

Advancing the CTBT and Defending the *De Facto* Nuclear Test Moratorium In Light of Russian Moves to De-ratify the Treaty

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Though it has not yet formally entered into force, the 1996 [Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty](#) (CTBT) is one of the most successful and valuable agreements in the long history of nuclear nonproliferation, arms control, and disarmament. Without the option to conduct nuclear tests, it is more difficult, although not impossible, to develop, prove, and field new warhead designs. Since the conclusion of the treaty in 1996, it has been signed by 187 countries, and nuclear testing has become taboo.

For the past several years, however, there has been no serious consideration of ratification of the CTBT by any of the remaining Annex 2 states that must ratify the CTBT in order to bring the treaty into force, including China and the United States.

Meanwhile, the possessors of the largest nuclear arsenals have launched nuclear weapons modernization programs, some are pursuing new nuclear weapons designs, and some are increasing the size and diversity of their arsenals. Military activities and subcritical experiments at former test sites continue.

Worse yet, recent moves by Russia to “de-ratify” the accord senselessly and dangerously threatens to undermine this crucial Treaty and efforts towards its entry into force. This action should be firmly condemned by all CTBT states parties.

It is important to recall that more than thirty years ago, citizen activists and independence leaders in Kazakhstan, forced the Russian leadership to halt nuclear testing in 1991. This was after the Soviet Union conducted more than 450 nuclear test detonations there, including 116 in the atmosphere. The Kazakh government estimates more than 1.5 million people were harmed and it is clear that many continue to suffer the effects of these detonations.

Today, Kazakhstan is leading efforts under the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) to provide assistance and environmental remediation to those people and regions affected by nuclear weapon use and testing. All countries should cooperate with states parties to the TPNW as they begin to fulfill these legal responsibilities and acknowledge that the TPNW reinforces the CTBT's prohibition on nuclear testing.

In the years that followed, Russia actively supported the negotiation of the CTBT and ratified the treaty in 2000.

Russian Moves to Withdraw Ratification

But on Oct. 9, in response to President Vladimir Putin’s suggestion that Russia should mirror the United States stance on the CTBT, the Duma’s Committee on International Affairs [was instructed](#) to contact the Russian Foreign Ministry to look into the issue of withdrawing the

ratification of the CTBT. According to the State Duma's press service, the conclusions must be presented by October 18, 2023.

On October 17th, the Duma approved a draft bill for Russia to revoke Article 1 of the 2000 law through which Russia ratified the CTBT, while retaining Russia's cooperation with the International Monitoring System and Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty Organization which verifies compliance with the accord. There is no legal precedent in the CTBT for "withdrawing ratification."

Such a move is self-defeating and it sabotages the CTBT regime. Contrary to perceptions of extremists in Moscow, "un-ratification" does not in any way create leverage for Russia vis-a-vis "the collective West." Instead, it would undermine Russia's already shaky nuclear nonproliferation standing, complicate efforts to secure U.S. ratification, and damage the broader nuclear nonproliferation system.

Recall that in 2016, Russia joined the United States, China, and other members of the UN Security Council in support of [Resolution 2310](#), which reaffirms support for the CTBT, and Russia joined a statement from its permanent five members, all of whom are CTBT signatories, pledging they would not take any action that would "defeat the object or purpose of the treaty."

Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs claims that "withdrawing ratification by no means undermines our constructive approach to the CTBT and does not mean that our country intends to resume nuclear tests," and that Russia's position, which was set out by Putin in February, is that Russia would only conduct a test if the United States did so first.

At the same time, senior Russian Foreign Ministry officials have accused the United States of carrying out preparations for nuclear testing at its nuclear test site in Nevada. U.S. officials say there are no plans to abandon a 1992 moratorium on nuclear test explosions and that subcritical experiments at the former Nevada Test Site are in line with the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT).

The United States, China, and Russia, all CTBT signatories, all continue to engage in weapons-related experiments at their former nuclear testing sites. Although the IMS is operational and far more effective than originally envisioned, very low-yield nuclear test explosions can still be difficult to detect without on-site monitoring equipment or inspections, which will not be in place until after entry into force.

If there are serious concerns about clandestine activities at former test sites that are not compliant with the zero-yield CTBT, states parties should develop voluntary confidence-building measures designed to detect and deter possible low-level, clandestine nuclear testing. In June, the U.S. National Nuclear Security Administration proposed a dialogue "to develop a regime that would

allow reciprocal observation with radiation detection equipment at each other's subcritical experiments to allow confirmation that the experiment was consistent with the CTBT."

Recommendations

With these challenges in mind, CTBT states parties have a duty to push back against de-ratification by Russia and press the remaining Annex 2 hold out states to accelerate their own efforts to sign and/or ratify the treaty. We respectfully urge your government to be a part of the solution.

As representatives of civil society, we offer urge all CTBT and TPNW states parties to:

- strongly urge Russia, through public and private communications, not to withdraw its ratification and formally reaffirm its full support for the CTBT;
- actively and publicly urge the remaining hold-out states to sign and/or ratify the treaty without delay and
- Call on the CTBT states parties that engage in military and scientific activities at their former test site to engage in talks to develop voluntary confidence-building measures to ensure that ongoing experiments at former nuclear test sites are consistent with the CTBT.

This requires more energetic, higher-level bilateral and multilateral diplomacy through the Article XIV process, at the UN General Assembly, the Security Council, and beyond.

More than a quarter century since they were established, the CTBT and the CTBTO enjoy broad support and have been highly successful. But we cannot take the treaty, the IMS, or the de facto global nuclear test moratorium for granted.

Now is the time to act to reinforce the treaty and the global norm against nuclear testing, which is important for the achievement of nuclear disarmament.

Sincerely,

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