



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

Russian de-ratification of nuclear test ban treaty - a real threat or a bluff?



When news comes from the Kremlin about nuclear weapons, the world feels anxious and uneasy, as in the Cold War period when the nuclear threat was at its peak. Moscow's decisions regarding its nuclear arsenal seem like a credible threat given its aggression against Ukraine and its treatment of the West as an enemy endangering Russia. One of the factors driving both houses of the Russian parliament and, ultimately, Russian President Vladimir Putin in his decision to withdraw the ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) last Thursday was the growing fear of the use of nuclear weapons. This is the agreement that Russia and the US signed in 1996, and the parliament in Moscow ratified in 2000, just a few months after Vladimir Putin came to power. With the statement that it wants to be treated equally to the US, which has never ratified the agreement, Russia is now withdrawing its decision.

A step back for global security

Apart from the fact that at first glance, this decision may seem threatening, bearing in mind that Russia has been in a state of war for almost 2 years, how threatening is the decision of the Russian parliament and the head of state really for world peace? "The Decision by the Russian Federation to revoke its ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty is very disappointing and deeply regrettable" wrote Robert Floyd, head of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organisation on X. This organisation deals with the advocacy of the agreement and its full implementation using a network of observatory stations for detecting shock waves and radioactive emissions resulting from nuclear explosions. Out of more than 300 such stations distributed globally, there are 30 of them in Russia, based on the agreement.

Mr Floyd's concern about Moscow's move is evident, given the mission of the organisation he leads. With this decision, the list of 164 countries that have ratified the agreement has been reduced by one. We are not talking about any country but a nuclear power, which has

been at war for almost 2 years. With this move, apart from the US, Russia joined China, one of the nuclear powers that signed but did not ratify the Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty. This means that the so-called original nuclear powers, which still have a ratified agreement (Great Britain and France), are now the minority among the 5 permanent members of the UN Security Council. However, Russia still remains a signatory of this international act, adopted within the framework of the UN, together with 186 other countries, and continues to assume responsibilities arising from it.

Russia is not withdrawing from the agreement

The reasons why the Kremlin decided to withdraw the CTBT ratification are, therefore, still symbolic. The prior remarks made by a number of senior Russian government officials support this. Last September, when parliament was already in the process of withdrawing its ratification, Russia's deputy foreign minister Sergei Ryabkov declared that his country would uphold the prohibition on nuclear tests and would only resume them if the US did it first. "Withdrawing ratification by no means undermines our constructive approach to the CTBT and does not mean that our country intends to resume nuclear tests," said Vladimir Yermakov, head of the Foreign Ministry's non-proliferation and arms control department in mid-October. After all, Russian President Putin said last February that he would continue nuclear tests only if the US did it first. Moscow's resolve to take a step back in terms of nuclear tests seems more appropriate for political rhetoric than military strategy, given the history of nuclear tests. Russia (then still the USSR) conducted its final nuclear test in 1990, and 2 years later, the last US nuclear test followed.

Indulging domestic radicals

Raising the authority of the state leadership in times of war and domestic motivation are the

main reasons behind Russia's de-ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty. Putin and the government in Moscow have been announcing this move for a long time. It was expected and desired. The protracted war in Ukraine with meagre results has strengthened radical voices in Moscow calling for a more decisive response, even a nuclear one. Proponents of the use of the nuclear arsenal are also vocal in the parliament, political life, and particularly in the state-controlled media. By doing this, Putin is partially caving into their demands, reassuring them that he is making progress towards providing the nuclear retaliation they have demanded. On the other hand, the nuclear arsenal in the hands of Russia is the only remaining parameter by which it can still be considered a global power and a competitor to the US. In the official rhetoric of Putin and his high-ranking officials, in this case, equality with the US in treating the CTBT has been emphasised. For the purpose of internal mobilisation, it sounds good when there are (still) areas in which Russia can present itself as an equal competitor to the US.

treaty may be a new problematic issue to explain to Chinese partners.

What is the appropriate answer for Beijing?

However, no matter how symbolic this decision is, Russia will take on the risk of "rattling" its nuclear arsenal again. China, Putin's vital and only remaining ally among principal global actors, is particularly sensitive to such behaviour. Seeking to maintain the impression of impartiality towards Russian aggression against Ukraine, Beijing insists on refraining from any changes in the regime of use and control of the nuclear arsenal. However, Putin already played a trick on his Chinese friends on this issue once, last March. Just a few days after the meeting with Xi Jinping in Moscow, when he confirmed the determination that nuclear states must not deploy their arsenal outside their borders in a joint statement, Putin announced that he would deploy part of his arsenal in neighbouring Belarus. The current backward step in implementing the nuclear test ban