

## RUSSIAN DE-RATIFICATION OF CTBT: RESUMPTION OF NUCLEAR TESTING ON THE HORIZON?

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*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)*



The threat of a new nuclear arms race and the resumption of nuclear testing by major powers have been looming over the horizon. Along with the Ukraine crisis and the Gaza conflict, the constant advancements of nuclear weapons, and the suspension and de-ratification of significant international arms control treaties reflect the rising great power rivalry and deteriorating international security environment. The latest blow could come from the de-ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), which would further hasten the demise of the arms control regime and nuclear testing framework. On October 6, 2023, Russia declared its intention to withdraw from the treaty in an attempt to mirror the United States, which is a signatory to the CTBT but has not ratified it. Thus, in November 2023, the Russian ratification of the CTBT was finally revoked. It is important to examine the implications of the Russian de-ratification of CTBT and the response of the United States. It is important to assess how it will impact U.S.–Russia relations and what it means for the nuclear nonproliferation regime.

The CTBT has formed a global standard against nuclear weapon testing and its ratification would be a significant milestone toward a nuclear-weapon-free world. Despite having 187 state signatories<sup>1</sup> and 177 ratifications, it is not likely to enter into force until 44 countries from the Annex 2 list ratify

<sup>1</sup> “CTBTO Status as of 9 December 2023,” CTBTO, December 9, 2023, <https://www.ctbto.org/our-mission/states-signatories>.

the treaty.<sup>2</sup> Russia ratified the CTBT on June 30, 2000. In September 2005, Russia iterated its intention to continue observing the moratorium on nuclear testing till the time of CTBT's entry into force, provided that other nuclear powers also comply with the treaty.<sup>3</sup>

Russia had been a strong proponent of the CTBT after its ratification. The Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, in November of 2007, confirmed Russia's unwavering support for the treaty citing it as an essential component of the nuclear non-proliferation regime and an effective instrument for reducing the nuclear arms race.<sup>4</sup> The Russian stance, however, has changed considerably since and it revoked the CTBT in November 2023. The intention behind this move is for Russia to be in line with the U.S., which has signed but not ratified the treaty itself. This, as a result, makes the prospects of the entry into force of the CTBT bleak. In 1998 and 1999, when President Clinton asked for the Senate's approval of CTBT, the request was rejected by Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Helms who believed that the treaty did not have a high priority for the committee.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, it highlights the lack of the U.S. commitment to ratify a legally binding treaty.

Russia's withdrawal from the treaty has not only been a major blow to the implementation of CTBT but also further contributes to the downward trajectory of its relations with the U.S. This decision made by Russia has increased the concerns of the U.S., which believes the decision was a wrong step. The U.S. Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken, stated that the actions of Russia will undermine confidence in the international arms control regime.<sup>6</sup> Russia's intent, however, is to be on the same page with the U.S., which never ratified the treaty. At the same time Russia claimed that unless the U.S. tests, Moscow will not conduct any tests.<sup>7</sup>

The de-ratification of CTBT is a consequence of declining U.S.-Russia ties and the constant distrust between the two. Arms control agreements like New START, Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF), Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM), CTBT, and Open Skies have been affected by tensions between Russia and the West.<sup>8</sup> The step taken by the U.S. in 2019 to terminate the INF with

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<sup>2</sup> Cotta-Ramusino, Paolo, Micah Lowenthal, Luciano Maiani, and Enza Pellegrin, "Nuclear Risks and Arms Control-Problems and Progresses in the Time of Pandemics and War: Proceedings of the XXII Edoardo Amaldi Conference," *Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei*, Rome, Italy, April 6–8, 2022," (2023): 212.

<sup>3</sup> "Russia Intends to Continue Moratorium on Nuclear Tests," *BBC Monitoring* former Soviet Union, excerpt from a report by Russian News Agency *ITAR-TASS*, September 23, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> "Russia Supports CTBT as Key Element of Nuclear Non-Proliferation—FM," *Itar-Tass*, November 12, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Medalia, "Comprehensive Nuclear-test-ban treaty: Background and Current Developments," *Congressional Research Service*, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Obsorn, "Putin Revokes Russian Ratification of Global Nuclear Test Ban Treaty," *Reuters*, November 2, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/putin-revokes-russias-ratification-nuclear-test-ban-treaty-2023-11-02/>.

