

■ Limited Test Ban Treaty

Date: August 5, 1963

Geographic Region: Soviet Union, United Kingdom, United States

Genre: treaty

Summary Overview

On August 5, 1963, representatives of the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union meeting in Moscow signed the first treaty to limit the testing of nuclear weapons. The approximately eighteen years that passed between the development and use of the first nuclear bombs by the United States at the end of World War II and the signing of the treaty had seen a massive arms race between the Western powers—primarily the United States and United Kingdom—and the Soviet Union. More and more powerful weapons were created and tested with little regard for the radioactive fallout entering the atmosphere or its impact on plant, animal, and human health. Although the negotiations took eight years, the Limited Test Ban Treaty ultimately restricted nuclear weapons testing to underground explosions, and although it did not stop or even slow the arms race, it proved to be an important first step in the superpowers working together toward limiting the growth of nuclear weapons stockpiles.

Defining Moment

The world changed in a number of important ways following the conclusion of World War II. The two factors that combined to create the Cold War that followed were the development of nuclear weapons (or atomic weapons, as they were first called) and the Soviet Union's postwar desire to establish a ring of friendly governments around it, leading to Soviet domination of Eastern Europe and a seeming desire to expand further. Though the United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union were allies during World War II, the relationship rapidly deteriorated after the use of the first two nuclear weapons against Japan at the conclusion of the war in August 1945. The Soviets quickly realized that they would need to have a nuclear weapon as well in order to compete with the Western powers in Europe. As a result, like the United States before them,

they engaged in a program to develop a nuclear bomb, achieving a nuclear chain reaction in December 1946 and detonating their first bomb in August 1949.

By the time the Soviets detonated their first nuclear bomb, the Americans and British were developing even more powerful weapons. Such weapons needed to be tested, and the Americans began detonating bombs both on small islands in the Pacific Ocean in the late 1940s and in the deserts of Nevada in the early 1950s. The Soviets began testing their weapons at Semipalatinsk, Kazakhstan. The pace of testing accelerated with the pace of development of new weapons. In 1952, the United States exploded the first thermonuclear device (a hydrogen bomb, more powerful than previous nuclear bombs) at Eniwetok Atoll, while less than a year later the Soviets were testing devices on the way toward the development of a hydrogen bomb. The Americans tested an improved hydrogen bomb at Bikini Atoll in March 1954. While the number of tests had been increasing, so had the evidence that the fallout from these weapons presented seriously adverse health risks to those nearby or downwind. For example, the March 1954 test was concluded without removing nearby island residents, and they experienced significant health problems as a result of a blast that was much larger than expected.

By the mid-1950s, it was becoming clear that indirect exposure to atomic radiation was also a health problem. Radiation had been detected in food supplies as a result of atmospheric nuclear weapons tests, and the underwater tests were having equally dramatic impacts on the aquatic environment of the South Pacific, as the British were also testing in their territories in the region. In May 1955, the Soviet Union first voiced the idea of an international agreement to cease nuclear testing through the inclusion of a proposal regarding the discontinuance of weapons testing as part of the United Nations (UN) Disarmament Commission. The

three powers (the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union) started negotiations and, as a first step, agreed on an informal moratorium on testing, although that was to last less than three years before the Americans and Soviets resumed testing. It would take another two years after this to finally negotiate a treaty to eliminate the atmospheric and underwater testing of atomic weapons.

Document Information

The final negotiations for the Limited Test Ban Treaty took place in July 1963, and the treaty was ultimately signed by US secretary of state Dean Rusk, Soviet foreign minister Andrei Gromyko, and British foreign minister Alec Douglas-Home. Though leaders on all sides

had expressed a desire to limit testing since the late 1950s, the political will to negotiate an agreement with international verification and inspections did not rise until the early 1960s. In the aftermath of the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, US president John F. Kennedy and Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev both saw the need for a treaty. The discussions continued, and by 1963 the basic mechanisms of verification were agreed upon; it was only the scale and frequency of inspections that were left to be negotiated. On July 15, 1963, delegates met in Moscow to negotiate the final treaty agreement, which they were able to do over a very brief ten-day conference, with the treaty signing taking place on August 5, 1963.

