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START vote in the U.S. Senate: a Pyrrhic victory?

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The US Senate has just ratified the new START Treaty between Russia and the USA, which provides for a reduction in strategic nuclear weapons.

The treaty was signed in Prague on 9 April 2010 between presidents Obama and Medvedev. The new treaty is the sequel to the old START Treaty which expired in December 2009.

This vote is undeniably a domestic and international victory for Barack Obama. Whether it is a victory for the cause of abolishing nuclear weapons is much less sure.

71 of the 100 senators voted for; 67 was the minimum required (two-thirds majority). At the last minute 2 democrat abstentionists were rallied, as were 2 republican opponents. Then all the 56 democrats voted for with 2 independents and 13 republicans, 26 republicans voted against and 3 abstained.

To have some chance of being ratified by both parties - Russia's Duma has yet to ratify - the treaty had to be approved by the US Senate before 31 December 2010, i.e. before the inauguration of the new senate elected in November. President Obama intervened personally and publicly in the days leading up to the vote, making a solemn appeal to senators in favour of ratification.

This vote favours the continuation of efforts for diplomatic rapprochement and strategic partnership between the US and Russia.

But to get this result the Obama administration had to make numerous pledges to the supporters of nuclear weapons and to the nuclear complex. For modernization of the US nuclear installations - which will permit the building of new nuclear warheads if so decided - the White House has proposed to the National Nuclear Security Agency a budget increase of nearly 10% for 2011, and for the period 2011-2020 the unprecedented sum of 80 billion dollars, to which the Obama administration added 5 billion more in the last days before the senate vote. These sums are independent of the 100 billion allocated at the same time to the development of an "anti-missile shield".

In the end, both supporters and opponents of nuclear weapons abolition are shouting victory, and the opponents are flaunting these enormous dollar figures, along with arguments of a remarkable cynicism.

For example, the republican senator from Tennessee Lamar Alexander, who (like three other senators, two of them democrats) had received a personal letter from Barack Obama, was able to declare that according to the treaty, the US can have up to 1,550 deployed strategic nuclear weapons, *"each one up to 30 times more powerful than the one used at Hiroshima to end World War II"*. And furthermore, the US will gain valuable data, including through inspection operations *"that should provide a treasure trove of intelligence about Russian activities that we would not have without the treaty - and that we have not had since the START treaty expired on December 9, 2009."* Besides, the president is committed to *"spending \$85 billion over the next ten years on nuclear modernization... to be assured that the weapons will work if needed."* *"Our military leaders say this plan does not interfere in the least with the development of our anti-missile system,"* and *"nothing in the treaty forbids such a development"*.

In short, *"Americans are safer and more secure with the Treaty than without it"*, according to Senator Alexander. If this is true, one can also say that the US nuclear and military-industrial complex has never been so healthy and has a long life to look forward to. His counterparts in Russia could well reason in the same way and support a similar vote

in the Duma.

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