

The Western states blamed Russia and Vladimir Putin's war on Ukraine for the failed Non-Proliferation Treaty conference. Yet to leave the matter squarely on the doorstep of Russia would be a gross distortion. *Photograph courtesy of Wikimedia Commons*



# The ugly truth about nuclear disarmament

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Opinion



EDMONTON—"The ugly truth, no matter how we wrap it, is that all nine nuclear weapon states have no intention to disarm; quite the contrary, the trajectory is towards more sophisticated 'usable' weapons and delivery systems! The emperor has no clothes."

This terse analysis by Mohamed ElBaradei, former head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, cuts to the heart of why

the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference, held Aug. 1-26 at the United Nations in New York, failed to produce an agreed-upon final document. ElBaradei, a distinguished Egyptian scholar and diplomat who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2005, expressed the frustration of most of the 191 states belonging to the treaty.

The immediate cause of the failure was Russia, which blocked consensus of the draft final document because it expressed "grave concern for the military activities" at the Ukraine Zaporizhzhya nuclear power plant, which contains six nuclear reactors. Though Russia wasn't directly named, the document left no doubt that Ukraine's loss of control over the reactors was brought about by Russia's war.

A statement by France, delivered on behalf of 55 states (including Canada), condemned Russia's "illegal war of aggression against Ukraine." Russia, France said, had betrayed both Ukraine—which gave up its nuclear weapons at the end of the Cold War—and the NPT itself, of which Russia is a depository state.

Thus, the Western states blamed Russia directly for the failed NPT conference. Yet to

leave the matter squarely on the doorstep of Russia would be a gross distortion of the wholeness of the conference. State after state warned that the NPT is critically weakened by the Nuclear Weapons States' constant modernization of the 13,000 nuclear weapons still in existence and the refusal of these states to engage in comprehensive negotiations for the elimination of nuclear weapons, a chief obligation set out in the NPT.

As the conference neared its end, a group of 145 states tried to rally the conscience of the international community with a humanitarian appeal: "Our countries are deeply concerned about the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons. Past experience of the use and testing of nuclear weapons has demonstrated the unacceptable humanitarian and environmental consequences caused by their immense, destructive capability and indiscriminate nature."

Canada, like all NATO countries, did not sign this statement on the grounds that it also called for nuclear weapons never to be used again "under any circumstances." It degrades the moral standards of Canada that the

government believes there are circumstances when a nuclear weapon could be legitimately used.

Perhaps the humanitarian statement had some effect, for the draft final document did acknowledge "the devastation that would be visited upon all humankind by a nuclear war." The draft reaffirmed the previous "unequivocal undertaking" by the Nuclear Weapons States to accomplish the total elimination of their nuclear arsenals. But the major states successfully lobbied to keep timelines, benchmarks and accountability for nuclear disarmament out of the draft. The document did not do much more than uphold the status quo—in which the powerful states hold onto their nuclear weapons while proscribing their acquisition by any other state. Yet, had it been agreed, the draft would at least have reasonably held the NPT together.

This is the second failed NPT review conference in a row. It's 12 years since there has been any agreement among the parties. How many failed conferences can the NPT absorb and still be considered a viable treaty? The UN leadership, always afraid to criti-

cize the major powers—who are, in fact, responsible for the NPT's weakness—issued a statement that the NPT "will not collapse." The UN insists the NPT is still the "cornerstone" of the non-proliferation regime. That may be, but the cornerstone is clearly crumbling. Successive NPT failures underscore the rationale and the need of the new treaty on the prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, now ratified by 66 states. This treaty bans nuclear weapons outright.

The Prohibition states said they would continue to support the NPT even though it falls dramatically short of nuclear disarmament. But they urged "all states committed to attain and maintain a world without nuclear weapons to join the [Prohibition Treaty] without delay."

Canada, in its final statement, came nowhere near the Prohibition Treaty. It said it would continue its work with associated states on risk reduction measures. This work gives Canada, and its NATO partners, a cover for refusing to support comprehensive negotiations for the elimination of nuclear weapons. As long as the U.S., Russia, the U.K., France, and China—the five permanent members of the UN Security Council—refuse to negotiate the timely elimination of their nuclear arsenals, the NPT will continue to fail.

ElBaradei was right: there is an "ugly truth" at the heart of the NPT. Canada is not willing to recognize that truth.

Former Senator Douglas Roche led the Canadian delegation to the 1985 Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference.

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