

Incoming GOP Senators Call for Delay on New START Ratification Vote

By Emily Cadei, CQ Staff

Ten Republicans elected to the Senate in November jumped into the debate over whether to ratify a contested arms control treaty with Russia this year, calling on Democrats to hold off on a vote until the new Congress is seated in 2011.

The White House and Senate Democrats have been making a last-minute push to hold a vote before the end of the year, likely in recognition of the tougher math that faces them in the Senate next year. It takes two-thirds of the Senate — 67 votes if the entire chamber is present and voting — to approve ratification of the accord (Treaty Doc 111-5), known as New START. In the current Senate, that means Democrats need to win over nine Republicans, but next year they would have to rally support from 14.

“We’re going to do our best to get a vote on the START treaty,” Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., said Thursday. He noted that only a simple majority vote is needed to take a treaty up on the Senate floor.

The entering GOP class, however, says it wants a say on the accord, under which Russia and the United States agree to reduce their strategic nuclear stockpiles by one-third.

“One of the most important tasks of the 112th Congress will be to carefully consider measures that protect the national security of the United States,” the 10 Republicans wrote to Reid on Thursday. “Few matters will more directly impact our security than arms control agreements like New START that would dramatically reduce the U.S. nuclear deterrent in a strategic environment that is becoming ever more perilous.”

“Out of respect for our states’ voters, we believe it would be improper for the Senate to consider the New START Treaty or any other treaty in a lame-duck session prior to Jan. 3, 2011,” the letter said.

The letter was signed by Roy Blunt of Missouri, John Boozman of Arkansas, Rob Portman of Ohio, Jerry Moran of Kansas, Mike Lee of Utah, Ron Johnson of Wisconsin, John Hoeven of North Dakota, Kelly Ayotte of New Hampshire, Rand Paul of Kentucky and Marco Rubio of Florida. The only incoming GOP senator not included was Mark Steven Kirk of Illinois, who is expected to be sworn in during the lame-duck session.

White House Pressure

The White House is trying to salvage a vote in the current Congress and remains in negotiations with the Republican point man on the accord, Minority Whip Jon Kyl of Arizona.

President Obama expressed confidence Thursday that the treaty could still be approved this year. White House spokesman Robert Gibbs told reporters that the administration has the votes for ratification, even without Kyl’s support.

“This is not about politics,” Obama said. “It’s about national security. This is not a matter that can be delayed.”

But even some Democrats are signaling that they might not be willing to go along. Ben Nelson of Nebraska issued a statement Thursday saying that he will not support New START or other key bills until Congress acts to extend the full range of tax cuts that are expiring Dec. 31.

The biggest setback for Obama came Nov. 16 when Kyl announced that he did not think there was enough time for debate in the current lame-duck session. Senate Republicans have continued to echo that conclusion.

Two other Republicans who have previously expressed openness to voting for the treaty have also argued that Republican gains in the midterm elections warrant a delay. "I think trying to pass a treaty during a lame-duck session like this just appears to be trying to do something at a time when there's a numbers advantage," Tennessee Republican Bob Corker said Nov. 16.

Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., echoed that argument in an interview Nov. 17. "We just had a major sea change election," he said. "You've got new members coming into the body who've expressed a desire to have a say about this."

The White House and other treaty backers are trying to counter that narrative with a public relations push, hoping to put pressure on Republicans by arguing the delay in ratification jeopardizes national security.

Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr. hosted a meeting Thursday morning with Obama; Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton; Senate Foreign Relations Chairman John Kerry, D-Mass., and ranking member Richard G. Lugar, R-Ind.; Gen. James Cartwright of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; and several former secretaries of Defense and State who support the treaty, in a show of solidarity to reiterate that point.

During the meeting, Obama said he was assigning Biden full-time to the job of securing START ratification.

In addition, the American Values Network, an advocacy group headed by a former aide to Clinton and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., launched a new six-figure television, radio and e-mail campaign Thursday in Arizona, Tennessee, Ohio, Florida, and Mississippi that sought to target conservative voters and convince them that the treaty is in America's security interests. "Now no one watches Russia's nuclear weapons," says the ad's narrator, in reference to the lack of American inspectors on the ground in Russia since the original START treaty expired last year. The new treaty would restart those inspections. "Tell your senator we must ratify New START now," the ad concludes.

Brian Friel contributed to this story.

A version of this article appeared in the [Nov. 19, 2010 print issue of CQ Today](#)

Source: CQ Today Online News

Round-the-clock coverage of news from Capitol Hill.

© 2010 CQ Roll Call All Rights Reserved.