five in January and waiting could have meant months of delay or defeat.

Republicans accused Democrats of rushing approval of the treaty for political reasons. They have asserted that it would limit U.S. missile defense options and argued that it has insufficient procedures to verify Russia's adherence.

When Senator Jon Kyl, the leading Republican on negotiations over the treaty, suggested a delay last month, Obama appeared unlikely to find the nine Republican votes needed for passage.

But he and top members of his administration lobbied intensely, with Obama postponing his Christmas vacation in Hawaii.

Obama has insisted the treaty is a national security imperative that will improve cooperation with Russia, an argument loudly echoed by the nation's military and foreign policy leaders, former Presidents George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton and six Republican secretaries of state.

In a new appeal for ratification, Defense Secretary Robert Gates said Tuesday that the treaty would "strengthen our leadership role in stopping the proliferation of nuclear weapons, and provide the necessary flexibility to structure our strategic nuclear forces to best meet national security interests."

Vice President Joe Biden and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made a rare visit to the Capitol on Tuesday to lobby lawmakers.

In the end, they persuaded enough Republicans to defy the party's top two leaders in the Senate, Minority Leader Mitch McConnell and his deputy Kyl, and support the pact.

"We know when we've been beaten," Republican Senator Orrin Hatch told reporters hours before Tuesday's vote.

Even the Senate's No. 3 Republican, Lamar Alexander, endorsed the accord, saying he was assured that U.S. defenses would not be weakened.

The treaty will leave the United States "with enough nuclear warheads to blow any attacker to kingdom come," Alexander said on the Senate floor.

Republicans had tried to kill the treaty by forcing changes in its language that would have sent

it back for negotiations with Moscow. Democrats were working to appease some Republican senators by letting them raise these issues in legislation accompanying the treaty that would not directly affect the treaty.

Most Republicans remained opposed.

"The administration did not negotiate a good treaty," Kyl said. "They went into the negotiations — it seems to me — with the attitude with the Russians just like the guy who goes into the car dealership and says, 'I'm not leaving here until I buy a car.'"

Though Kyl looks likely to vote on the losing side of the debate over the treaty, in his negotiations with the administration he did win Obama's commitment to modernize the remaining U.S. nuclear arsenal with projected spending of \$85 billion over 10 years.

(AP, MT)

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