

MP-IDSA *Commentary*

Analysing Trump's Nuclear Rhetoric

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Summary

Satellite imagery and expert analysis reveal significant expansion of nuclear testing sites in Russia, China and the US.

US President Donald Trump’s instructions to the Pentagon “to start testing nuclear weapons on an equal basis”¹ shook the international community. He justified his stance by claiming that other countries, especially Russia and China, among others, were testing their respective nuclear weapons, and he did not want the US to be left behind.² He claimed that Russia was the US’s peer in the nuclear domain and China was fast catching up with the two. And both—Russia and China—“test way under- underground where people don’t know exactly what’s happening with the test.. You feel a little bit of a vibration”.

Trump’s statements came as a surprise and created confusion about whether the US was resuming testing, which it last conducted in 1992. US Energy Secretary Chris Wright attempted to calm nerves by stating that the US will not conduct nuclear explosive testing but rather conduct “systems tests”, which are considered non-critical explosions.³

Although Trump’s nuclear rhetoric seemed to have come from nowhere, it had a strong precedent from his first term. Even then, some officials from his administration were considering nuclear tests with Russia and China in mind. Additionally, a policy document published in April 2023 by a conservative US think tank prescribed that the new government proceed with nuclear tests.

Roots of Trump’s Nuclear Rhetoric

Trump’s rhetoric of nuclear testing is seemingly stemming from two sources—one, the US State Department’s Adherence to and Compliance with Arms Control, Non-proliferation, and Disarmament Agreements and Commitments’ Report (Compliance Report) and two, Project 2025. During the first iteration of the Trump administration, the 2020 Compliance Report by the US State Department claimed that ‘Russia has conducted nuclear weapons experiments that have created nuclear yield and are not consistent with the U.S. “zero-yield” standard’.⁴ Further, it claimed that Russian nuclear testing was aimed at improving its nuclear weapons designs and capabilities. The US also suspected that Russia conducted several ‘supercritical or self-sustaining nuclear experiments’ in 2019.⁵

¹ Donald J. Trump, “[The United States has more Nuclear Weapons than any other country...](#)”, Truth Social, 30 October 2025.

² [“Full Transcript of Norah O'Donnell's Interview with President Trump”](#), CBS News, 2 November 2025.

³ Morgan Phillips, “[Energy Secretary Reveals How US Nuclear Tests Will Work](#)”, Fox News, 3 November 2025.

⁴ [“2020 Adherence to and Compliance with Arms Control, Nonproliferation, and Disarmament Agreements and Commitments \(Compliance Report\)”](#), The US State Department, June 2020.

⁵ Ibid.

Similarly, in the case of China, the same report contended that ‘China could have conducted activities at its test site that are inconsistent with its moratorium commitment, as interpreted in accordance with the US “zero-yield” standard’.⁶ The report also discussed China’s opacity regarding the nature of its testing activities, raising concerns about its 1996 moratorium on testing. In view of the US suspicions of Chinese and Russian nuclear testing, several officials from Trump’s first administration wanted to conduct nuclear explosive tests back in 2020.⁷

The 2024 Compliance Report, published during the Biden era, continued to raise questions regarding nuclear testing by Russia and China. It stated that ‘the United States remains concerned about the PRC’s and Russia’s adherence to their respective moratoria’.⁸ Further, it faulted Russia for the non-compliance with the Threshold Test Ban Treaty (TTBT), stating that ‘Russia has conducted supercritical nuclear weapons tests without TTBT notification...(and) concerns remain due to past activities and the uncertainty and lack of transparency relating to Russia’s activities at Novaya Zemlya’.⁹ Thus, the Compliance reports must have been a significant factor in shaping Trump’s rhetoric.

The second likely source of Trump’s nuclear rhetoric is the ‘Mandate for Leadership – The Conservative Promise (Project 2025)’ Report, published in April 2023 by the think tank Heritage Foundation. The Project 2025 is a policy document published by conservative researchers that claims to provide policy prescriptions to the incoming President. The Trump administration’s policies across sectors, from immigration to security, have been shaped by the recommendations outlined in this document.

In view of threats from China, Russia, North Korea and Iran, the Project 2025 had recommended that the incoming US administration reject the ratification of the CTBT and ‘indicate a willingness to conduct nuclear tests in response to adversary nuclear developments if necessary’.¹⁰ It also recommended the restoration of nuclear infrastructure, including ‘readiness to test nuclear weapons at the Nevada National Security Site to ensure the ability of the U.S. to respond quickly to asymmetric technology surprises’.¹¹ Further, the Report urged the incoming government to have ‘more than the bare minimum of nuclear modernisation’¹² and

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ “[U.S. Nuclear Weapons Tests](#)”, Congressional Research Service, 4 December 2020.