HISTORICAL DOCUMENT

The Governments of the United States of America, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, hereinafter referred to as the “Original Parties,”

Proclaiming as their principal aim the speediest possible achievement of an agreement on general and complete disarmament under strict international control in accordance with the objectives of the United Nations which would put an end to the armaments race and eliminate the incentive to the production and testing of all kinds of weapons, including nuclear weapons,

Seeking to achieve the discontinuance of all test explosions of nuclear weapons for all time, determined to continue negotiations to this end, and desiring to put an end to the contamination of mans environment by radioactive substances,

Have agreed as follows:

Article I

1. Each of the Parties to this Treaty undertakes to prohibit, to prevent, and not to carry out any nuclear weapon test explosion, or any other nuclear explosion, at any place under its jurisdiction or control:

(a) in the atmosphere; beyond its limits, including outer space; or under water, including territorial waters or high seas; or

(b) in any other environment if such explosion causes radioactive debris to be present outside the territorial limits of the State under whose jurisdiction or control such explosion is conducted. It is understood in this connection that the provisions of this subparagraph are without prejudice to the conclusion of a Treaty resulting in the permanent banning of all nuclear test explosions, including all such explosions underground, the conclusion of which, as the Parties have stated in the Preamble to this Treaty, they seek to achieve.

2. Each of the Parties to this Treaty undertakes furthermore to refrain from causing, encouraging, or in any way participating in, the carrying out of any nuclear weapon test explosion, or any other nuclear explosion, anywhere which would take place in any of the environments described, or have the effect referred to, in paragraph 1 of this Article.

Article II

1. Any Party may propose amendments to this Treaty. The text of any proposed amendment shall be submitted to the Depositary Governments which shall circulate it to all Parties to this Treaty. Thereafter, if requested to do so by one-third or more of the Parties, the Depositary Governments shall convene a conference, to which they shall invite all the Parties, to consider such amendment.

2. Any amendment to this Treaty must be approved by a majority of the votes of all the Parties to this Treaty, including the votes of all of the Original Parties. The amendment shall enter into force for all Parties upon the deposit of instruments of ratification by a majority of all the Parties, including the instruments of ratification of all of the Original Parties.

Article III

1. This Treaty shall be open to all States for signature. Any State which does not sign this Treaty before its entry into force in accordance with paragraph 3 of this Article may accede to it at any time.

2. This Treaty shall be subject to ratification by signatory States. Instruments of ratification and instruments of accession shall be deposited with the Governments of the Original Parties—the United States of America, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics—which are hereby designated the Depositary Governments.

3. This Treaty shall enter into force after its ratification by all the Original Parties and the deposit of their instruments of ratification.

4. For States whose instruments of ratification or accession are deposited subsequent to the entry into force of this Treaty, it shall enter into force on the date of the deposit of their instruments of ratification or accession.

5. The Depositary Governments shall promptly inform all signatory and acceding States of the date of each signature, the date of deposit of each instrument of ratification of and accession to this Treaty, the date of its entry into force, and the date of receipt of any requests for conferences or other notices.

6. This Treaty shall be registered by the Depositary Governments pursuant to Article 102 of the Charter of the United Nations.

Article IV

This Treaty shall be of unlimited duration.

Each Party shall in exercising its national sovereignty have the right to withdraw from the Treaty if it decides that extraordinary events, related to the subject matter of this Treaty, have jeopardized the supreme interests of its country. It shall give notice of such withdrawal to all other Parties to the Treaty three months in advance.

Article V

This Treaty, of which the English and Russian texts are equally authentic, shall be deposited in the archives of the Depositary Governments. Duly certified copies of this Treaty shall be transmitted by the Depositary Governments to the Governments of the signatory and acceding States.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF the undersigned, duly authorized, have signed this Treaty.

