Today America finds itself on the precipice of profound change as its adversaries advance in ways that the US government has largely ignored for the last several decades. China has made an alarming nuclear breakout; European security has collapsed thanks to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine; and weapons of mass destruction programs in Iran and North Korea have advanced almost unabatedly. Despite these changes, Washington continues to look to the same, ineffective, and tired tools of arms control that marked America’s Cold War and post-Cold War foreign policy.

The entire arms control architecture is replete with examples of measures that lack mechanisms to hold violators accountable, and of bad actors who violate their obligations under these agreements because they know no one will hold them to account. The latest example is Russia’s non-compliance with its obligations under the New START treaty by refusing to resume inspections and hold a Bilateral Consultative Commission meeting as required by the treaty.

While New START is on life-support, the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization’s (CTBTO) Preparatory Commission (PrepCom), headquartered in Vienna, Austria, marches along with its dogmatic and outdated view that having fewer nuclear tests lowers the number of actual nuclear weapons. Further, the US continues to fully fund the CTBTO to the tune of $29 million every year.

The organization bills itself as “an interim organization tasked with building up the verification regime of the [Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT)] in preparation for the Treaty’s entry into force, as well as promoting the Treaty’s universality.” One could be forgiven for thinking this was a permanent organization, as this “interim” body has been around for nearly three decades. Over that period it has bilked American taxpayers of hundreds of millions of dollars in “voluntary” and in-kind contributions that are central to the CTBT’s existence—even though the United States self-funds its own International Monitoring System (IMS) stations.
Many taxpayers might be taken aback further when they realize that the United States, while a treaty signatory, is not a treaty ratifier, nor does it have any obligations under international law to this treaty. That went out the door when the Bush administration publicly abrogated itself from any such obligations. The Biden administration cannot undo this change, wish as hard as it might, without the US ratifying the treaty.

Who is at the CTBTO PrepCom’s helm? The affable Australian ecologist Rob Floyd, who begged for US support when nominated to be executive secretary of the CTBTO in 2020. In a recent visit to Patrick Space Force Base in Florida, Floyd, now in harness after securing US support, seemingly declared victory against the proliferation of nuclear weapons. His statement seems to imply that because his organization had not detected any nuclear explosion, one might conclude there must be fewer nuclear weapons being built. He said:

I hold nothing but hope that someday all nations will recognize the influence they’ve had in reducing the number of nuclear tests that have been performed. Think about it—before the CTBT was signed in 1996, there were more than 2,000 nuclear tests conducted around the world. But after the treaty was drafted, less than a dozen were carried out, and only one—one!—has taken place this century. I consider that an outstanding success.

The CTBTO has done nothing to arrest the growth of our adversaries’ nuclear ambitions. Russia has a fully modernized nuclear arsenal with various delivery systems, including hypersonic intercontinental ballistic missiles. Meanwhile, no arms control regime places any constraints—none—on China’s stockpile, which also has hypersonic capabilities. North Korea’s program continues to march along, growing in size, range, and sophistication, and the Iran breakout timelines continue to shrink. The absence of detectable nuclear explosions does not directly correlate to the shrinking of the global stockpile of nuclear weapons.

Further, Floyd omits that neither Iran nor North Korea is a party to the treaty. The US has also assessed that Russia has previously conducted nuclear weapons tests that have created nuclear yield, and Washington has raised similar concerns regarding China’s testing activities. Despite his assurances to US diplomats to confront Beijing and Moscow, Floyd was doing what other foreign powers and nationless organizations do in the US: beg for money.

The CTBTO’s IMS is a network of detectors placed strategically around the world in oceans, mountain ranges, and other far-reaching destinations to detect seismic activity, one indicator of a nuclear explosion. US taxpayers gift Floyd’s CTBTO in Vienna $29 million every year, but there are some strings that bureaucrats and globalists hate. For years, Democrats in Congress and arms control advocates have begged for a blank check to support more than just the maintenance and upkeep of the monitoring system that ostensibly has some value to the US military. They have wanted to support staff salaries, contracts, IT upgrades, and all the goodies that US tax dollars can buy. But a few stalwarts in Congress rightly insist that the US can only support the monitoring system itself, not the overhead costs in Vienna. This relatively small investment (each new B-21 Raider costs $700 million) and bureaucratic squabble miss the larger point.

The larger lesson for US policymakers is that the diplomatic relics of the ’80s and ’90s did not work then, and they do not work now. Rob Floyd is an affable, friendly fellow who is generally supportive of the United States, and he is in the unenviable position of having to herd those nations that signed and ratified the CTBT.
Going forward, any US taxpayer support to the IMS needs to come with a series of goals and clear metrics. Further, the US needs to address the double billing to US taxpayers. Currently, the Department of Defense spends millions of dollars every year, in addition to the funds the US sends to Vienna, to maintain our own network of IMS stations. America is one of the, if not the only, countries in the world that self-funds the operations and maintenance of its IMS stations, while subsidizing other countries’ IMS networks via the CTBTO. Given that the United States is not a treaty ratifier and is not bound to uphold the treaty’s object and purpose, a more equitable solution would be for the US to contribute its proportional share (roughly equivalent to the 22 percent we contribute to the UN assessed budget) for the upkeep and maintenance of its IMS network while receiving the remaining percent from the CTBTO. We need to ensure no double billing occurs.

Second, CTBTO should make partner nations accountable for the full-time operation of their stations. In 2019, a failed test of a Russian nuclear cruise missile resulted in the shutdown of a Russian monitoring station near a major population center to potentially hide and obfuscate critical information so that international partners would not have critical information on the nuclear fallout. And as the State Department’s 2020 Compliance Report noted, China frequently blocks the flow of data from its IMS stations to the international data center operated by CTBTO Preparatory Commission.

Finally, the CTBTO executive secretary needs to uphold his promise to the United States to call out the behavior of adversaries like Russia and China clearly and unequivocally.

But when interviewed by a friendly, left-leaning non-governmental organization about Russian low-yield testing, which the United States has raised concerns about for years, Floyd responded:

As far as I am aware, and I would never be fully aware of everything that the US government would do, but as far as I’m aware, the United States has made, on a number of occasions, that declaration that you just mentioned. But I’m not aware of a sharing of more detailed information that might back that up.

When nominated to be the executive secretary of the CTBTO, Floyd assured US officials when pressed that he would challenge Russian and Chinese malfeasance and non-compliance in exchange for their support. But with the $29 million on the line and a new administration to appease, those assurances are blowing in the wind.
About the Author

Thomas DiNanno served in the White House Homeland Security Council in the aftermath of 9/11, and as DHS deputy assistant secretary for critical infrastructure, FEMA assistant administrator for grant programs, and from 2018 to 2021 was acting assistant secretary of state for arms control. He is an adjunct senior fellow at Hudson Institute in Washington, DC.