⁸ “[Adherence To and Compliance with Arms Control, Nonproliferation, and Disarmament Agreements and Commitments](#)”, The US State Department, April 2024.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Paul Dans and Steven Groves (eds), “[Mandate for Leadership 2025: The Conservative Promise](#)”, The Heritage Foundation, April 2023.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

‘prepare to compete to secure US interests should arms control efforts continue to fail’.¹³

Trump’s Nuclear Rhetoric and Implications

First, according to nuclear experts, the 2020 Compliance Report’s suspicions regarding nuclear testing by Russia and China pointed to possible conduct of the sub-critical tests that do not involve nuclear fission.¹⁴ The subsequent 2024 Compliance Report raised suspicions based on previous reports, without adding any new information. The US has been conducting such tests at the Nevada National Security Site (NNSS) for years.¹⁵ More importantly, the US State Department fact sheet titled ‘Scope of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty’ states that sub-critical nuclear testing is permitted under the CTBT. It notes

Under the CTBT, supercritical hydro-nuclear tests (which produce a self-sustaining fission chain reaction) are banned by the Treaty, but subcritical hydrodynamic experiments, which do not produce a self-sustaining fission chain reaction, are permitted.¹⁶

Therefore, while making his claims regarding nuclear tests by others, Trump has failed to clarify the nature of the tests by others to justify the US nuclear explosion tests.

Second, Trump’s allegations of Russian and Chinese nuclear tests are not backed by any concrete evidence. The Preparatory Commission for the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organisation (CTBTO), established to achieve the aims of the CTBT, has a strong network of more than 300 facilities distributed across the globe to detect any sign of a possible nuclear test.¹⁷ Trump’s claims of nuclear tests by other countries do not pass the scrutiny of the CTBTO, as the Organisation has not produced any such findings. CTBTO Executive Secretary Robert Floyd stated that the CTBTO’s International Monitoring System (IMS)

can and will detect any nuclear weapon test explosion anywhere on the planet, and has successfully detected all six declared nuclear tests conducted this century. Any explosive nuclear weapon test by any

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Julian Borger, “[China May Have Conducted Low-level Nuclear Test, US Claims](#)”, *The Guardian*, 16 April 2020.

¹⁵ Morgan Phillips, “[Energy Secretary Reveals How US Nuclear Tests Will Work](#)”, no. 3.

¹⁶ “[Scope of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty](#)”, The US State Department, Fact Sheet.

¹⁷ “[Overview of the Verification Regime](#)”, Preparatory Commission for the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organisation, Vienna.

State would be harmful and destabilising for global non-proliferation efforts and for international peace and security.¹⁸

Third, Trump’s statements have already eroded the nuclear taboo believed to be in place since the use of the atomic bomb in 1945, which restrains the use of nuclear rhetoric as well. Nuclear sabre-rattling by the custodian of the world’s second-largest nuclear arsenal leads to rhetorical normalisation of escalation, weakening the taboo further.

Fourth, if Trump’s rhetoric indeed becomes a reality, it would be a death knell for the arms control architecture. Although the CTBT has not come into force due to the non-ratification of several states, it has been followed in spirit by all countries, except North Korea. Resumption of nuclear testing will trigger a chain reaction of tests by other states, leading to the collapse of the CTBT. Such a possibility is also ultra vires in relation to Article VI of the NPT, which discusses complete nuclear disarmament.

Fifth, while Trump’s rhetoric may or may not materialise, satellite imagery and expert analysis reveal significant expansion of nuclear testing sites within Russia, China and the US. Satellite images taken in May and June 2025 of the Russian nuclear testing site at Novaya Zemlya show a significant expansion of infrastructure compared to 2021.¹⁹ A high level of activity at the site suggests that Novaya Zemlya is prepared for nuclear tests. In September 2024, Rear Admiral Andrei Sinitsyn, head of Russia’s central atomic test site at Novaya Zemlya, confirmed this in an interview with the Russian government newspaper *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*.²⁰

Satellite imagery of Lop Nur indicates that China has been excavating vertical and horizontal tunnels that could be utilised for future nuclear tests. Work has been ongoing since 2020, and support facilities, including electrical infrastructure, have been established.²¹ Similarly, the NNSS in the US has experienced considerable expansion of underground facilities between 2018 and 2023.²² Thus, it can be inferred that three major nuclear powers are readying infrastructure to conduct future nuclear tests.

¹⁸ [“Statement by Robert Floyd, Executive Secretary of the CTBTO”](#), Preparatory Commission for the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organisation, 30 October 2025.

¹⁹ Matthew Loh, “[Satellite Photos Show How Russia is Building Up 5 of Its Secret Nuclear Bases](#)”, *Business Insider*, 14 July 2025.

²⁰ Astri Edvardsen, “[All Clear for Nuclear Testing at Novaya Zemlya, Says Russian Head of Test Site](#)”, *High North News*, 21 September 2024.

²¹ Cate Cadell, “[China Rapidly Expands Nuclear Test Site as Trump Revives Cold War Tension](#)”, *The Washington Post*, 17 November 2025.

²² Eric Cheung, Brad Lendon and Ivan Watson, “[Satellite Images Show Increased Activity at Nuclear Test Sites in Russia, China and US](#)”, *CNN*, 23 September 2023.

Conclusion

Although Trump’s nuclear rhetoric came as a surprise to the international community, signs of his intentions were evident throughout his opinions on this matter during his first term, as well as in the nuclear-related contents of the 2020 and 2024 Compliance reports and the nuclear-related issues outlined in the Project 2025 Report. Trump’s justification for the proposed US nuclear tests fails when examined against evidence supported by the CTBTO. Trump’s statements have already undermined the nuclear taboo, and if he goes ahead with tests, it will mark the end of the global arms control architecture. The top three nuclear powers have already started modernising infrastructure at their respective nuclear testing sites, anticipating a future need to resume nuclear testing, which is perhaps the most concerning factor for global peace and stability.

About the Author



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