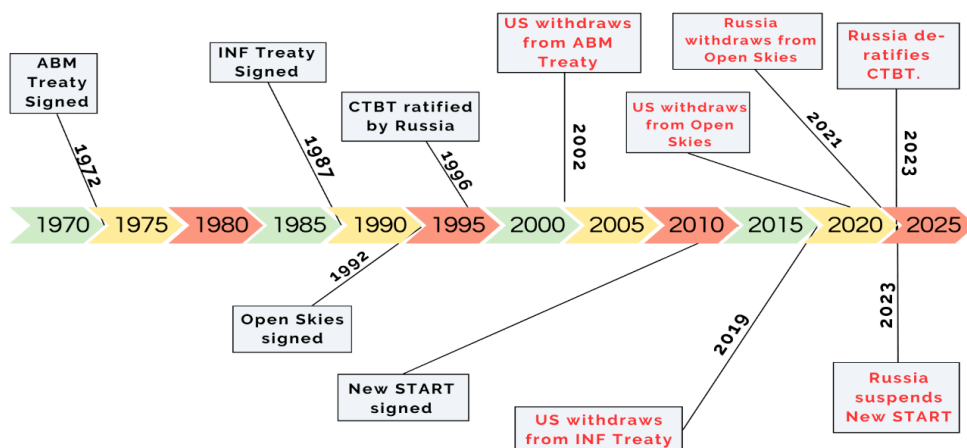
<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Mathias Hammer, "The Collapse of Global Arms Control," *Time*, November 13, 2023, <https://time.com/6334258/putin-nuclear-arms-control/>.

Russia was one of the major setbacks to their relations. The U.S. Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, blamed Russia for the end of the treaty and declared Russia to be in material breach of the treaty.<sup>9</sup> Russia blamed the U.S. for being in violation of the treaty. Subsequently, Russian President, Vladimir Putin, announced that any missile development carried out by the U.S. would be replicated by Russia.<sup>10</sup>

In 2023 President Putin decided to suspend the last remaining bilateral treaty, New START, which put limits on the number of deployed strategic nuclear warheads to 1,550 and deployed strategic delivery systems to 700 for each state and establishes measures for transparency and verification between the two nations, including biannual data exchanges.<sup>11</sup> Russia had been a staunch proponent of the treaty in the past and actively pursued renewal of New START in 2021, while the U.S. was reluctant. Treaty extension came about when the Biden administration took over. Thus, the treaty's suspension has resulted in the discontinuation of information exchange and meetings, which is likely to have far-reaching implications for international non-proliferation regime.<sup>12</sup>

## THE DECLINE OF ARMS CONTROL



**Source:** Compiled by Author using information from Nuclear Threat Initiative and Arms Control Association

The U.S. and Russia both have been embroiled in a security dilemma over the years with constant mistrust about the other side's intentions and actions. Russia has been suspected of carrying out

<sup>9</sup> Daryl Kimball, "The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty at a Glance," Arms Control Association, August 2019, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/INFtreaty>.

<sup>10</sup> Shannon Bugos, "U.S. Completes INF Treaty Withdrawal," Arms Control Association, September 2019, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2019-09/news/us-completes-inf-treaty-withdrawal>.

<sup>11</sup> Patricia Lewis, Marion Messmer, Julia Cournoyer, and Emma Saunders, "Nuclear Stability for All Put at Risk by Putin's Speech," Chatham House, February 2023, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2023/02/nuclear-stability-all-put-risk-putins-speech>.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

secret nuclear weapon tests. From 1996 to 1999, there were multiple reports claiming that low-yield nuclear tests were conducted by Russia at its Arctic testing ground in Novaya Zemlya.<sup>13</sup> In 2002, it was reported that Members of Congress were briefed by the Bush Administration in private claiming that preparations were being made by Russia to resume underground nuclear testing at Novaya Zemlya.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, in 2011 again, Russia was allegedly testing nuclear weapons at lower yields even though it had promised not to.<sup>15</sup> However, Russia has claimed that it will only make preparations for nuclear tests if the U.S. does so first. Both Russia and the U.S. have carried out multiple subcritical nuclear experiments which are not prohibited by the CTBT.<sup>16</sup>

In October 2023, Russia made an allegation that preparations were being made by the U.S. for nuclear testing at its facility in Nevada. Thus, Mr. Sergei Ryabkov emphasized that the way of de-ratification of CTBT should be urgently studied by the Russian lower house.<sup>17</sup> The U.S. denied the allegation and the spokesperson of the U.S. State Department regarded it as an attempt by Russia to increase nuclear threat and intensify nuclear hostilities. He also asserted that the U.S. does not plan on going against the moratorium of 1992 on nuclear testing.<sup>18</sup>

The U.S. has been continuously advancing its weapons and it has declared its intent to develop a new range of nuclear weapons including new ICBMs and new bombers.<sup>19</sup> Russia has also been modernizing its weapons and has recently launched its new ICBM.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, there is ongoing suspicion on both sides of nuclear weapon tests. At the same time, the U.S. is of the belief that Russia is increasing nuclear risks by suspending agreements. Thus, each side is suspicious of the other as nuclear tensions are on the rise.

