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U.S. Seeks to Keep Watching Russia's Weapons

By [THOM SHANKER](#) and [PETER BAKER](#)

WASHINGTON — With a key arms control treaty set to expire soon, the Obama administration is searching for ways to keep inspectors in [Russia](#) or else it risks losing American eyes on the world's second most formidable [nuclear weapons](#) arsenal for the first time in decades.

The administration has been [negotiating a replacement for the pact](#), the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, or Start, which goes out of force on Dec. 5. But even if the talks produce a new agreement by then, the Senate and the Russian Parliament will not have time to ratify it before the old one expires — and some Republicans on Capitol Hill are warning that approval is far from certain.

In the absence of a treaty or an ad hoc but legally binding "bridge" authority, American inspectors would be forced to leave Russia when the treaty expired, and Russian inspectors would have to leave the United States. State Department lawyers are examining several options in hopes of preserving the ability to monitor and collect information about Russia's nuclear weapons, administration officials confirm.

Under Start, the United States is allowed a maximum of 30 inspectors in Russia to monitor compliance with the treaty. Russia likewise has interests in finding a bridge mechanism to continue its similar rights to inspections in the United States.

If negotiators for [President Obama](#) and President [Dmitri A. Medvedev](#) of Russia reach agreement on a follow-up treaty that the two leaders can sign by Dec. 5, then the administration may seek what is called "provisional application," putting the terms of the treaty into place on a temporary basis pending a Senate vote.

If the two sides do not settle on a new treaty, then the administration may seek some form of executive agreement with the Russians permitting inspectors to stay and information to be shared on terms similar to the current Start agreement while negotiators continue to talk.

Such an agreement, at least according to administration officials, would not require Senate approval, although lawmakers are demanding that the Senate Foreign Relations Committee be brought into the discussion. Administration officials said they would consult with Senate leaders on the plan.

Secretary of State [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#) raised the issue with her Russian counterpart, Foreign Minister Sergey V. Lavrov, during talks in Moscow last week, according to senior officials. But the two sides have not yet agreed to any specific measures to continue verification efforts in the absence of a new treaty, these officials said.

“We are working on options to provide transparency on strategic forces during the time before the new treaty enters into force,” a senior administration official said Friday. “But I think it’s premature to discuss specifics of any transparency options. Our focus is on getting the new treaty finished.”

The impending lapse of the treaty is already raising significant concerns on Capitol Hill.

Senator [Richard G. Lugar](#) of Indiana, the ranking Republican on the Foreign Relations Committee, asked the State Department for a report on what legal instruments were being considered as a “bridge” between the expiration of Start and a new treaty, and for a description of what verification activities could take place without a treaty.

Andy Fisher, a senior adviser to the senator, said Mr. Lugar had also asked whether any of the proposed verification mechanisms would require Congressional authority. The senator has expressed specific concern that verification measures not be allowed to lapse, Mr. Fisher said.

The [Start agreement was signed in 1991](#) before the collapse of the Soviet Union and went into effect in 1994, requiring both sides to reduce their arsenals to 6,000 warheads. The two sides are trying to produce a new treaty that keeps many of the verification and inspection elements of Start, while bringing the legal ceiling on strategic warheads and delivery vehicles down even below today’s much lower levels.

The administration hopes to follow up with a new round of negotiations on another treaty with Russia that would enact more far-reaching reductions in nuclear weapons as part of Mr. Obama’s goal of eventually ridding the world of all nuclear arms.

Mr. Obama and Mr. Medvedev struck [a preliminary agreement on the terms of a new treaty](#) during a meeting in Moscow in July that would cut the arsenals of both sides by at least a quarter. The two presidents agreed to cut each side’s strategic nuclear warheads to between 1,500 and 1,675, down from the 2,200 called for in 2012 by the Treaty of Moscow, which was signed in 2002.

The number of delivery vehicles, like land-based intercontinental missiles, submarine-based missiles and long-range bombers, would be cut to between 500 and 1,100, down from the 1,600 currently allowed under Start.

Negotiations are progressing, but Russia continues to press for restrictions on missile defense systems to be included in the treaty, something the United States has refused to consider. Even though [Mr. Obama reshaped President George W. Bush’s plan for an antimissile shield](#) based in Europe, Russian officials insist on legal limits.

Senior Republican aides in the Senate said a number of members were angered that the administration had undermined relations with two important [NATO](#) allies by canceling the Bush plan. It had called for 10 interceptors in Poland and radar in the Czech Republic; some senators have vowed to fight any post-Start treaty that includes provisions limiting missile defense.

Republicans also have called attention to comments by Russian military officers, who said that they might decide to field missiles with multiple warheads, which is seen as destabilizing and contrary to any new effort to lock in nuclear arms reductions.

Ratification of a follow-up treaty would require Mr. Obama and the Democratic leadership to hold all members of their party and gain at least seven more votes from Republicans.

Senators from both parties who specialize in arms control and military issues are asking that the president concentrate as well on how to enhance the safety of the nuclear stockpile and modernize the nation's weapons facilities in parallel with submitting a draft treaty for ratification.

Senators [Jon Kyl](#) and [John McCain](#), both Republicans of Arizona, are leading that effort. A senior Republican Senate aide said some members were gearing up to push the administration to commit to developing a new warhead, although a number of senior Democrats argue that reopening a warhead assembly line would undermine the administration's nonproliferation message.

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