



Vladimir Putin in Sochi on Friday. The Russian president on Thursday suggested the country could revoke its ratification of the 1996 CTBT agreement. Photograph: Getty Images

Nuclear weapons

Russia will revoke ratification of nuclear test ban treaty, envoy says US condemns announcement by Mikhail Ulyanov, saying it ‘needlessly endangers the global norm’ against nuclear testing

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Russia’s envoy to the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO) has said that Moscow will revoke its ratification of the pact, a move that Washington denounced as endangering “the global norm” against nuclear test blasts.

Friday’s announcement by Mikhail Ulyanov added new fuel to tensions between Russia and the US over Moscow’s invasion of **Ukraine** and arms control disputes between the world’s largest nuclear powers.

Ulyanov, Moscow's envoy to the CTBTO, said on X, formerly known as Twitter: "#Russia plans to revoke ratification (which took place in the year 2000) of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty.

"The aim is to be on equal footing with the #US who signed the Treaty, but didn't ratify it. Revocation doesn't mean the intention to resume nuclear tests."

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Stephen Wertheim

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While the US signed but did not ratify the treaty, it has observed a moratorium on nuclear weapon test explosions since 1992 which it says it has no plans to abandon.

"We are disturbed by the comments of ambassador Ulyanov in Vienna today," a US State Department spokesperson said in a statement. "A move like this by any state party needlessly endangers the global norm against nuclear explosive testing."

Robert Floyd, the executive secretary of the **Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO)**, said it would be "concerning and deeply unfortunate if any state signatory were to reconsider its ratification of the CTBT."

Russian President **Vladimir Putin** had suggested that Russia could revoke its ratification of the 1996 CTBT agreement to "mirror" the US a day earlier.

Speaking in Sochi on Thursday, **Putin made several references to nuclear weapons**. He said he was "not ready to say now whether we really need or don't need to conduct tests".

"As a rule, experts say, with a new weapon - you need to make sure that the special warhead will work without failures," Putin said.

Any Russian nuclear test would be the first since 1990, the last conducted by the Soviet Union. Renewed testing by a nuclear superpower would undo one of the principal advances in non-proliferation since the cold war.

Since the all-out invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Putin and other Russian officials have frequently drawn attention to the country's nuclear arsenal, the

biggest in the world, in an attempt to deter other countries from helping Ukraine resist the invasion.

Vyacheslav Volodin, the chairman of the State Duma, the lower house of parliament, said after Putin's remarks that it would swiftly consider whether revocation of Russia's ratification of the CTBT was necessary.

Last week, Mikhail Kovalchuk, a close associate of Putin and head of the Kurchatov Institute research centre, said Russia could carry out a nuclear test "at least once" at Novaya Zemlya, an Arctic archipelago where the Soviet Union carried out testing.

Satellite images of Novaya Zemlya, published last month by the Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey, showed recent construction activity at the old test site.

The institute also found signs of activities at the old US testing ground in the Nevada desert, and the Chinese site in Xinjiang province, suggesting the CTBT is increasingly fragile as international tensions rise, and the nuclear powers expand or modernise their arsenals.

National security officials in Donald Trump's administration discussed in May 2020 **a possible resumption** of US tests for the first time since 1992.

In his remarks in Sochi, Putin claimed Russia had successfully tested an experimental nuclear-powered cruise missile, the Burevestnik, and was close to producing a new type of nuclear-capable ballistic missile.

"A Russian nuclear test in the near future would be the latest in a stream of nuclear signals related to the war in Ukraine, which often come when Russia is facing battlefield losses," said Heather Williams, the director of a project on nuclear issues at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

"Nonetheless, these threats should be taken seriously. If Russia withdrew ratification from the CTBT or did test a nuclear weapon, this would be a major strategic and diplomatic provocation.

"It would undermine one of the few remaining agreements managing nuclear risk, since Russia suspended participation in the 2010 New Start treaty earlier this year."

The CTBT was opened for signature in 1996 and since then it has been signed by 187 countries, and ratified by 178. For the test ban to enter into force, however, it requires ratification by 44 states who participated in negotiating the agreement and who had nuclear power or research reactors at the time.

Of that 44, eight countries have yet to ratify the ban: China, North Korea, Egypt, India, Iran, Israel, Pakistan and the US.