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<sup>13</sup> Johnathan E. Medalia, "Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty: Background and Current Developments". *Congressional Research Service*, June 2, 2015, [https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20150602\\_RL33548\\_dde37beb5f50d673551528e088cfd4fd6464023e.pdf](https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20150602_RL33548_dde37beb5f50d673551528e088cfd4fd6464023e.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> Michael Jasinski, Christina Chuen, and Charles D. Ferguson, "Russia: of Truth and Testing," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 58, no. 5 (2002): 60-65.

<sup>15</sup> R. James Woolsey and Keith Payne, "Reconsidering the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty," *National Review Online*, September 8, 2011, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2011/09/reconsidering-comprehensive-test-ban-treaty-r-james-woolsey-keith-b-payne/>.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Andrew Osborn, "Russia Accuses US of Nuclear Testing site Activity, says it won't Test unless U.S. Does," *Reuters*, October 11, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-would-only-resume-nuclear-testing-when-us-does-agencies-2023-10-10/>.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Office of the Secretary of Defense, United States, *Nuclear Posture Review*, DOD, February 2018, <https://dod.defense.gov/News/SpecialReports/2018NuclearPostureReview.aspx>

<sup>20</sup> Dylan Spaulding, "On the Future of Nuclear Testing in America," *The Equation*, October 4 2023, <https://blog.ucsusa.org/dylan-spaulding/on-the-future-of-nuclear-testing-in-america/>.

Arms control and disarmament regime has been eroding in recent times. The disintegration of this framework is a result of shifts in geopolitics and the deterioration of interstate relations.<sup>21</sup> Most importantly, there is now a shift towards norm-based prohibitions rather than relying on legally binding treaties. In the case of the U.S., it is evident that there is a lack of keenness to participate in legally binding agreements. Throughout, the U.S. has been acting as a major proponent of the disarmament regime, however, it itself neither withdrew from legally binding arms control agreements with Russia nor is eager to negotiate further arrangements. Thus, the U.S. does not want any limitations or constraints placed on the advancement of its armaments by any bilateral or multilateral arms control agreements.

The U.S. has increasingly asserted that the current arms control regime is insufficient to address the alleged danger posed by China. The U.S. sees a rising China as a bigger security concern than Russia. The perceived threat posed by China was also used as one of the excuses by the U.S. for withdrawing from the INF.<sup>22</sup> Along with increased development of armaments, the U.S. has also been involved in increasing its offensive capabilities in outer space. Arms control measures in outer space have been frequently proposed by Russia and China, which the U.S. has rejected.<sup>23</sup> Thus, the U.S. is making a shift towards a normative strategy by de-emphasizing official arms control.<sup>24</sup> The lack of action and commitment from the great power, as a result, paints a grim picture of the future of arms control and disarmament regimes and paves the way for the start of an intense global arms race.

The Russian de-ratification of the CTBT has been viewed by the West as a Russian motive to resume testing and stimulate fear in the West. Although Russia claims to mirror the U.S., the fear exists that this move could produce a domino effect globally among nuclear weapon states especially. The norm against nuclear testing may be weakened and states may consider nuclear weapons testing. It could also cause instability in the Asian region and strengthen the nuclear arms race between states like China and India, and India and Pakistan. India could also feel the need to conduct a test again whenever it finds the right opportunity.<sup>25</sup> Had the U.S. ratified the treaty, being a major power it could set precedence and provide impetus for other states to ratify the CTBT. The Russian decision has not only eroded US-Russia ties but also weakened the arms control regime. De-ratification from

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<sup>21</sup> Sverre Lodgaard, "Arms Control and World Order 1," in *The Nuclear Ban Treaty* (Routledge, 2021), 216-234.

<sup>22</sup> Ghazala Yasmin Jalil, "Arms Control in the Age of New Arms Races: Realities and Options for Pakistan," *Pakistan Army Green Book*, 2021.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ashley J. Tellis, *Striking Asymmetries: Nuclear Transitions in Southern Asia* (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2022), 101.

a significant treaty by an influential actor in the international system highly undermines the legitimacy of the treaty. Russia's decision has decreased the likelihood of CTBT entering into force.

The arms control and nuclear nonproliferation regime has been weakening as the great power competition intensifies. Thus, the threat of a new nuclear arms race and resumption of nuclear testing has been looming over the horizon more than ever now. This bodes ill for the non-proliferation regime and international security.