NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY

INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 659 May 20, 2026

Why President Trump Ordered the Resumption of U.S. Nuclear Testing

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In October 2025, President Trump announced that he had ordered the resumption of nuclear testing stating that, "Because of other countries' testing programs, I have instructed the Department of War to start testing our Nuclear Weapons on an equal basis. That process will begin immediately."[1] Despite the shock exhibited in the so-called mainstream media, covert Russian and Chinese nuclear testing had been reported in the last six State Department reports, including all four Biden Administration reports.[2] Chinese and Russian nuclear testing also appeared in the 2009 report of the bipartisan Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States.[3] This author discussed reported Russian nuclear testing in a 2006 publication[4] and reported Chinese nuclear testing in 2007.[5] Indeed, as far back as 1999, the House of Representatives *Select Committee on U.S. National Security and Military/Commercial Concerns with the People's Republic of China* (the Cox Committee) report stated that "…nuclear tests related to development of the PRC's *next generation of thermonuclear w*arheads may be continuing at the PRC test site at Lop Non Nor."[6] (Emphasis added.)

In February 2026, Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Thomas DiNanno asserted at the United Nations Conference on Disarmament in Geneva that:

> I'd now like to address an issue where another disparity exists. Last Fall, President Trump instructed the Pentagon to start testing our nuclear weapons, quote, "on an equal basis," close quote. Specifically, the President was referring to Russian and Chinese nuclear testing in violation of their respective moratoria on yield-producing nuclear tests. Since the President's statement, we have received many questions about what he meant by, quote "an equal basis," close quote. The annual U.S. compliance report has previously assessed that Russia has failed to maintain its testing moratorium by conducting supercritical nuclear weapons tests.
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> Today, I can reveal that the U.S. Government is aware that China has conducted nuclear explosive tests, including preparing for tests with designated yields in the hundreds of tons. The PLA sought to conceal testing by obfuscating the nuclear explosions because it recognized these tests violate test ban commitments. China has used decoupling – a method to decrease the effectiveness of seismic monitoring – to hide their activities from the world. China conducted one such yield-producing nuclear test on June 22 of 2020.[7]

Assistant Secretary of State for Arms Control and Proliferation Dr. Christopher Yeaw, a noted nuclear weapons expert, stated that the June 22, 2020 Chinese test conducted at China's Lop Nor test grounds had a seismic magnitude of 2.75.[8] This is way beyond very low-yield hydronuclear testing and, hence, has much greater significance. He indicated that while it was clear the June 22, 2020 Chinese test was a nuclear test, the United States did not know its yield from seismic data because the decoupling factor could be 20 to 40 times or even more.[9] (Decoupling involves creating a large cavity, pumping out the air, and then detonating the device.)

Dr. Yeaw indicated that the information he examined went beyond the original detected seismic signal.[10] Subsequently, *CNN* reported that China's intent was "to radically advance its nuclear weapons" and that its "…investment in its nuclear arsenal is pushing China closer to peer status with Russia and the US and could yield technical capabilities neither of the two dominant nuclear powers currently possess."[11]

Dr. Robert Floyd, Executive Secretary of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO), stated, "At the specific time of 9:18am UTC, on 22 June 2020, the CTBTO's International Monitoring System (IMS) detected two very small seismic events, 12 seconds apart. The location of these events was in the vicinity of 40.65N; 89.22E and 41.08N; 89.63E."[12] This suggests the possibility that there were two separate nuclear weapons detonations. It also indicates how ineffective international monitoring of nuclear testing can be. The supposed 500-ton yield detection capability the CTBTO claims does not assume adversary efforts to conceal the tests.

The declassified information indicating that China was "preparing for tests with designated yields in the hundreds of tons" appears to confirm a 2023 *New York Times* report that, "…waves of satellite images reveal that the military base [at Lop Nor] has newly drilled boreholes—ideal for bottling up firestorms of deadly radiation from large nuclear blasts—as well as hundreds

of other upgrades and expansions."[13] It even reported activity that may have been related to the June 22, 2020 Chinese nuclear testing. It said, "A 2020 satellite image showed a main tunnel undergoing extensive new digging and construction, its entrance surrounded by trucks, bulldozers and piles of excavated dirt."[14] Writing in *The Wall Street Journal* in 2020, Michael Gordon also reported concerns that, "China might be secretly conducting nuclear tests with very low explosive power…."[15]

In 2024, this author noted, "There is also a possibility that sub-kiloton Chinese nuclear tests were conducted but not detected or made public."[16] This now appears to be what actually happened.

