



EXPERT ROUNDUP

What Russia's CTBT De-Ratification Means for Global Nuclear Risks

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The Russian State Duma on 17 October 2023 [started](#) to review a bill on the country's de-ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT), which it will almost certainly pass [this week](#). This follows President Putin's speech on 5 October to the Valdai Club, where he [said](#) Russia might consider withdrawing its ratification of the CTBT. Russia's anticipated de-ratification of the treaty raises vital questions about the frailty of arms control frameworks and the heightened danger of miscalculation.

In anticipation of Moscow's de-ratification of the CTBT, Open Nuclear Network (ONN) interviewed members of the [ONN Advisory Council](#), a senior board of advisers who are former high-level government officials and renowned experts, for their takes on what Russia's latest move could mean for nuclear risks and the global nuclear non-proliferation and arms control regime. In addition to one ONN Advisory Council member who provided comments on the condition of anonymity (referred to as "Advisory Council Member" in the roundup), the following members participated in the interview (listed alphabetically):

- **CHUN Yungwoo**, Chairman, Korean Peninsula Future Forum; former National Security Advisor to the President of the Republic of Korea
- **Robert EINHORN**, Senior Fellow, Brookings Institution; former Assistant Secretary of State for Nonproliferation
- **SUZUKI Tatsujiro**, Vice Director and Professor, Research Center for Nuclear Weapons Abolition (RECNA), Nagasaki University
- **ZHAO Tong**, Senior Fellow, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

Russia's Motivation for De-Ratification

CHUN Yungwoo: Russia's de-ratification would be a setback for global nuclear nonproliferation norms and the cause of arms control and disarmament. It is not clear whether Putin is playing games in order to be taken seriously or is really intent on resuming testing. My bet is that he is posturing. Demonstrating his capability to do harm to the global nuclear order is a tempting way of being taken more seriously and adding credibility to his threats. I would not, however, rule out the possibility of his resorting to actual nuclear testing if his posturing fails to work and he runs out of options.

Robert EINHORN: Revoking ratification may be another attempt to rattle the nuclear sabre to get the United States and its allies to take Russian interests more seriously and make them more cautious in their support for Ukraine. Putin may have concluded that his earlier thinly veiled threats to use nuclear weapons in the Ukraine war had produced a backlash, including from countries critical to Moscow, such as China and India. De-ratification may be Putin's way of continuing to invoke the nuclear spectre while reducing the likelihood of strong international criticism, especially because Moscow can say that it is simply adopting the same legal relationship to the CTBT as the United States, which has signed but not ratified the treaty and is unlikely to have the domestic political support for doing so for the foreseeable future.

Strategic Implications for the Global Nuclear Order

Robert EINHORN: A Russian decision to resume nuclear testing would have profound strategic implications. The no-testing norm that, with the exception of the DPRK, has gathered strength over 30 years even in the absence of CTBT entry into force could quickly unravel. The DPRK, which for reasons not clearly understood has refrained from conducting a seventh nuclear test, would likely be the first to follow Russia. But it would not be the last country to resume testing, and political barriers to additional countries such as Iran conducting tests and joining the nuclear club would be severely weakened. Nuclear testing would facilitate the development of new and more destabilizing types of tactical and strategic nuclear weapon systems, increasing instability at both the regional and global levels.

ZHAO Tong: Russia would be de-ratifying the CTBT as Putin repeatedly seeks to manipulate the risks of a nuclear escalation of the Ukraine war to achieve broader coercive goals, such as the containment of US and NATO military aid to Ukraine. Against this background, the de-ratification would represent another step of escalation and move Russia one step closer toward conducting a nuclear explosion, either in the form of a nuclear test or actual nuclear use. Russia's actions contribute to normalizing the practice of nuclear coercion and erode global confidence in the existing moratorium on nuclear testing among nuclear weapons states. Its negative impact on the policies of other nuclear-armed states should not be underestimated.

Security Implications for Northeast Asia

CHUN Yungwoo: I am not so worried about the implications of Russia's de-ratification for the DPRK's calculus or the security dynamics of Northeast Asia. The DPRK's decision to conduct another nuclear test will not be affected by Russia's or any other country's stance on nuclear testing; rather, it will depend primarily on whether the DPRK deems a test necessary in order to confirm the credibility of its lighter and smaller tactical warheads and whether it is technically prepared for testing. Pyongyang has already revealed a new type of warhead small enough to be mounted on its short-range tactical missiles like KN-23 or KN-24, although it is not clear whether this new type of tactical warhead requires testing. Given the safety hazards to its own people living close to the test sites, China is more intensely opposed to the DPRK's nuclear explosion tests than any other provocations such as ICBM flight tests. For this reason, the DPRK may refrain from testing to the extent that it values its cosy relationship with China. However, as was the case with all six previous nuclear tests, China's opposition is not likely to override the DPRK's own strategic interest and military imperative.

