



PUTTING AN  
END TO NUCLEAR  
EXPLOSIONS

Article  
Diplomatic Service and Practice Journal  
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## Introduction

Seen in the Western hemisphere as the worst crisis since World War II, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to the adoption of measures comparable to those in war time. COVID-19 has affected all spheres of our lives, adding to the already overburdened global agenda. Historically, the international system has often been reformed after major wars and conflicts, be it 1815, 1919 or 1945.<sup>1</sup> The question remains – in which direction will the balance shift.

A pessimistic scenario depicts the post-COVID-19 world as less prosperous, less open and less globalized. The question is whether one should resign oneself to such a possibility.

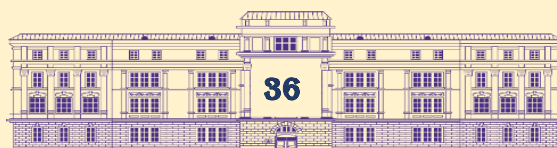
In this article, focused on the main theme of the journal publishing it, – diplomatic practice, I will share some thoughts on the effects of the ongoing COVID crisis, both politically and organisationally, on the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty and the disarmament and non-proliferation sphere more generally.

## Multilateral disarmament efforts in times of pandemic

Today, more and more voices are warning about a trust deficit, increasingly affecting multilateral legal instruments and institutions. Unilateralism presses hard against efforts to seek long-term and durable solutions. This is particularly troubling in view of one of the truly existential issues, facing humanity – the nuclear threat.

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<sup>1</sup> Kemp, W. (2020, March 24). Cooperation and Corona. *Cooperative Security Initiative*. Retrieved from <https://www.cooperative-security-initiative.org/cooperation-and-corona-by-walter-kemp/>



Last year, the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists' doomsday clock has been set as close as 100 seconds to midnight. This year, it has still remained in this critical zone. Much has been said recently about the crisis of the nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament architecture. The demise of the INF Treaty alongside the fragility of other non-proliferation, disarmament and arms control agreements, demand collective action.

The challenge today, especially in light of upcoming NPT Review Conference, is how the international community can come together to rebuild trust and strengthen faith in dialogue over confrontation. How can we reinvigorate multilateralism to confront global challenges, and how can we ensure that internationally accepted, robust and verifiable disarmament instruments get prioritized? There are three key points.

First, we should learn from our past experiences. Last year marked the 50th anniversary of the entry into force of the NPT. The Treaty was concluded amidst the Cold War tensions and its success was never foreordained. But it was, is and will remain the "gold standard of nuclear non-proliferation". While the next NPT Review Conference may or may not succeed in adopting a consensus final document on measures to strengthen the implementation of the NPT, all is not lost. It is instructive to consider that the NPT remains one of the most adhered-to treaties and continues to provide a platform for cooperation, accountability and goal-oriented action on nuclear non-proliferation, disarmament and peaceful uses of nuclear energy.

Second, it should be ensured that new initiatives complement and strengthen the NPT. The divides, rising tensions and growing distrust amongst UN Member States has touched the disarmament sphere, too. The entry into force of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons has led to rifts between nuclear weapons' and non-nuclear weapons' states. 2021 has marked the 75th anniversary of the UN General Assembly's resolution, establishing a commission to advance "the elimination from national armaments of atomic weapons and all other major weapons adaptable to mass destruction". The international community should focus on consensus-building and verifiable measures.

With this in mind, finally, the international community should capitalize on what it already has. Ratifying the CTBT provides both an opportunity to lower the prospects of a new nuclear arms race and an opening to build deeper internal trust via scientific cooperation and verifiable data sharing. For the



CTBT signatories this represents a first concrete step towards nuclear disarmament. It also showcases the importance of science and the indispensable role of scientists in a future global order.

The successful development of the CTBT's verification regime is a product of enormous collective investments. Member States have contributed substantial financial support valued at more than \$1 billion dollars. They have invested their time, energy, and resources to help put in place the most expansive verification regime ever designed. We must all strive to ensure that these investments are protected.

