

Obama appeals to Republicans to back Russia arms treaty

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The Obama administration has launched a full-scale effort to appeal to Senate Republicans to approve the New START weapons treaty with Russia. The campaign is significant both for its politics—lobbying for Republican support by invoking the Cold War policies of Ronald Reagan—and for the decision to focus on this issue above all others in the current lame duck session of Congress, including the impending expiration of unemployment benefits for two million jobless workers.

The White House campaign began with an appearance by Obama alongside former secretary of state Henry Kissinger—long linked to war crimes in Vietnam, Chile and other countries targeted by US imperialism—and other ex-officials. It continued with the president's radio speech Saturday and interviews on Sunday morning television talk shows by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Admiral Michael Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The new treaty would replace the START agreement negotiated by the administration of George W. Bush and the Vladimir Putin government in Russia, which expired last December, cutting off—among other things—the mutual inspection process under which US and Russian experts monitored each others' nuclear weapons facilities.

New START would extend the very minor reductions in nuclear weapons stockpiles carried out by Bush and Putin, while keeping intact enough nuclear capability to destroy all human life on the planet many times over.

A major purpose of the treaty, from the standpoint of American imperialism, is to keep the Russian government on board as a facilitator in the war in Afghanistan (much US military equipment passes through Russia on the way to the battlefield) and in the

campaign led by Washington to isolate Iran and impose economic sanctions.

Obama cited both these reasons in his radio speech, noting the importance of Russian cooperation in relation to both Afghanistan and Iran. But his main focus was not on Russia but on the Republican Party.

In the course of the five-minute address, he dropped the name of Ronald Reagan four times, along with the names of four former Republican secretaries of state—Colin Powell, George Shultz, James Baker and Kissinger—and the ranking Republican on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Richard Lugar of Indiana. He also cited the concerns of the leading Republican critic of the treaty, Senator Jon Kyl of Arizona.

Obama began his address by declaring, “This Treaty is rooted in a practice that dates back to Ronald Reagan.” He went on to support a massive modernization of US nuclear weapons production facilities, pledging “to invest at least \$85 billion in that effort over the next ten years—a significant increase from the Bush Administration.”

The amount of money earmarked for refurbishing Los Alamos, Oak Ridge and other facilities for making weapons that could kill hundreds of millions of people exceeds the total amount committed to New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina or to the entire Gulf Coast after the BP oil spill.

The same day, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, while visiting Santiago, Chile, warned that failure of the Senate to Pass the START treaty would have “significant consequences” in terms of Russian cooperation with US foreign policy.

Hillary Clinton, the secretary of state, sounded the same theme in Sunday interviews on CBS, NBC and Fox, calling treaty ratification a vital national security

issue. On CBS, she rebuffed a suggestion from host Bob Schieffer that failure to win treaty ratification would be viewed internationally as a further sign of the weakening of the Obama administration, like the debacle of the G20 summit last week in South Korea.

Admiral Mullen was the administration advocate for the treaty on ABC's Sunday morning program "This Week," and he declared the Pentagon's unreserved support for Senate ratification as soon as possible. He said that nothing in the treaty would limit the US ability to modernize nuclear infrastructure—one of the principal pretexts employed by Republican advocates of delaying ratification.

Kyl, the deputy minority leader in the Senate and the lead Republican negotiator with the White House, had pressed for an additional \$4 billion for the nuclear modernization program, and the Obama administration agreed to deliver this sum. But after pocketing the concession, Kyl simply shifted the grounds for his opposition, declaring there was not sufficient time during the lame duck session to examine all the implications of the treaty.

He called for putting off consideration until the new Senate convenes in January, when the Republican Party will have 47 senators, up from the present 41, and correspondingly greater influence.

The real goal of these political maneuvers seems not to be the actual torpedoing of the START treaty, but rather to use the treaty as leverage on the White House to extract the maximum concessions on domestic policy, particular on extension of the Bush tax cuts for the wealthy.

It is no exaggeration to say that the actions of the congressional Republican leadership are driven almost entirely by the immediate pecuniary interests of the super-rich, who are adamantly demanding that Washington act, and act now, to extend tax cuts worth \$700 billion to the financial aristocracy.

Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell gave a glimpse of this maniacal focus of maximizing personal wealth, when he gave the official Republican response to Obama's radio speech. He declared that extending all the Bush-era tax cuts should be the top priority of the lame duck session of Congress, and that anything else was a diversion.

"Americans don't think we should be raising taxes on anybody, especially in the middle of a recession,"

McConnell claimed, although opinion polls consistently show overwhelming public support for ending the tax cuts for the wealthy.

In a speech on the Senate floor Thursday, McConnell was even more explicit, declaring, "The most important thing we can do to create jobs between now and Jan. 1 is to send a message to job creators that we're not going to raise their taxes." In other words, if the rich don't get their tax cut, they will continue the effective freeze on hiring by major corporate employers that has contributed to the persistence of unemployment at double-digit levels.



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