DONE in triplicate at the city of Moscow the fifth day of August, one thousand nine hundred and sixty-three.

For the Government of the United States of America
DEAN RUSK

For the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland
SIR DOUGLAS HOME

For the Government of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
A. GROMYKO

Document Analysis

A brief document, the Treaty Banning Nuclear Weapon Tests in the Atmosphere, in Outer Space, and Under Water focuses on the definitions of activities banned by the treaty, the mechanism for amendment to the treaty, the ability for additional nations to sign the treaty, and the duration of the treaty. The preamble to the treaty discusses the three original signing nations and their ambitious goal of “the speediest possible achievement of an agreement . . . which would put an end to the

armaments race and eliminate the incentive to the production and testing of all kinds of weapons, including nuclear weapons.” Although the Limited Test Ban Treaty would not come close to meeting that long-term goal, it was a vital first step in curbing the unprecedented arms race that had dominated the period since World War II.

In the first section of the document, at the most basic level, the parties to the treaty agree not to test nuclear weapons in the air, in outer space, underwa-

ter, and on land in any territory under their control or in any location if radioactive debris could conceivably contaminate areas outside of their borders. While the treaty does not explicitly ban underground testing, this latter qualification is designed to at least limit any such activities. The overall aim of the treaty is to prevent the spread of radioactive materials, as earlier tests had already resulted in measurable amounts of radiation being found in crops and watersheds. An important point in the text is that it is not confined to nuclear explosions conducted solely for military purposes, but rather, the treaty outlaws “any nuclear weapon test explosion, or any other nuclear explosion.” This encompassing description ensures that nations cannot claim that nuclear test explosions were done for peaceful purposes, and yet use the research to advance weapons programs.

The treaty is designed to be signed by additional nations outside of the original three and can be amended at the recommendation of any signer with a majority vote of all of the signers; however, for any amendment to take effect, all three of the original signers have to approve. Though the treaty is to be unlimited in duration, any of the signers can withdraw from the treaty with three months’ notice.

Essential Themes

The ultimate success of the treaty can be called mixed. In terms of its immediate goal—the elimination of above-ground or underwater nuclear testing—it was largely successful. Over one hundred nations ultimately signed the pact, including nearly all nations with sizable enough military and scientific infrastructures as to possibly produce a nuclear weapon. The only two notable nations not to sign the treaty were the People’s Republic of China and France. On the other hand, the treaty, which was seen as a first step toward calming Cold War tensions, did not lead to additional steps over the rest of the decade to bring the United States and the Soviet Union together. A comprehensive test ban treaty would not be signed for over thirty years after the Limited Test Ban Treaty, and the idea of *détente*, when tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union would lessen to a degree, would not come until the 1970s.

It would be another five years before the next agreement between the superpowers, the Nuclear Non-Pro-

liferation Treaty, was signed. During the 1970s, Richard Nixon, who had been vice president under Dwight D. Eisenhower when the first talks leading to the Limited Test Ban Treaty began, became the US president, and he sought to reduce tensions between the nuclear powers. In 1972, Nixon became the first president to travel to Moscow, and he signed two important treaties: the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and the first Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT I). These treaties represented the first agreements that actually placed limits on the number of nuclear weapons possessed by the superpowers.

Immediately after the signing of SALT I, negotiations for a follow-up treaty began. Negotiations were slow and contentious, but in 1979, US president Jimmy Carter and Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev signed SALT II, which limited the number of both nations’ nuclear weapons to 2,250 delivery vehicles. However, a renewed rise in tensions due to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan caused Carter to advise the US Senate not to ratify the treaty, though both nations pledged to adhere to its provisions. In 1991, the powers both signed the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), which actually reduced the number of nuclear weapons in the final years of the Cold War and after.

— Steven L. Danver, PhD

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