Despite financial difficulties facing most States due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the collection rate of assessed financial contributions remains high. This reflects the strong commitment of States Signatories to the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty and their interest in the work of the Organization.

### The current status of the CTBT

The objective of the CTBT is to put a verifiable end to nuclear test explosions by everyone, everywhere, and for all time. A comprehensive nuclear test ban is one of the oldest items on the international nuclear disarmament agenda, first proposed more than six decades ago.

The CTBT continues to receive high attention on the international stage. The significance of the Treaty and the importance of achieving its entry into force and universalization are broadly acknowledged. As highlighted by Russia's President Vladimir Putin on the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the signing of the CTBT, "This treaty was a great victory for international diplomacy at the time and showed just how effective such diplomacy can be at resolving the greatest challenges to global security"<sup>1</sup>.

Although the CTBT has yet to enter into force, the Treaty enjoys near-universal support. The Treaty has solidified the *de facto* international norm against nuclear testing. In stark contrast with the darkest days of the Cold War, when nuclear testing was commonplace, since the CTBT's opening for

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<sup>1</sup> Statement by the President of Russia on the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the signing of the CTBT. (2016, April 11). *CTBTO Preparatory Commission*. Retrieved from <https://www.ctbto.org/press-centre/highlights/2016/statement-by-the-president-of-russia-on-the-20th-anniversary-of-the-signing-of-the-ctbt/>



signature in 1996 to the present time, the international community is unanimous in its condemnation of any violation of this norm. This has been the case with each of the nuclear tests by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) – the only State to carry out a nuclear test explosion in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The CTBT is one of the most adhered-to arms control and international security related instruments. There are now 185 States that have signed the Treaty, of which 170 have ratified. Nonetheless, the CTBT has not yet become legally binding international law, since we still have eight Annex 2 States remaining that must ratify the Treaty in order to achieve its entry into force: Egypt, India, Iran, Israel, China, the DPRK, Pakistan and the United States of America. The Russian Federation that ratified the Treaty more than twenty years ago has been and is a strong and valued supporter of the CTBT. And more is needed in light of the upcoming 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Treaty signature.

Without these eight remaining ratifications in place, the international community has no insurance against a return to an era of unrestrained nuclear testing. This would have disastrous implications for regional and global stability, as well as international peace and security more broadly. History teaches us that norms and voluntary moratoria can never substitute for a legally binding and credibly enforceable nuclear test ban.

There were moratoria on nuclear testing by the United States, the Soviet Union, and the United Kingdom from 1958 – 1961 as negotiations were taking place on a nuclear test ban in Geneva. However, changing geopolitical circumstances and a rise in tension between the United States and the Soviet Union led to a collapse of the negotiations. Soon afterward, the two superpowers resumed their nuclear test programmes and carried out more nuclear tests between 1961 and 1962 than in the whole of the previous decade.

This is why we are continuing our work on confidence building, education and outreach with the Annex 2 States. This is done with the aim of creating the right conditions globally and regionally that would be conducive for positive consideration of their signature and/or ratification of the Treaty. With regard to developments related to the Treaty's verification regime, the system is nearing completion. The progressive build-up of the system has resulted in a level of maturity, readiness, and relevance that has been



demonstrated on numerous occasions and in a variety of circumstances. COVID-19 has been a stress test for our Organization, which has proven its functionality and resilience, swiftly adapting to the new realities and the challenges posed by the crisis.

With the technical mandate being at the core of the Organization's work, it was of crucial importance to ensure that the operations of the International Monitoring System (IMS) continue functioning impeccably. CTBTO focused its main efforts on mitigation measures to increase the IMS stations' resilience.

Notwithstanding the crisis, the build-up and certification of the IMS did not stop, either. Work continued even in the most remote locations, defined by harsh weather conditions and difficult accessibility. In October 2020, CTBTO successfully completed its first-ever remote certification of an IMS facility - Radionuclide station RN55 in the Russian Federation.

