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The Test Ban Solution

After the Senate voted against the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty in October 1999, I was asked to recommend steps to build bipartisan support for U.S. ratification. After nearly a year as a special adviser to the president and the secretary of state, I am impressed by how much common ground can be found through quiet, nonpartisan discussions. There is broad bipartisan agreement that nuclear proliferation ranks among the gravest threats to national security.

The test ban treaty is no panacea for this problem, but I believe it can contribute to a comprehensive solution. Banning nuclear explosions places significant technical constraints on nuclear weapon development, especially of advanced designs that are more efficient and easier to deliver. The test ban treaty is also an integral part of the political bargain that the United States made in 1995 to gain permanent extension of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Stopping the spread of nuclear weapons requires a web of restraints. If one component is damaged, others will be weakened. Our credibility, our leadership in any nonproliferation effort, and the long-term viability of the non-proliferation treaty itself would be strengthened by our ratification of the test ban treaty, and weakened without it.

As a former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, it is my considered view that we should not reverse the policy instituted in 1992 and resume testing new nuclear weapon designs. Given our overwhelming conventional superiority, assigning a broader role to nuclear weapons would cause far more problems than it would solve.

My intensive review of the test ban treaty strengthened my earlier judgment that this treaty is compatible with keeping a safe and reliable U.S. nuclear deterrent and is an essential part of an effective nonproliferation strategy. Recommendations I have made would help answer legitimate questions about the treaty's nonproliferation value, its verifiability, its impact on the U.S. nuclear deterrent and its indefinite duration. None of these recommendations requires renegotiating the treaty; all would improve our position under it. Most should have broad bipartisan support.

In any event, the recommendations can and should be implemented without delay simply because they are important for our national security in their own right. They are:

- That our government adopt a more integrated approach to nonproliferation, appoint a deputy national security adviser for nonproliferation to oversee it, and work more closely with like-minded countries.

- That the United States strengthen its capability to detect and deter nuclear testing, as well as its ability to monitor the many steps proliferators must take before they can test a nuclear device.

- That we make improvements to the U.S. Stockpile Stewardship Program to minimize any potential risks to the long-term reliability or safety of our nuclear deterrent.

Implementing these three recommendations would have the added benefit of mitigating most concerns that have been voiced about the test ban treaty.

I urge the new administration and the Senate to reexamine the test ban treaty in light of the contributions it can make to strengthened U.S. leadership of a comprehensive nonproliferation strategy. We do not need nuclear test explosions now, and we do not want others conducting them. We have a wealth of knowledge gained from more than a thousand tests. Our nuclear arsenal is safe, reliable and effective.

The president-elect has endorsed continuing the U.S. nuclear testing moratorium. Other countries, however, are more likely to continue their own voluntary test moratoriums if they are considered steps toward a verifiable, legally binding ban, not end-points in themselves.

Russia has ratified the test ban treaty, along with 68 other countries. China, which has signed but not yet ratified, as well as India and Pakistan, which have made provisional promises to sign and ratify, are watching to see what the next administration will do.

In response to concerns about the test ban treaty's indefinite duration, I am recommending that the Senate and the executive branch conduct a joint review of the treaty's overall impact on national security 10 years after ratification. If serious concerns cannot be resolved, the president would exercise our right to withdraw.

High-level reconsideration of the test ban treaty and a sustained interagency effort to work toward ratification would also increase congressional support for other important aspects of U.S. defense policy. For example, a bipartisan commitment to a stronger stockpile stewardship program is more likely if the program remains closely linked to U.S. support for the test ban treaty.

Progress on ratification is also important for U.S. leadership of global nonproliferation efforts. All our NATO allies and most of our other security partners have ratified the test ban treaty. They are likely to cooperate more closely with us on other nonproliferation initiatives—such as tougher safeguards on civilian nuclear programs and tighter controls over exports related to weapons of mass destruction—if we don't close the door on a nonproliferation tool that they value highly.

One thing is clear: A successful U.S. nonproliferation strategy must be based on a broad international consensus. We cannot manage this problem on our own. And that means we must find a way to move forward with the test ban treaty.

The writer, a retired Army general, was chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff from 1993 to 1997.