

10 Challenges to US Security if the Senate Fails to Ratify New START

“I believe, and the rest of the military leadership in this country believes, that this treaty is essential to our future security...I hope the Senate will ratify it quickly.”
(November 12, 2010)

Admiral Mike Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff

Key Findings

- If the Senate fails to ratify New START before the Congress goes out of session for the year, the United States will lose significant national security and intelligence benefits.
- The bipartisan resolution of ratification amended and passed by a clear majority of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee is void if the full Senate fails to move forward with ratification this year.
- Delaying a vote until the next Congress means that New START risks never being taken up again. Other legislation that the new Congress must consider next year will compete for Senate time and could make it impossible to fully vet the agreement or put it to a vote.
- Even under the most optimistic scenarios, it will be months before the Senate can complete another review of the treaty and move the agreement to the floor.
- With a new Congress starting in January 2011 that will include newly elected members who have little familiarity with the treaty’s provisions, the Senate would literally have to start from scratch.

Failure to ratify New START will create many new national security challenges for the United States. Here are ten:

1. Undermining US Stature in the World

The United States will lose stature and credibility if a treaty that is vital to both global and national security cannot be ratified because of domestic politics.

American influence to promote nuclear restraint globally depends on the US honoring its commitments to other powers, including Russia. A failure to ratify START this year

will damage the US-Russian relationship, could play to Russian opponents of US-Russian cooperation, and ultimately reverse the progress the US has made in unifying the large powers to act decisively against urgent security threats such as Iran.

Russian assistance in non-proliferation, counter-narcotics, counter-terrorism, and the quest for stability in Afghanistan will be compromised if there is a stalemate or decline in US-Russian relations stemming from a US failure to ratify START.

At the recent NATO summit in Lisbon, the allies urged the US to move without delay to ratify the START treaty, stressing the importance of START to their own security and as an essential part of the support the US has elicited among European states and Russia for missile defense.

“I have received overwhelming support from our allies here that START — the New START treaty — is a critical component to U.S. and European security...and they have urged both privately and publicly that this gets done.” (November 21, 2010)

President Barack Obama

2. Uncertainty about the US-Russian Nuclear Balance

Without a formal and verifiable agreement, there will be no constraints on or predictability about the level and type of nuclear forces the Russians deploy, making it much more difficult – and expensive – for the United States to plan and size its forces. The US may be forced to revert to “worst case” predictions to plan its own forces instead of the more precise and cost effective criteria that come with the transparency provided under START.

“If we don’t get the treaty, [the Russians] are not constrained in their development of force structure and ...we have no insight into what they’re doing. So it’s the worst of both possible worlds.” (June 6, 2010)

General Kevin Chilton, US STRATCOM Commander

3. An Uncertain Future for Modernization

The administration has proposed unprecedentedly large increases in funding for the modernization and refurbishment of the nuclear infrastructure over the next ten years, recently adding an additional \$4.1 billion to the \$80 billion the Senate had already approved.

The recognition of the need for augmented investment in nuclear facilities has prompted a former NNSA director, Linton Brooks, to quip: “this is a budget I would have killed for.”

No matter how strong the commitment to modernization currently, a failure to ratify the START treaty – in a climate of mounting pressures from both parties to cut the federal budget – will undercut the bipartisan consensus in favor of these large budgetary increases and could lead to a failure to make needed investments.

“Concerns about modernization … are not an argument against the treaty. They are an argument for building a political consensus between the administration and Congress on what needs to be funded now and what can be deferred. In this respect, the treaty provides a vehicle whereby some Democrats not usually known for their support of strategic systems can bring themselves to commit to modernization, while, at the same time, some Republicans not usually known for their support for arms control can bring themselves to vote for ratification. Conversely, rejecting the treaty may well break this consensus and result in no modernization of our forces.” (September 22, 2010)

Lt. General Brent Scowcroft, USAF (Ret.), President George H.W. Bush’s National Security Advisor

4. Constraints on US Intelligence

Without New START, the US is deprived of the vital intelligence it receives from having trained inspectors on the ground to closely monitor Russian nuclear forces and facilities.

The US uses national technical means to augment intelligence from onsite inspections. Overhead surveillance and other such intelligence capabilities are much less precise and inevitably face constraints in light of the many other demands on intelligence assets, especially from the Middle East and Afghanistan.

“We need to get our inspectors back into Russia after a gap of nearly a year. As our intelligence and defense colleagues have repeatedly noted, we are much better off with New START than without it. Jim Clapper, the Director of National Intelligence, said yesterday, the earlier, the sooner, the better. We need the stability, transparency, and predictability that New START will provide by giving us insight into Russia’s strategic nuclear arsenal.” (November 17, 2010)

Hillary Clinton, Secretary of State

5. Less Bang for the Buck

Without a formal agreement that sets reliable ceilings on Russian strategic weapons, the US will have to program funds for weapons it planned to retire and may need to redirect resources from other, more urgent defense priorities to hedge against unknown Russian developments.

At a time of severe budget cuts and accelerating demands for defense resources, a failure to ratify New START could force the Chiefs to make difficult sacrifices that impinge on critical priorities – from the war in Afghanistan to improvements in advanced conventional capabilities under Prompt Global Strike, to medical benefits for veterans.