This station, a crucial part of Russia's segment of the IMS, has taken longer to be put into operation, primarily due to its location. Only four IMS radionuclide stations, including two hosted by the Russian Federation, are located above the Arctic Circle. Close cooperation between CTBTO and the Station operator - Special Monitoring Service of the 12<sup>th</sup> Main Directorate of the Ministry of Defence, headed by Igor Tokarev, enabled to overcome the technical and climate challenges, as well as disruptions brought in by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The success of this remote certification is a showcase of innovation and business continuity. This remote, virtual certification has equally highlighted the importance of quality planning and greater reliance on support of the national authorities. The local operators trained by the Special Monitoring Service, as well as the support of the local contractor, which competently assisted the remote certification process in cooperation with the CTBTO colleagues based in Vienna, were among the key factors facilitating this mission.

As a result, Russian radionuclide segment of the IMS, that is 10 % of the entire IMS, has been completed with the full establishment of the CTBT verification system well within reach.



The CTBTO is also continuing to prepare for entry into force by strengthening its on-site inspection (OSI) capabilities. The development of the OSI element includes conduction of various types of exercises to test OSI scenarios, training and other activities aimed at sustaining OSI operational readiness. Following the conclusion and evaluation of the OSI Integrated Field Exercises (IFE) in 2008 and 2014, we are now in a new cycle of OSI development. Since 2016, experts from the Russian Federation have been trained as surrogate inspectors in the Third OSI Training Cycle and continue up to date to participate in capacity building trainings. The COVID-19 pandemic did not unfortunately allow to hold the planned new Build-Up Exercise (BUE) foreseen for 2020. All in-person events have been postponed until the epidemiological situation is normalized globally. However, the work to operationalize the OSI mechanism continues. Notwithstanding travel restrictions due to COVID-19, active implementation of innovative online technologies has enabled to maintain the efficiency of our trainings and a broad participation of experts.

The CTBT verification regime and its associated technologies and data have also proven valuable for civil and scientific purposes. For example, the CTBTO cooperates with UNESCO in the area of tsunami early warning. We provided timely and trustworthy information on the dispersion of radiation during the Fukushima nuclear power plant accident.

In recognition of the quality and accuracy of its data, the CTBTO is now a member of the Inter-agency Committee on Radiological and Nuclear Emergencies (IACRNE). The committee is tasked with coordinating among relevant international intergovernmental organizations in preparing for and responding to nuclear and radiological emergencies.

In addition, in the context of the COVID-19, CTBTO experience in early warning and emergency preparedness based on trusted data is being considered as a potential model for a Pandemic Early Warning System<sup>1</sup>.

## Vision of the future

The international community cannot afford today to pursue narrowly defined self-interest and expect to thrive and prosper. Seeking multilateral

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<sup>1</sup> Csefalvay, C., & Foldi, T. (2020, May 3). PAWS: Towards a globally integrated outbreak surveillance system for public health. *Zenodo*. Retrieved from <https://zenodo.org/record/3782877#.Xw19d20zZaR>



solutions to twenty-first century challenges remains the only viable approach. If we are ever to advance our shared objective of a world of peace, security, and prosperity, we need to invest our efforts and resources in building the case for multilateralism. The good news is that, from climate change action to international development to arms control, many of the multilateral structures we need already exist. The more difficult part is making sure they stay protected and nurtured.

COVID-19 has been a stark reminder that global threats do not respect political borders. This applies equally to nuclear testing and proliferation. We have witnessed the problems of “others” quickly becoming our problems. From this point of view, what COVID-19 has shown, is the need for open channels of communication, agreed reporting systems, common contingency plans and in-force treaties.

The current crisis highlights the value of multilateralism, cooperation, confidence building measures and prevention. Today, such words as “resilience”, “partnerships” and “solidarity” are not empty words. They resonate with the efforts to tackle current international challenges and the global community.

