

## Key Issues for the 2026 NPT Review Conference

### NUCLEAR TESTING

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The Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1996 but has yet to enter into force nearly thirty years later. The Treaty prohibits States parties from conducting all nuclear test explosions and establishes a verification regime, including through an International Monitoring System (IMS) operated by the CTBTO Preparatory Commission based in Vienna. Comprising over 300 monitoring stations worldwide, the IMS has successfully [detected](#) all six nuclear tests conducted by North Korea.

However, some of the CTBT's key verification mechanisms, including on-site inspections, will become operational only after its entry into force, once all 44 so-called [Annex 2](#) states have ratified the treaty. Of these, six have signed but not ratified the CTBT: China, Egypt, Iran, Israel, Russia and the United States, and three have neither signed nor ratified: India, Pakistan and North Korea. All the nuclear-weapon States (NWS) have voluntary unilateral nuclear testing moratoria in place since the 1990s.<sup>1</sup>

The normative environment around nuclear testing has deteriorated significantly during the current NPT review cycle. In October 2023, the Russian Federation's State Duma formally [withdrew](#) its ratification of the CTBT, though it remains a signatory and has retained national legislation related to implementation. Russian officials portrayed the move as a response to the United States' failure to ratify the Treaty for more than two decades, and [warned](#) that Russia was ready to restart nuclear testing if the United States were to do so.

Concerns about nuclear testing intensified further when, in October 2025, US President Donald Trump instructed the Department of Defense to [resume](#) nuclear weapons testing on what he described as an "equal basis" with China and Russia, referring to "other countries' testing programs." Initially, it was unclear whether President Trump in fact meant intensified testing of nuclear-capable missiles and other delivery systems. Still, the announcement raised questions about whether Washington was preparing to conduct explosive nuclear tests for the first time in over three decades.

In February 2026, Thomas Dinanno, US Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security, [clarified](#) at the Conference on Disarmament that the United States believed both Russia and China had been conducting nuclear tests in violation of their respective moratoria. He referred to [earlier US assessments](#) that Russia had been conducting

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<sup>1</sup> [India](#) and [Pakistan](#) maintain a voluntary moratorium on nuclear testing since 1998, and North Korea [announced](#) a moratorium in 2018. Israel maintains a policy of "nuclear ambiguity" regarding its nuclear arsenal.

supercritical nuclear experiments (such experiments, sometimes referred to as “hydronuclear” tests, result in release of energy, which would be in violation of the CTBT as a “zero-yield” testing ban). The United States also alleged that China had conducted an explosive nuclear test at the Lop Nor site on 22 June 2020 and had concealed the test through decoupling, a method of detonating a device in a large underground chamber to reduce its seismic signature.

On 23 February 2026, US Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Yeaw also addressed the Conference on Disarmament and [provided](#) additional details. He stated that on 22 June 2020, the [Makanchi seismic station](#) in Kazakhstan recorded a “probable explosion” as a magnitude 2.75 seismic event, located at the Lop Nor testing grounds in Western China. The event’s signature was indicative of a “single fire explosion,” inconsistent with either mining activity or earthquakes. Yeaw acknowledged that some countries may not fully trust U.S. assessments and others may request further information. He stated that he believed “more will be coming,” though it is unclear if the United States would be providing further information or if it expects other states and entities to corroborate the claims.

The CTBTO’s Executive Secretary Dr. Robert Floyd in a [statement](#) noted that on the day and time indicated by the United States, the IMS had detected “two very small seismic events, 12 seconds apart.” However, they fell well below the 500 tonnes of TNT threshold at which the IMS could assess their cause with confidence. At present, the CTBTO cannot pursue further verification of the US claim in the absence of on-site inspections and clarification and consultations mechanisms. The passage of time since the alleged test further complicates the matter.

China [denied](#) the allegation, without commenting on the detected seismic events, and accused the United States of “political manipulation” and “evading its own nuclear disarmament responsibilities.”

Reflecting on these developments presents a challenge for the Review Conference. In a [working paper](#) submitted to the 2024 NPT Preparatory Committee, the European Union urged States parties to “strongly regret” Russia’s withdrawal of ratification of the CTBT and to call on Russia to uphold its commitment to a nuclear testing moratorium. The United States will likely seek a broad expression of concern about China’s alleged testing activities.

Non-Aligned States Parties to the NPT, however, have been reluctant to call out Russia for its “de-ratification” of the CTBT, and the group is certain not to criticize China based on US claims. At the same time, the Non-Aligned States’ 2026 [working paper](#) expresses “deep concern over recent public pronouncements and preparations suggesting the possible resumption of nuclear weapon testing and condemns any move toward such a resumption” – language aimed at the United States that the European countries would hesitate to support.

While naming specific States and activities appears impossible, the Conference could call on the NWS to maintain their respective nuclear testing moratoria. The Conference could [further call](#) on the NWS to engage in consultations and confidence building measures around the activities at their former testing sites, as a step towards clarifying allegations and increasing transparency.

Even reaffirming the importance of the CTBT's entry into force might prove problematic, given current US position on the treaty. At the UN General Assembly First Committee in 2025, the United States was the only country to vote against the [resolution](#) on the CTBT, [explaining](#) that "several paragraphs are inconsistent with US policy or are undergoing policy review" and that "the United States is not currently pursuing CTBT ratification and therefore cannot support calls for ratification and entry into force."

The pursuit of a comprehensive ban on nuclear testing has been closely interlinked with the NPT and its review process since the treaty's negotiation. A commitment to conclude the CTBT by 1996 was part of the package of decisions that resulted in the indefinite extension of the NPT in 1995. At the 2000 Review Conference, two of the 13 Practical Steps addressed the CTBT and its entry into force. The last consensus final document, the 2010 Action Plan, contained five action items on the CTBT and nuclear testing moratoria. The 2026 Review Conference's inability to call for the CTBT entry into force would be a serious step backward in this regard. States Parties might still be able to reaffirm support for the CTBTO Preparatory Commission and its work on building and maintaining the International Monitoring System.