

The Test Moratorium's Uncertain Future

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It has been nearly 10 years since the United States has conducted a nuclear test explosion. After 1,030 U.S. nuclear detonations, Congress, following the Soviet Union's lead, legislated a halt to nuclear testing in the fall of 1992. This test moratorium has served U.S. and international security interests well. But now, a decade after the moratorium helped defuse the U.S.-Soviet nuclear rivalry, the Bush administration is pursuing new policies that put at risk the moratorium and the nuclear nonproliferation regime. The moratorium and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) it helped produce created an important obstacle to the induction of new warhead types by nuclear-weapon states. At the same time, the United States has been able to continue maintaining its remaining nuclear weapons stockpile through robust non-nuclear testing and evaluation programs. The United States' test halt and its commitment to finalize the CTBT also provided the diplomatic leverage needed in 1995 to extend the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty indefinitely. Furthermore, the moratorium and the CTBT helped convince India and Pakistan to exercise nuclear restraint following their 1998 test explosions.

Despite these accomplishments, senior Bush officials announced shortly after taking office that they would not ask the Senate to reconsider the CTBT, which was rejected in October 1999 after a hasty and highly partisan debate. The administration has tried to deflect domestic and international criticism of this policy by insisting that there are no immediate plans to resume testing. But the White House has condoned a series of moves that further undercut the test ban treaty, call into question the permanence of the U.S. moratorium, and undermine efforts to detect and deter nuclear testing by other states.

Last year, the administration unilaterally decided to end its technical and financial support for short-notice, on-site inspections that will only be available under the test ban treaty. The White House then decided to boycott an international conference to promote the treaty's entry into force, which was supported by all major U.S. allies.

In recent weeks, it has become clearer that the Bush administration's test ban unilateralism is, in part, motivated by the misguided belief that new types of nuclear weapons are useful and necessary. The Pentagon's latest nuclear posture review calls for the development of new nuclear weapons capabilities to provide a wider range of options to defeat "hardened and deeply buried targets." The president asked Congress for \$15.5 million for fiscal year 2003 for research on modifying existing warheads for this purpose. In addition, the posture review calls for reducing the time necessary to resume nuclear testing from the current 24- to 36-month requirement, and the administration has requested \$15 million more to improve Nevada Test Site readiness.

Despite administration assurances that there are no plans for new weapon types that require testing, the Bush policies seek to establish a stronger rationale and technical capability for future U.S. testing. Pro-testers in the Pentagon want to go even further and have been pressing the White House to repudiate formally the CTBT and end U.S. funding for all international test ban treaty organization activities. Their aim is to free the United States of its international legal obligations as a signatory to the treaty, which prohibits actions contrary to its basic purpose—to ban nuclear weapons test explosions.

Repudiation of the CTBT would have far-reaching, adverse effects on U.S. relations with allies and

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Published on Arms Control Association (<https://www.armscontrol.org>)

rivals as well as on U.S. nuclear nonproliferation goals. Cutting off U.S. support for the treaty's international monitoring system would also hamper U.S. intelligence-gathering capabilities, which depend on the unique capabilities of international stations placed in sensitive regions, including China and Central Asia.

If the United States continues to undermine the moratorium and stiff-arm the test ban treaty, it will only increase the risk that some other state will resume testing. A U.S. decision actually to resume testing would provide no real U.S. security benefit and would lead only to other nuclear-weapon states following suit, setting off a dangerous global action-reaction cycle.

If President George W. Bush is truly concerned about nuclear proliferation—including weapons development that would be facilitated by further Chinese or Russian nuclear detonations—he should direct his advisers to reconsider, not repudiate, the CTBT. Regardless of his stance on the treaty, the U.S. nuclear test moratorium must be reinforced, not rejected.

Toward this end, President Bush should reaffirm his father's 1992 policy decision not to conduct nuclear tests for new nuclear warhead development, provide full U.S. support for international test ban monitoring and inspections, and immediately pursue Russian proposals for bilateral transparency measures to clarify concerns about ongoing test site activities. To do otherwise moves the United States back toward, not beyond, obsolete Cold War thinking.

Source URL: https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2002_05/focmay02