

Disputes of interpretation following US Senate's ratification of START treaty

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On 22 December, the US Senate agreed to ratify the new Russian-US START treaty regarding the reduction of strategic nuclear arms, and appended to it a declaration which provided an interpretation of selected provisions of the treaty. The first reading of the draft ratification resolution took place on 24 December in Russia's State Duma. In practice, the US Senate's decision means that the treaty will come into effect, since Russia has made its ratification dependent on that. At the same time, disputes over the interpretation of the START provisions show that signing the treaty itself has failed to resolve the fundamental differences between the two parties regarding strategic (nuclear) stability, and has just postponed this matter.

For example, the US Senate deemed that START did not impose any restrictions on the development of missile defence by the USA, and that the preamble and the Russian unilateral statement regarding that issue were not legally binding. Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov responded that the linkage between offensive and defensive strategic systems mentioned in the preamble to the treaty was legally binding, and threatened that Russia could withdraw from the treaty if the USA created a global and comprehensive missile defence system. It was also agreed that the USA could not develop non-nuclear strategic systems by itself, because this issue pursuant to the treaty should be discussed by a bilateral commission.

These disputes make it clear that even when START comes into force, the differences of opinions regarding strategic stability between Russia and the USA will not be reduced; missile defence will still be the main bone of contention. <MaK>