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Russia's Revocation of its Ratification of the CTBT and the Future of International Nuclear Security

By Maksim Sorokin

SYNOPSIS

Russia's decision to revoke its ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty shook the global nuclear security agenda. This unprecedented political move by Moscow has led to the revision of the existing legal frameworks governing nuclear weapons and brought international nuclear stability into question. However, it is unlikely to lead to nuclear escalation or instability as it is a calibration of Moscow's response in its dealings with the United States and the West.

COMMENTARY

In November 2023, Russia [revoked](#) its ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), claiming the need to balance the nuclear playing field with the United States, which never ratified it. In this respect, Moscow prioritises [strategic parity](#), which has always been a core element of the Russian nuclear policy and the Russia-US security dialogue. Russia [regarded](#) the US' refusal to ratify the CTBT as granting the latter an unfair advantage.

As expected, the international community's response to Russia's move had been hostile and rigorous. Dr Robert Floyd, Executive Secretary of the CTBT Organization, [labeled](#) the Russian action as a "very disappointing and deeply regrettable" political decision against the international community's efforts to invoke entering the Treaty into force. Additionally, Mr. Antony Blinken, the US Secretary of State, expressed [concerns](#) about "Russia's planned action", reversing the shift to greater confidence in the international arms control regime. The issue was further aggravated by [talk](#) that Moscow was planning to resume nuclear testing.

The CTBT and the Russia-US Nuclear Dialogue

The CTBT is an [international agreement](#) aimed at preventing all forms of nuclear explosions, either for civilian or military purposes. The Treaty was opened for signature in 1996 but has yet to enter into force, as some of the states identified in [Annex II](#) of the Treaty (aka states with nuclear power or currently operating nuclear reactors), including the United States and China, have yet to ratify it. However, Russia did so in the year 2000. The CTBT contributes to nuclear disarmament by constraining the development and qualitative improvement of nuclear weapon arsenals.

It is worth emphasising that Russia's revocation of its ratification of the CTBT was not a spontaneous decision. Instead, some experts had [assumed](#) that Russia would withdraw from the CTBT, the first Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START-I), or the [Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty](#) back in the 1999-2000s in response to the US' extension of missile defence systems across Europe.

However, Moscow did not take any measures until President Vladimir Putin [postponed](#) Russian participation in the New START agreement last year, although NATO [reaffirmed its adherence](#) to the Treaty the same month.

The New START agreement was signed in 2010 and entered into force in 2011. It had become a new milestone in the US-Russia nuclear dialogue, which aimed to [reduce](#) strategic nuclear arsenals further. Remarkably, by 2018, both countries had met the agreement's requirements. In 2021, they [agreed](#) to extend it until 2026, promising cooperation to maintain stability in the nuclear domain.

However, the Ukraine war has significantly impacted the Russia-West dialogue, bringing parties back to a nuclear agenda comparable to the Cold War era. Some experts [assumed](#) that Russian postponement of the New START Treaty would lead to incremental risks of a nuclear escalation and further increases in Russia's nuclear arsenal.

It seems reasonable to believe this if one connects it to the revocation of the CTBT ratification. However, it is still too early to conclude whether Russia's intention was to enhance its nuclear potential further. Moscow's official position remains consistent and is based on achieving strategic parity with the US, including in the legal domain.

It is also worth recalling that the United States attempted to ease diplomatic tensions across the nuclear agenda by offering Russia and China [nuclear test inspections](#) to deepen transparency. This time-tested political initiative is a sign of goodwill to normalise nuclear dialogue among the three countries.

Nonetheless, decades of disputes could not disappear because of one particular step forward. Thus, one of the central disagreements concerned the US-proclaimed [unilateral moratorium](#) on nuclear testing, which Russia considered inapplicable within the existing legal surroundings, besides creating inequality in both states' obligations under international law.

Russia-DPRK Nuclear Relationship

Some experts reasonably assumed that Russia's revocation of its ratification of the CTBT is linked to the Russia-North Korea (DPRK) nuclear partnership. Indeed, the Russian Federation recently [vetoed](#) the UN Security Council Resolution to prolong the mandate of the UN Panel of Experts, extending the panel's authority to monitor states' adherence to the UN sanctions against North Korea.

Was the Russian decision on North Korea related to Moscow's revocation of its ratification of the CTBT? Most likely not. It is also not a surprise that [nuclear cooperation](#) between Russia and the DPRK is now evolving. Yet, Russia has always been consistent with its approach to North Korea. Although Russia [cannot accept](#) the latter's nuclear status as it contradicts several UN resolutions and violates the international nuclear non-proliferation regime, North Korea has been an essential military partner in Putin's calculation.

It is premature to connect North Korea's nuclear issue with Russia's revocation of its ratification of the CTBT; these are two separate security problems Russia has been approaching in various ways and, most importantly, quite consistently.

Impact on the International Nuclear Security Architecture

Some analysts [assert](#) that the ongoing war in Ukraine triggered Putin's decision to revoke Russia's ratification of the CTBT. They [suggest](#) that the Russian government had been seeking an opportunity to threaten the West with nuclear retaliation or an attack to accomplish the political aims of the war in Ukraine. It also seems reasonable that Moscow's move may [weaken](#) the international arms control regime.

Nevertheless, as discussed herein, moving away from the CTBT has almost nothing to do with the Ukraine crisis. It might have been an impetus for the revocation of ratification, but it is not the reason. Accordingly, it is worth highlighting Russian [accusations](#) that the United States carried out preparations at its nuclear site in Nevada last year.

Thus, Moscow's decision to revoke the ratification of the CTBT has to be seen in the light of the two nuclear powers' decades-long nuclear competition. It should be seen as a countermeasure to the perceived US self-granted freedom of responsibility in the nuclear domain rather than a threat of any nuclear escalation in response to the West's continuing support of Ukraine.

The critical word is parity, which Moscow regards as the cornerstone of its decision. Thus, Moscow's move is unlikely to trigger any escalation or a weakening of the global arms control and nuclear non-proliferation regime, which Moscow moreover supports. On the other hand, Russia accuses the US of undermining nuclear stability. Thus, to protect Moscow's national security, it is indispensable to maintain nuclear parity like it was during the Cold War.

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