

Nuclear Testing: A Bygone Era

by Mohamed ElBaradei

The Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) has been the longest outstanding objective of the nuclear age. Envisaged more than half a century ago in 1954, this goal remains unmet – though a CTBT was successfully negotiated and opened for signature in September 1996.

Virtually all post-World War II U.S. Presidents have grappled with this issue and President Dwight Eisenhower described the failure to achieve a permanent ban on nuclear testing as the greatest disappointment of any administration, of any decade, of any time, and of any party.

Jewel in the crown of nuclear arms control

The CTBT, not surprisingly, has been considered arms control history’s longest sought, hardest fought for prize. Achieving the entry into force and implementation of the CTBT would undoubtedly be the jewel in the crown of nuclear arms control and disarmament, supplementing the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT), which is still to be negotiated.

For the past several years, I have been advocating the need to take the bold steps necessary to achieve a world free of nuclear weapons in our time and, in this regard, to fashion a new collective security system that relies not on nuclear weapons, but rather on concepts such as interdependent responsible sovereignty.

Achieving a new collective security system

Achieving such a system requires rebuilding confidence in the authority and integrity of the NPT; securing the entry into force of the CTBT;

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negotiating a verifiable global FMCT; engineering a new framework for the nuclear fuel cycle; devaluing the role of nuclear weapons through de-alerting; and concrete verified nuclear weapon dismantlement and elimination.

The CTBT is essentially a treaty to end all nuclear explosions permanently, in all environments, for all time. And, there has always been a permanent and indissoluble link between ending nuclear explosive testing and moving down the path of achieving a world free of nuclear weapons

Key role in global security

Why is the CTBT so important? Because it would send a very clear, very concrete signal that the nuclear-weapon States are taking seriously the commitment under the NPT to move towards nuclear disarmament. But more importantly, I think, because it will also make difficult the qualitative development of nuclear weapons and the development of nuclear weapons by new countries.

Without the CTBT it would be tempting for new countries to acquire nuclear weapons without violating legal norms, as we have seen recently. Without the CTBT we might continue to see the qualitative development of nuclear weapons.

Another reason I am concerned about the CTBT not coming into force is because it is unfortunately symptomatic of the slow progress overall with regard to moving towards nuclear disarmament.

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Biographical note



Dr. Mohamed ElBaradei has been the Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) since 1997. An expert in international peace and security and international

development, his diplomatic career began in 1964 in the Egyptian Ministry of External Affairs whilst he completed his Doctorate in International Law at the New York University School of Law. Dr. ElBaradei and the IAEA were jointly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2005. ■