After five decades of talk, the importance of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) to the nuclear non-proliferation regime has grown to the point where it is now indispensable. As we take stock of recent developments, we see a series of “good news/bad news” stories about the CTBT. The good news is that worries about the Treaty’s verifiability have been assuaged by technical progress. And seventeen years of a test moratorium, in the case of the United States, have shown that nuclear explosive testing is not necessary to maintain national security. But there is also bad news. In a word, the non-proliferation regime, which we’ve tried to sustain over five decades, has deteriorated in the last 10 years or so. Just think about a few names: North Korea, Iran, Syria, A.Q. Kahn (the founder of Pakistan’s nuclear programme). I don’t need to elaborate. Those names speak for themselves.

NPT’s credibility is at stake

The splits between “nuclear haves” and “nuclear have-nots” have widened; my use of those terms shows you what the roots of the problem really are. The basic bargain of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) has lost credibility. Nations really doubt that it is still operative. The 2005 NPT Review Conference was close to a disaster. The UN summit meeting of that same year failed to reach agreement on measures to strengthen the non-proliferation regime, “a real disgrace” in the words of then UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan.

The renaissance in civil nuclear power is poised to spread technology and materials around the world in the next decades. Is it going to be safeguarded? The Additional Protocols of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) are still a long way from becoming universal. Tensions in the Middle East and South Asia have risen, no end in sight, and nuclear weapons are present in both areas. As summed up by George Shultz, William Perry, Henry Kissinger, and Sam Nunn in their Wall Street Journal article of 4 January 2007: “The world is now on the precipice of a new and dangerous nuclear era.” They described the reliance on nuclear weapons for deterrence as “increasingly hazardous and decreasingly effective,” – their words.

CTBT can revitalize the non-proliferation regime

A comprehensive effort to revitalize and restore the credibility of the non-proliferation regime is needed, desperately needed, and a CTBT must be part of it. I’d like to recall the 2001 report on the test ban by General John Shalikashvili, a former Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff. After the U.S. Senate had turned down the ratification of the CTBT, General Shalikashvili was asked to talk to Senators about their concerns and to make his assessment of how to proceed. I was his deputy. We talked to at least a third of the Senate, people who were interested in the issues and who would be influential. He wanted to hear their views, especially their concerns.

CTBT is a key element in a network of barriers against proliferation

And as a result of all those discussions, General Shalikashvili prepared a report, which he presented to President Clinton in January 2001. General Shalikashvili saw the CTBT as one key element in a network of barriers against proliferation – not a panacea in itself, but an element critical to the success of the whole project. His report pointed out that a CTBT would prevent the advanced nuclear weapon States from making significant improvements in their weapon stockpiles and it would prevent non-nuclear weapon States from developing nuclear weapons, particularly sophisticated weapons useful for war fighting.

General Shalikashvili understood that what the nuclear powers do affects the decision of other countries. Expectations about the future are what motivate all governments. Explosive testing is perhaps the most visible of nuclear weapons activities. Rightly or wrongly, a nuclear explosion amounts to a signal to the world that nuclear weapons are here to stay.

Notes & quotes

“[My] fellow U.S. Republicans may have been right to vote down the nuclear test-ban treaty a decade ago, but they’d be wrong to scuttle it again as President Barack Obama pushes for Senate ratification.”

George Shultz, former U.S. Secretary of State, at the conference ‘Overcoming Nuclear Dangers’ in Rome, Italy, on 17 April 2009.
That’s what testing tells the world. That lesson then becomes part of the world’s expectations.

No nuclear weapons programme is risk-free

Each State, of course, has to make its own assessment of the effect of a CTBT. No agreement, especially in the nuclear field, can be considered risk-free. For that matter, no nuclear weapons programme is without risk.

General Shalikashvili’s assessment of the advantages of the test ban for the United States was as follows: “The test ban treaty will complicate and slow down the efforts of aspiring nuclear states, especially regarding more advanced types of nuclear weapons. It will hamper the development by Russia and China of nuclear weapons based on new designs and will essentially rule out certain advances. It will add to the legal and political constraints that nations must consider when they form their judgments about national defense policies.”

Moratoria are inherently instability

General Shalikashvili’s considered judgment was that the test ban “is vital to the long-term health of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, and will increase support for other elements of a comprehensive non-proliferation strategy.” Furthermore, he stated in his report: “The verification regime established under the Treaty will enhance the United States’ own very capable nuclear test monitoring system and foster new techniques to improve verification. The Treaty will make it easier to mobilize domestic and international support for clarifying ambiguous situations and for responding vigorously if any nation conducts a nuclear test.”

Much has changed both for good and for bad in the past 10 years. But those assessments, I believe, remain valid. The past 10 years have shown us how unilateral moratoria work and how they don’t work. We’ve learned some things about them. One lesson is that instabilities are inherent in moratoria. When any participant can drop out with little or no notification, an atmosphere of the temporary is inescapable.

Another instability is that since there are no agreed standards regarding the scope of a moratorium, there are always bound to be doubts about whether there is a level playing field among the countries observing those moratoria. And a third instability is that there is no agreed way to remove doubts about other nations’ actions: no on-site inspections, no transparency at test sites.

No real alternative to a fully ratified CTBT

The general expectation that a binding treaty is not in the cards obviously discourages any State that might be thinking about refraining from nuclear weapons programmes from doing so. A test ban treaty would be a higher barrier for Iran, for example, to jump over than is a moratorium. Probably the same is true for North Korea as well.

The importance of the context for a CTBT cannot be overstated. President Obama has said that he will work for a world without nuclear weapons. With the end of a two-tier system, a commitment made by the two leading nuclear weapon States to eliminate those weapons will make it easier for test ban hold-outs to accept the Treaty. I hope, therefore, that all possessors of nuclear weapons will rally around the vision of a world without nuclear weapons. It is also true that without a CTBT, the vision of a world free of nuclear weapons will not be perceived as realistic or possible. And the non-proliferation regime will become irrelevant. It’s that important.

Biographical note

Ambassador James Goodby is a research fellow at the Hoover Institution and nonresident senior fellow at the Brookings Institution. His career spanned 35 years in the U.S. Foreign Service and included several assignments dealing with nuclear issues including the START treaty, what became the Helsinki Accords, and five ambassadorial rank appointments including ambassador to Finland. Goodby co-edited Reykjavik Revisited: Steps toward a World Free of Nuclear Weapons with George Shultz and Sidney Drell in 2008.