So, why should the United States be concerned about these covert nuclear tests? All nuclear tests have benefits for assessing the reliability and safety of nuclear weapons. This includes even very low-yield hydronuclear tests. The late Dr. John Foster Jr., a former Director of the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, and perhaps the greatest figure in the history of U.S. nuclear weapons development, said that hydronuclear tests "of less than one ton" yield could provide high confidence in the "performance [of nuclear weapons] at low yield."[17] Russian Atomic Energy Minister, the late Dr. Viktor Mikhaylov, was very open about Russian hydronuclear tests, apparently in an effort to legitimize them under the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty.[18] A declassified Clinton-era Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) report stated that, "Authorities including First Deputy Minister for Atomic Energy Mikhaylov have said, Russia is looking at a range of techniques—including hydronuclear experiments—that they say would allow them to continue warhead design and maintenance research within the limits of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty."[19] Another declassified Clinton-era CIA report said that Mikhaylov had published an article "justifying" hydronuclear tests for weapons safety and the development of new types of nuclear weapons, noting that hydronuclear experiments "…are far more useful for Russian weapons development" than subcritical tests.[20] Dr. Mikhaylov stated that "…developed traditional nuclear powers can use hydronuclear experiments to perform tasks of improving *reliability* of their nuclear arsenal and effectively steward its operation."[21] (Emphasis added.) Since 1992, the United States has conducted nothing more than subcritical tests, i.e., tests that do not result in a nuclear explosion.

The Russian definition of a nuclear test is apparently the release of one metric ton of TNT of nuclear yield.[22] Thus, the nuclear tests with hundreds of tons yield that China is preparing to conduct are at least hundreds of times greater than the yield of hydronuclear tests. Their implications are serious. Their significance is far more than the simple percentage increase in yield would suggest. A report on nuclear testing by the well-known JASON study group concluded that "…testing under a 500 ton yield limit would allow studies of boost gas ignition and initial burn, which is a critical step in achieving full primary design yield."[23] With full primary yield the chance of a dud is very low. Apparently, this is the reason that, in 1993, the Defense Department position "…favored a low-yield treaty with a 500 ton testing limit."[24] This reflects the critical importance of testing at this level for assuring weapons reliability and safety. In 1995, the Clinton Administration made its final decision to seek a zero-yield test ban treaty. The late Dr. Paul Robinson, former Director of the Sandia National Laboratory, was an

unquestioned expert on nuclear testing. He had served as Principal Associate Director of the National Security Program at the Los Alamos National Laboratory, and headed the U.S. delegation, with the rank of Ambassador, that negotiated the verification protocol to the Threshold Test Ban Treaty (TTBT), which limited test yield to 150-kilotons. In 2012, he stated, "At that time [1995], we in the U.S. labs requested that the permitted test level should be set to a level which is [was], in fact, lower than a one-kiloton limit, which would have allowed us to carry out some very important experiments, in our view, to determine whether the first stage of multiple-stage devices was indeed operating, successfully."[25]

Such testing would allow high confidence that the life-extended primary of a thermonuclear weapon would work as designed and even allow the development of new advanced thermonuclear weapons. Absent nuclear testing to diagnose problems, a defective primary can result in a dud. Taking into account the enormous amount of U.S. nuclear weapons design information stolen by China (documented in the Cox Committee report), and the fact that Chinese nuclear weapons are not one-point safe which tends to make them more robust,[26] covert nuclear testing at hundreds of tons could allow Chinese development and deployment of advanced high-yield nuclear weapons for deployment as MIRVs. Indeed, *CNN* has reported:

> Evidence collected as part of a subsequent review of the June 2020 event, has led US officials to conclude the test was motivated by China's pursuit of next-generation nuclear weapons, the sources familiar said. That includes efforts to develop additional weapons systems capable of delivering multiple, miniaturized nuclear warheads from a single missile. China also appears to be developing low-yield, tactical nuclear weapons—something the country has never previously produced—that could be deployed against targets closer to home, including in scenarios where Beijing responds to a potential US defense of Taiwan, the sources added.[27]

According to Dr. Yeaw, covert Russian and Chinese nuclear testing could result in improved "nuclear warfighting capabilities."[28] This is clearly correct. Warfighting appears to be the main reason for the large Chinese ICBM silo deployments since China already had mobile ICBMs with higher survivability.

