

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2010

Remarks Prior to a Meeting on the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty and an Exchange With Reporters

November 18, 2010

The President. I want to begin by thanking the incredible leaders who are around this table, not only the Vice President and the Secretary of State, but also some of the most able statesmen from both parties that we've had in modern American history, who are sitting around this table.

We are here to discuss the importance of ratifying the START Treaty. And let me be clear: It is in the national security imperative—it is a national security imperative that the United States ratify the new START Treaty this year.

There is no higher national security priority for the lame duck session of Congress. The stakes for American national security are clear, and they are high. The new START Treaty responsibly reduces the number of nuclear weapons and launchers that the United States and Russia deploy, while fully maintaining America's nuclear deterrent.

If we ratify this treaty, we're going to have a verification regime in place to track Russia's strategic nuclear weapons, including U.S. inspectors on the ground. If we don't, then we don't have a verification regime: no inspectors, no insights into Russia's strategic arsenal, no framework for cooperation between the world's two nuclear superpowers. As Ronald Reagan said, we have to trust, but we also have to verify. In order for us to verify, we've got to have a treaty.

The new START Treaty is also a cornerstone of our relations with Russia. And this goes beyond nuclear security. Russia's been fundamental to our efforts to put strong sanctions in place to put pressure on Iran to deal with its nuclear program. It's been critical in supporting our troops in Afghanistan through the Northern Distribution Network. It's been critical in working with us to secure all vulnerable nuclear materials around the world and to enhance European security.

We cannot afford to gamble on our ability to verify Russia's strategic nuclear arms. And we can't jeopardize the progress that we've made in securing vulnerable nuclear materials or in maintaining a strong sanctions regime against Iran. These are all national interests of the highest order.

Let me also say—and I think the group around the table will confirm—that this new START Treaty is completely in line with a tradition of bipartisan cooperation on this issue. This is not a Democratic concept; this is not a Republican concept. This is a concept of American national security that has been promoted by Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and now my administration.

We've taken the time to do this right. To ensure that the treaty got a fair hearing, we submitted to the Senate last spring. Because of the leadership of John Kerry and Dick Lugar, there have been 18 hearings on this subject. There have been multiple briefings. It has been fully and carefully vetted and has the full endorsement of our Nation's military leadership. Our Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Hoss Cartwright is here and will confirm that this is in our national security interests.

My administration is also prepared to go the extra mile to ensure that our remaining stockpile and nuclear infrastructure is modernized, which I know is a key concern of many around this table and also many on Capitol Hill. We've committed to invest \$80 billion on the effort to modernize over the next decade. And based on our consultations with Senator Kyl, we've agreed to request an additional \$4.1 billion over the next 5 years.

So the key point here is, this is not about politics, it's about national security. This is not a matter that can be delayed. Every month that goes by without a treaty means that we are not able to verify what's going on on the ground in Russia. And if we delay indefinitely, American leadership on nonproliferation and America's national security will be weakened.

Now, as Senator Reid said yesterday, there is time on the Senate calendar to get this treaty ratified this year. So I've asked Vice President Biden to focus on this issue day and night until it gets done. It's important to our national security to let this treaty go up for a vote. I'm confident that it's the right thing to do. The people around this table think it's the right thing to do.

I would welcome the press to query the leadership here, people who have been National Security Advisers, Secretaries of State, and key advisers, Defense Secretaries for Democratic and Republican administrations, and they will confirm that this is the right thing to do.

So we've got a lot on our plate during this lame duck session. I recognize that, given the difficulties in the economy, that there may be those—perhaps Democrats and Republicans on the Hill—who think this is not a top priority. I would not be emphasizing this and these folks would not have traveled all this way if we didn't feel that this was absolutely important to get done now.

And so I'm looking forward to strong cooperation between Democrats and Republicans on Capitol Hill, as exemplified by John Kerry and Dick Lugar, to get this done over the course of the next several weeks.

All right? Thank you very much.

Congressional Vote

Q. Do you have the votes in the Senate?

The President. I'm confident that we should be able to get the votes. Keep in mind that every President since Ronald Reagan has presented a arms treaty with Russia and been able to get ratification. And for the most part, these treaties have been debated on the merits; the majority of them have passed overwhelmingly with bipartisan support. There's no reason that we shouldn't be able to get that done this time as well.

All right? Thank you, guys. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:36 a.m. in the Roosevelt Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to former Secretaries of State Madeleine K. Albright, James A. Baker III, and Henry A. Kissinger; former Secretaries of Defense William S. Cohen and William J. Perry; former National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft; and former Senator Samuel A. Nunn.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, meeting on; Interviews With the News Media : Exchanges with reporters :: White House.

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Names: Albright, Madeleine K.; Baker, James A., III; Biden, Joseph R., Jr.; Bush, George H.W.; Bush, George W.; Cartwright, James E.; Clinton, Hillary Rodham; Clinton, William J.; Cohen, William S.; Kerry, John F.; Kissinger, Henry A.; Kyl, Jon L.; Lugar, Richard G.; Nunn, Samuel A.; Perry, William J.; Reid, Harry; Scowcroft, Brent.

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