

RELEASE IN FULL

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From: Withers, Anne M
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Subject: (Reuters) U.S. Senate panel approves new arms treaty with Russia

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - A U.S. Senate panel approved a new strategic nuclear arms control treaty with Russia on September 16, advancing one of President Barack Obama's main foreign policy priorities to an uncertain future in the full Senate. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee voted 14-4 to approve the new START treaty. The full Senate must consent to the agreement before it can go into effect, but with Congress in the hottest part of the political season before mid-term congressional elections, it is unclear when the treaty will get a vote on the Senate floor. The agreement signed by Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev in April commits former Cold War foes Washington and Moscow to reducing deployed nuclear warheads by about 30 percent.

It picked up some Republican support in the foreign relations committee from Senators Bob Corker and Johnny Isakson. They voted aye along with Richard Lugar, previously the only Senate Republican who had publicly supported the treaty. But since 67 votes are needed to meet the two-thirds minimum required for treaties to pass the full Senate, at least eight Republicans will have to vote for it. Most Republicans have remained uncommitted for months, leaving the treaty's fate in limbo. The weak Republican support to date and the fact the Senate has a lot of business to take care of before the congressional November 2 elections, makes the new START treaty a likely candidate for the "lame duck" session to follow.

Obama wants the new START ratified this year as part of his "reset" of relations with Russia and a step toward his goal of a world without nuclear weapons. Russia must also ratify the treaty, but is waiting to see what the United States will do. The treaty is broadly supported as an important step forward in arms control by former senior security officials from both Republican and Democratic administrations. But some Republican senators say they worry it may limit U.S. missile defenses, and some want Obama to promise to spend more money modernizing the nuclear weapons that remain.