I do not expect Russia's de-ratification or even actual testing to have a significant impact on trilateral Japan-ROK-US security cooperation or China's decision on nuclear testing. The trilateral cooperation is driven primarily by shared threat perceptions about the DPRK and China, with or without Russia's de-ratification

Robert EINHORN: De-ratification – by itself and in the absence of Russia's resumption of nuclear testing – would have little strategic effect. It is unlikely to influence the DPRK's nuclear posture and strategy, trilateral Japan-ROK-US defence cooperation, the US extended deterrent, Northeast Asian regional or border security, or competition among the great powers. Yes, it will make prospects for CTBT entry into force bleaker, but they have been very bleak for a long time. And yes, it could deepen the gloom over the future of arms control. But whether international conditions evolve in a way that permits future formal or informal arms control arrangements will have little to do with whether Russia revokes its CTBT ratification.

SUZUKI Tatsujiro: Russia's de-ratification may influence the DPRK's policy of nuclear testing. It may become easier for the DPRK to conduct nuclear testing, and this may be another serious blow to the global non-proliferation and disarmament regime. It is certainly another decision that we cannot welcome.

Legal and Technical Dimensions

Robert EINHORN: It is not clear whether in practical terms de-ratification will alter Russia's legal obligations with respect to the CTBT. Because the treaty has not entered into force, Russia has not been formally bound to abide by it, even though the Duma previously ratified the treaty. After de-ratification, Russia would presumably remain a signatory and, like other signatories such as the United States, would remain obligated by the Vienna Convention not to act in a way that would defeat the "object and purpose" of the CTBT.

SUZUKI Tatsujiro: Both Russia and the United States have enough data and do not need nuclear testing, even for newly designed nuclear warheads. Laboratory scientists may claim the need for such testing for newly designed warheads, but even in this case, testing is considered "desirable" but not necessarily "essential." The cumulative data and advancements in simulation technologies are good enough to eliminate the need for nuclear testing, even for newly designed warheads. It is thus unlikely that Russia's decision to de-ratify the CTBT comes from a need for new testing. It is not clear what kind of technical discussions could have driven Russia's latest move, but it is more likely political than technical. This means that nuclear testing is not likely to follow Russia's de-ratification of the CTBT.

Advisory Council Member: Unless and until Russia walks out entirely from the CTBT, as a signatory to the treaty, it has an obligation under international law not to act in a way to defeat the objective and purpose of the CTBT. This prevails for all signatories.

Looking Ahead

Robert EINHORN: In addition to seeking to further unnerve the United States and the rest of the international community, Putin's decision to de-ratify was probably a response to pressure he has been receiving from Russian hawks who have argued that Russia should employ nuclear weapons in the Ukraine conflict. Presumably there are those in Russia who are lobbying for a resumption of nuclear testing. It is not possible to know at this stage whether de-ratification is simply a domestic political move to appease the hawks or whether it reflects a real interest in the Kremlin in ending Russia's nuclear testing moratorium. Perhaps it is a "trial balloon" and future Russian decision-making on nuclear testing will be influenced by the world's reaction.

If de-ratification is a prelude to a resumption of nuclear testing, it is a very serious matter. But if it is a one-off political gesture made with international and domestic audiences in mind, it should not be of great concern.

ZHAO Tong: At present, the United States, Russia and China are all making substantial investments in the expansion and modernization of their nuclear weapons testing facilities, increasing their preparedness to conduct nuclear tests, which are prohibited by the CTBT. Any attempt by a State Party to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons to resume nuclear testing, or the replication of such an act by other State Parties, would constitute a grave violation of their Article VI obligation on nuclear disarmament. The international community must take preventive measures by strongly opposing such attempts in the clearest and loudest terms possible. The prospect of a total collapse of the current nuclear arms control regime is becoming increasingly less inconceivable, and everyone stands to suffer should such an eventuality materialize.

Advisory Council Member: Sadly, in my opinion, it will make entry into force of the CTBT even more difficult, because it will create further resistance within the US Government to US ratification of the CTBT.

The opinions expressed in this roundup are those of individual ONN Advisory Council members and do not necessarily reflect the views of ONN or the ONN Advisory Council.



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