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Efforts to conclude a Comprehensive Test Ban (CTB) proved unsuccessful, but negotiations bore some fruit with the signing of the Partial Test Ban Treaty (PTBT) in 1963. The PTBT prohibits the testing of nuclear devices in the atmosphere, underwater and in outer space. As of January 1988, the Treaty had 116 states parties, although two nuclear-weapon states—France and China—have yet to sign.

Further progress on the limitation of nuclear testing came when the United States and the Soviet Union signed the Threshold Test Ban Treaty (TTBT) in 1974, and the Peaceful Nuclear Explosions Treaty (PNET) in 1976. The former limits underground nuclear testing to 150 kt, while the latter bans the same for so-called "peaceful nuclear explosions." Neither the TTBT or the PNET has, however, been ratified by the US Senate.

Efforts to achieve more ambitious limitations on nuclear testing continued when the Carter Administration reopened bilateral negotiations on a CTB in 1977. Although some headway was made in developing a draft treaty, strong domestic political opposition in the United States ensured that progress was limited. These negotiations ceased with the advent of the Reagan Administration.

On 6 August 1985, the Soviet Union announced a unilateral moratorium on nuclear testing, later extended three times. Yet the Soviet initiative failed to prompt the United States to take similar action, or to resume negotiations on a CTB. Soviet testing resumed on 28 February 1987. The US Congress has put forth proposals seeking a moratorium on nuclear tests above one kiloton, but these have never been accepted by the Administration.

The Reagan Administration maintained that, although it regarded a total ban on nuclear testing as a long-term objective, the need to ensure weapons reliability and national security required continued testing. In addition, the Administration contended that progress on a CTB could be achieved only in stages: first by securing more stringent monitoring provisions for the TTBT and the PNET, next by negotiating intermediate limitations on testing, and finally by pursuing a total ban as part of a broad, effective disarmament process.

While the Soviets initially opposed the US government's approach to limits on nuclear testing—favouring instead immediate negotiations on a total ban—the prospects for accommodation began to brighten by the summer of 1988. In July of that year, the two sides resumed talks on testing at the expert level in Geneva. By summer 1987, the Soviets had largely acceded to the US position on how negotiations toward a CTB should proceed.

On 17 September 1987, the two sides agreed to begin "step-by-step" negotiations on nuclear testing before 1 December 1987. The negotiations would begin by searching for mutually agreeable procedures for verifying the TTBT and the PNET. On 9