“Without New START we will be compelled to waste military resources, not to mention tax dollars. A precise accounting of the Russian arsenal and predictability going forward informs our strategic force structure. Frankly, it is to our advantage to verifiably reduce the Russian deployment because it allows us to use our resources more effectively.” (November 15, 2010)

Lt. Gen John Castellaw, USMC (Ret.)

6. A Loss of Intelligence Assets

Without a treaty in place, the United States cannot count on getting the intelligence we need from the highly skilled on site inspectors who have developed the experience and technical expertise to effectively implement verification provisions and keep close tabs on Russia.

Each day the inspectors cannot be on the job, the individuals who have spent years training to understand and monitor Russian nuclear activities risk frustration from being unable to do their jobs and ultimately may opt to seek new opportunities for more productive employment.

The loss of experienced inspectors and their special expertise would have an incalculably adverse impact on US intelligence capabilities, chilling prospects for future agreements with Russia (or any other country) that need to be verified with confidence.

7. Stalled Progress in Nuclear Security: The Russian Tactical Nuclear Arsenal

If the Senate fails to complete the New START treaty, it will be impossible to move ahead to achieve new agreements with Russia, including to reduce and secure their large and dangerous arsenal of tactical nuclear weapons.

As long as Russia keeps thousands of tactical nuclear weapons without agreed constraints or a verification regime, they pose a risk to the security of our NATO allies and heighten the danger of terrorist compromise.

“The principal result of non-ratification would be to throw the whole nuclear negotiating situation into a state of chaos.” (June 10, 2010)

Lt. General Brent Scowcroft, USAF (Ret.), President George H.W. Bush’s National Security Advisor

8. No Future for Nuclear Threat Reduction

The failure to implement the START agreement could make it impossible to sustain ongoing cooperative efforts to secure and dismantle the stockpiles of mass destruction weapons and materiel dispersed across the territory of the former Soviet Union.

The Cooperative Threat Reduction Program, also known as Nunn-Lugar, is the most successful counter proliferation agreement the world has ever seen. It has reduced and secured the stockpiles and facilities of dangerous technologies of many former Soviet republics and contained the most likely source of supply of unconventional weapons to terrorists.

The risk of terrorists gaining access to nuclear material – or even to a weapon – will increase without Russian willingness to continue and extend cooperative efforts under Nunn-Lugar. The US would lose the ability to monitor developments in the region with any confidence, a vital element of efforts to contain global proliferation.

“It is unlikely that Moscow would sustain cooperative efforts indefinitely without the New START treaty coming into force. The Nunn-Lugar Umbrella Agreement expires in 2013. The prospects for extending Nunn-Lugar work in Russia after that date would be especially complicated without New START’s transparency features that assure both countries about the nuclear capabilities of the other.” (November 8, 2010)

Sen. Richard Lugar (R-IN)

9. Effects on the Global Non-Proliferation Regime

The viability of the global non-proliferation regime, including efforts to contain outlier states like Iran and North Korea, depends on Russian support and cooperation.

Russia aside, other countries may be less inclined to follow American leadership or join US-sponsored initiatives if they perceive that the US is too hobbled by domestic politics to honor its commitments or ratify a simple strategic arms treaty.

Failure to ratify this treaty “would have a detrimental effect on our ability to influence others with regard to, particularly, the nonproliferation issue.” (April 29, 2010)

James Schlesinger, Secretary of Defense for Presidents Nixon and Ford

10. Unraveling the American Security Consensus

Military leaders from successive administrations have come forward to urge prompt ratification of New START in the highest interest of national security.

A failure to ratify – in defiance of our military’s best advice – will have severe effects on American political cohesion and the long-standing consensus among all Americans to subordinate politics when it comes to issues of national security.

“The New START Treaty has the unanimous support of America’s military leadership.” (April 3, 2010)

Robert Gates, US Secretary of Defense

The Bottom Line

“...We have to hold elected officials of either party to account for their behavior on a matter of consequence such as this and not just let them get by with a rubber stamped negative vote. They have to say why they’re doing that and it has to make sense.

“These are matters of ultimate consequence, survival perhaps, who knows, we owe it to our children, we owe it to future generations to do what’s right here and not calculate the politics.” (July 19, 2010)

Gary Hart former Senator (D-CO)

Building a New American Arsenal

The American Security Project (ASP) is a bipartisan initiative to educate the American public about the changing nature of national security in the 21st century.

Gone are the days when a nation's strength could be measured by bombers and battleships. Security in this new era requires a New American Arsenal harnessing all of America's strengths: the force of our diplomacy; the might of our military; the vigor of our economy; and the power of our ideals.

We believe that America must lead other nations in the pursuit of our common goals and shared security. We must confront international challenges with all the tools at our disposal. We must address emerging problems before they become security crises. And to do this, we must forge a new bipartisan consensus at home.

ASP brings together prominent American leaders, current and former members of Congress, retired military officers, and former government officials. Staff direct research on a broad range of issues and engages and empowers the American public by taking its findings directly to them.

We live in a time when the threats to our security are as complex and diverse as terrorism, the spread of weapons of mass destruction, climate change, failed and failing states, disease, and pandemics. The same-old solutions and partisan bickering won't do. America needs an honest dialogue about security that is as robust as it is realistic.

ASP exists to promote that dialogue, to forge consensus, and to spur constructive action so that America meets the challenges to its security while seizing the opportunities the new century offers.



American Security Project

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