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Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty: Social Cognitions

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Abstract. This article explores social cognitions bearing on support for and opposition to the
Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty.

Advocates of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) assert that its ratification by the requisite
number of signatories would vastly impede--if not totally stop--the development and proliferation of
nuclear weapons. Those in opposition to the CTBT assert that its ratification by the requisite number of
states would prevent nuclear weapons development and proliferation, except among rogue states and
other rogue political actors. These last two entities would not comply with CTBT directives and, thus,
CTBT ratification would afford these entities a competitive advantage in nuclear weapons development.
Supporters and those in opposition to the CTBT are both being disingenuous.

CTBT supporters seek to counter the concerns of CTBT opponents that ratification would preclude
maintaining the safety and reliability of nuclear weapons assets. They do this by emphasizing that
simulations using high-tech supercomputers and sub-critical experiments (not involving nuclear
explosions, but using radioactive materials in an underground environment) can adequately ensure
safety and reliability. Moreover, supporters maintain that verification technology allows adequate
discrimination between non-nuclear explosions, low-level nuclear explosions, and natural seismic events
such as earthquakes. In addition, supporters assert that even if such discrimination fails, the value to
CTBT violators--be they ratifiers, signatories, or neither of the two--for nuclear weapons development
would be operationally minimal.

However, CTBT supporters do not often admit that the same methodologies useful in ensuring safety
and reliability of existing nuclear weapons can also be useful in nurturing new nuclear weapons
programs. They do not publicly state that a lack of evidence of CTBT violations may merely indicate that
no violation has been detected, not the absence of violation. As well, supporters do not often mention
that while any violation may in itself be operationally minimal, an accumulation of operationally minimal
increments may become quite significant indeed.

CTBT opponents maintain that safety and reliability of nuclear weapons cannot be ensured without
actual weapons testing (via nuclear explosions underground.) They also assert that verification can
never be fool-proof.

However, CTBT opponents do not often admit that actual weapons testing is not a fool-proof means of
ensuring safety and reliability--that, in fact, there is no fool-proof means. They also rarely admit that, at
times, computer simulations and sub-critical experiments may yield safety and reliability concerns as
well as or better than actual weapons testing. More often, they may hark back to an ironic and
paradoxical Cold War shibboleth that (regardless of safety and reliability concerns) actual testing is
necessary to establish resolve to employ nuclear weapons--a requisite to the nuclear deterrence that
mitigates against nuclear weapons employment. This shibboleth, however, seems to ignore that nuclear
weapons security threats may stem much more from the most primitive of delivery systems--e.g.,
suitcases--than sophisticated intercontinental ballistic missiles. Deterrence through the threat of nuclear
weapons employment against suitcase manufacturers and identifying the source of a nuclear device are much more problematic than deterring detecting missile trajectories approved by a national government.

Assertions that verification can never be fool-proof--while literally correct--lock CTBT opponents into a position that no defense or security treaty based on weapons or weapons-testing limitation, reductions, or outright bannings should ever be approved. But what would be left? Two other conceptual alternatives also are problematic. That no defense or security treaties should ever be signed because past, present, or future behavior can never be verified becomes a pure isolationist position in an increasingly globalized world. That only treaties that do not revolve around weapons and weapons-testing limitations, reductions, and banning should be approved assumes that this approach has security-enhancing consequences, while the converse never does.