

Moscow's 'nuclear doctrine' under fire

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A top Pentagon official has expressed concern at what she describes as Russia's increasing reliance on nuclear weapons, a trend the US says is at odds with President Barack Obama's arms control agenda.

"There are aspects to their nuclear doctrine, their military activities that we find very troubling," said Michèle Flournoy, the defence department undersecretary for policy.

In an interview with the Financial Times, she said that while Mr Obama had stressed "the importance of reducing the role of nuclear weapons . . . if you read recent Russian military doctrine they are going in the other direction, they are actually increasing their reliance on nuclear weapons, the role in nuclear weapons in their strategy".

Her comments came as Hillary Clinton, secretary of state, visited Russia to help reach a deal on an overdue arms pact. They highlight the challenges to the Obama administration's bid to address nuclear proliferation through a sequence of treaties and agreements.

The US is seeking to conclude a nuclear arms agreement with Russia to replace the 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (Start). Sergei Lavrov, Russian foreign minister, said on Thursday the two sides were "at the finish line" in the talks but could not give a date for an agreement. Washington had hoped to conclude a deal by December last year, when Start lapsed.

The time lag – and doubts over whether the deal will be ratified in the current partisan atmosphere in Washington – have thrown into question the US administration's original plan.

"It was a mistake to bet on getting a quick treaty with the Russians," said Jeffrey Lewis at the New America Foundation in Washington. "There was no quick treaty in the offing and it is going to cost all of their political capital to get this treaty through."

The administration's original plan was to use the treaty to build momentum on arms control ahead of a summit on nuclear security that Mr Obama is hosting next month and a conference on the nuclear non-proliferation treaty in May, at which the US wishes to close loopholes exploited by countries such as Iran.

Greater reliance by Moscow on nuclear weapons would complicate the US's planned next step with Russia – a more ambitious treaty to make big cuts in their nuclear arsenals.

Ms Flournoy said the two countries were "very close" to agreement in the current talks. She also forecast "strong bipartisan support" for Mr Obama's overall nuclear policy, which includes increased spending on maintaining the US nuclear deterrent, non-proliferation and arms control.

But the delays to date have already thrown into doubt plans for ratifying the next arms control deal, the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty.

Last April, Mr Obama said his administration would "immediately and aggressively pursue US ratification of the CTBT".

But congressional staffers say the treaty is now unlikely to be voted on by the US Senate before November elections.

Fonte: Financial Times, London, Mar. 18th 2010, World, online.