The first use of low-yield/low-collateral-damage nuclear weapons is the core of Putin's nuclear escalation doctrine.[29] The 2018 *Nuclear Posture Review* report stated, "Russia's belief thatlimited nuclear first use, potentially including low-yield weapons, can provide such an advantage is based, in part, on Moscow's perception that its greater number and variety of non-strategic nuclear systems provide a coercive advantage in crises and at lower levels of conflict."[30] Russia has placed great emphasis on low-yield nuclear weapons. In December 2017, Dr. Philip Karber, President of the Potomac Foundation, stated that roughly half of Russia's 5,000 tactical nuclear weapons have been modernized with new sub-kiloton nuclear warheads for air defense, torpedoes and cruise missiles.[31] Reportedly, the modern Russian warheads, which include nuclear artillery, have yields as low as 20 tons and include enhanced radiation weapons.[32] Dr. Viktor Mikhaylov, former Russian Atomic Energy Minister and then Director of the Sarov nuclear weapons laboratory, stated that Russia was improving thermonuclear

weapons which range from "megaton class" to "weapons yielding hundreds of tons."[33] (With testing at hundreds of tons, China could clearly do the same.) He also discussed Russian development "…of a 'nuclear scalpel' capable of 'surgically removing' and destroying very localized targets. The low yield warhead will be surrounded with a superhardened casing which makes it possible to penetrate 30–40 meters into rock and destroy a buried target—for example, a troop command and control point or a nuclear munitions storage facility."[34] (This is another type of weapon China could develop with covert testing at hundreds of tons.) The United States clearly has nothing like this type of weapon.

China seeks a greatly expanded and unprecedented nuclear force with weapons ranging from multimegaton to low-yield.[35] Testing at hundreds of tons yield can allow full-yield tests of advanced low-yield nuclear weapons or these weapons, if their design yield is a kiloton or so, could be tested at least at a significant fraction of their full-design yield. This is very important, particularly when viewed in the context of the massive Chinese expenditure on strategic and theater delivery vehicles and their development and deployment of MIRVed missiles.[36]

Testing at hundreds of tons is not comparable in value to high-yield nuclear testing. But compared to zero testing, it has great value.

Despite China's bogus claim that it supports no first use of nuclear weapons, Chinese nuclear doctrine appears to be little different from Russia's. In 2022, DoD's (now the Department of War) China military power report stated that, notwithstanding its announced "no first use" (NFU) policy, "…China's nuclear strategy probably includes consideration of a nuclear strike in response to a nonnuclear attack threatening the viability of China's nuclear forces or C2, or that approximates the strategic effects of a nuclear strike. Beijing probably would also consider nuclear use to restore deterrence if a conventional military defeat gravely threatened PRC [People's Republic of China] survival."[37] China's formulation on "no first use" is cleverly worded propaganda. Colonel (Ret.) Dr. Larry Wortzel, a leading U.S. expert on Chinese military capability, pointed out that a careful analysis of China's "no first use" language indicated, "…if China launched a surprise nuclear attack tomorrow, it would still not be the first nation to use nuclear weapons," and, thus, "…the attack would not violate its NFU policy since the United States used nuclear weapons first in World War II."[38]

Available open source evidence indicates that covert nuclear testing by Russia and China goes back to the 1990s. (China's overt high-yield nuclear testing continued until 1996.) The cumulative impact of these covert tests is quite considerable. In 2024, China's Communist Party Central Committee pledged to "…speed up the development of strategic deterrence forces."[39] This objective may be linked to China's preparations for nuclear tests with yields of hundreds of tons.

Decades of Russian and Chinese covert nuclear testing more than justify President Trump's decision to resume nuclear testing "on an equal basis." With this decision, President Trump reaffirms his commitment to "peace through strength" and common sense policies that advance the national security interests of the United States.

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