

Revival of Nuclear Arms Race: US Conducts New Underground Nuclear Tests

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In 1997, five years after its last underground nuclear test, the U.S. Department of Energy conducted its first subcritical nuclear test. Back then, critics said that the subcritical test program was creating a crisis of confidence in the negotiations over the CTBT because nations such as India and Indonesia strongly felt that such experiments should be included in the activities banned by the treaty. Critics also feared that because of the nature of these experiments on plutonium (e.g. conducted underground, there is no visible flash, seismic signal or 'gas signature'), one country's conduct of a subcritical test might easily be seen by another as a very low yield nuclear test.

Even without creating a 'yield,' which would categorize a nuclear experiment as a nuclear explosion, experts and even government documents agree that subcritical tests can be used beyond their stated purpose, to study the aging properties of plutonium. They could be used for developing new nuclear weapons. Although it hasn't been yet proven that any country has used subcritical tests for this latter purpose, do we want to wait around and find out (the CTBT doesn't actually ban subcritical nuclear tests)?

As was seen during the Cold War, the nuclear arms race closely resembled the feverish pace of the nuclear testing race. We should know from history that whenever one superpower begins conducting a lot of nuclear weapons-related tests, then the other superpower or superpowers, with nothing to lose by staying in lock-step, follow suit. What is worrisome with the subcritical nuclear test race now beginning between the U.S. and Russia is that the chances of one thing leading to another – resuming subcritical tests leading to full-scale nuclear testing resumption – substantially increase.

In 1998, the U.S. had increased its rate of subcritical testing by 50% from 1997 levels and nuclear experts noted that the Soviets met this ramp-up with an increase in their own subcritical tests at their nuclear test site in Novaya Zemlya; in October 1998, the Soviets conducted a subcritical test underground at Novaya Zemlya on the same day the U.S. carried out one in Nevada. We're lucky that in the fourteen years since, in the absence of a CTBT-in-force, there hasn't been a resumption of nuclear testing.

The U.S. took a long 'break' from subcritical testing from 2006 to 2010 and little was heard then about the programs of other countries known to have a subcritical testing program – China, Russia, and France. Since 2010, the U.S. has 'shot' off three subcritical tests and has plans in late 2012 for 'Pollux,' a 'first-of-a-kind demonstration' combining a 'scaled subcritical experiment' with plutonium-239. Pollux is called a subcritical nuclear experiment because it will be held underground and use larger-than-normal (but nevertheless 'small')

amounts of plutonium-239 fuel than used in ordinary hydrodynamic tests. However, it is the first such 'scaled' subcritical test by the U.S. because it will involve a scale model of a warhead primary (using plutonium-239 nuclear material). This is provocative because Pollux will be the closest thing to a full-scale nuclear test that the U.S. has carried out since its last nuclear explosion 20 years ago. (Read more in 'NNSA Keeps Conducting 'Nuclear Tests' and Mentioning Them Well After the Fact')

While the news about 'Pollux' may be raising eyebrows in places like China, in Russia the interest in this 'scaled' subcritical test apparently has already tipped the scales of restraint. On September 28, 2012, the Russian paper *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* printed an article by Vladimir Mukhin titled 'Nuclear Umbrella for the Arctic' (or 'Nuclear Umbrella for Arctic Region') which notes that Russia's defense ministry is planning to beef up security at its former nuclear test site (at Novaya Zemlya) while considering restarting a subcritical nuclear testing program for ensuring the reliability of the Russian nuclear stockpile. But that's not all. The article also notes that, for Russia, subcritical experiments are important for verification of the properties of new types of nuclear weapons. The article, however, quotes one Russian think-tank researcher who says subcritical tests can't be useful in new weapons work without full-scale nuclear testing. That may be true for Russia, but the U.S. nuclear weapons complex's 'Green Book' (see above-linked article 'NNSA Keeps....') says the opposite. The Russian article also notes that the Arctic nuclear test site, like its 'nemesis' site in the State of Nevada, is maintained by a 'readiness' program for the possibility of nuclear weapons testing resumption.

What we're seeing in real-time in September 2012 is a replay of 1998. The U.S. is ramping up the rate and provocativeness of its subcritical testing program while Russia is readying for 'something' at its Novaya Zemlya site. (In August 2012, Russia banned civilian use of the airspace over the archipelago, which has a resident population of 2,900.) Fortifying the Arctic former nuclear test site with deadly navy and air military assets, Russia is preparing for, at least, resumed subcritical testing, if not something worse. It's all really too bad. If the CTBT banned subcritical nuclear tests, then we wouldn't be hearing about this worrisome development and what may lay in store for us. In 1997, an article in the 'Disarmament Times' paraphrased the comments made about subcritical testing by the foreign minister of Indonesia at a U.N. meeting:

'Unless the nuclear powers desisted from sub-critical tests and computer simulations to design new weapons, there could be a resumption of the nuclear arms race and a revival risk of global disaster.'(1)

So, now we have to live with the consequences of a renewed subcritical nuclear test race that was sparked by the U.S. with a little help of a test ban treaty that's simply not comprehensive enough to do the job.

NOTES

[1] As paraphrased in 'Assembly Debates Show Continuing Stalemate on Disarmament Priorities,' by plenary speech of Foreign Minister Ali Alatas of Indonesia during the 52nd U.N. General Assembly.

Andrew Kishner is founder of NuclearCrimes.org, which provides deep analysis into the history and consequences of the manifold reckless activities related to nuclear weapons work during the 20th century by several 'nuclear club' nations.

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