

Why Canada should sign the treaty banning nuclear arms

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I was 16 when the first atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in early August, 1945. It was only years later, when I visited Japan as a member of Parliament, that I realized the unspeakable horror and scale of destruction possible in the new nuclear age.

That experience changed my life as I began to understand that the threat to use the immense killing power of modern nuclear weapons challenges all human rights. Through the years, the movement to abolish nuclear weapons ebbed and flowed, and few people thought the elimination of all 15,000 nuclear weapons was a practical political goal.

But new hope emerged July 7, when 122 countries – 63 per cent of all countries – adopted at the United Nations a Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. The [new treaty](#) prohibits the development, testing, production, manufacturing and possession of nuclear weapons. Nuclear weapons have been unconditionally stigmatized as standing outside international humanitarian law.

The treaty was achieved through the work of leading states – such as Ireland, Austria and Mexico – working in collaboration with highly informed members of civil society. They recognized the “catastrophic humanitarian consequences” of any use of nuclear weapons, which would pose grave implications for the environment, the global economy, the health of current and future generations and for human survival itself.

When 50 countries have ratified it, the new treaty will enter into force and all the signatory states will be committed to “measures for the verified, time-bound and irreversible elimination of nuclear-weapon programmes.”

The UN High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, Izumi Nakamitsu, has hailed the “historic adoption” of the treaty as “a beacon of hope for all those who have dedicated their lives to the pursuit of a nuclear-weapon-free world.”

However, the road ahead will be difficult because the nuclear-weapons states oppose the new treaty, just as they have refused to honour their legal obligations under the longstanding Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to negotiate “in good faith” the elimination of nuclear weapons. A statement issued by the United States, Britain and France – the three Western nuclear-weapons states – arrogantly said they “do not intend to sign, ratify or ever become party to [the new treaty].”

Thus, world opinion is split between those who believe the military doctrine of nuclear deterrence (“mutual

assured destruction”) is necessary to preserve peace and those who hold that nuclear weapons, with their immense destructive power, are the major threat to peace.

The majority of countries now agree that the faulty doctrine of nuclear deterrence must be replaced with a sincere desire to build a global security architecture without nuclear weapons. This is a struggle of titanic proportions.

It is dismaying that the Government of Canada, the first country in the world to declare it would not develop nuclear weapons, took a stand in Parliament opposing the new treaty as “premature.” How can it be “premature” to ban nuclear weapons after seven decades of their existence?

The real reason for Canada’s opposition is because the U.S. government instructed its partners in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization to resist on the grounds that the treaty “delegitimizes the concept of nuclear deterrence.” That is exactly the aim of the treaty advocates, who maintain that the measure is a head-on rejection of nuclear hegemony.

The new treaty also shores up the non-proliferation treaty, which is continually being weakened by the major powers’ refusal to abide by its obligation to negotiate the elimination of nuclear arsenals. Prohibiting nuclear weapons is an essential step toward their elimination. Thus, the Government of Canada should sign and ratify the new prohibition treaty as a concrete step toward the goal of a world free of nuclear weapons.

The government must face the fact that NATO nuclear policies are a huge obstacle to achieving a nuclear-weapons-free world. Canada once tried to get NATO to change these policies; it should try again. It will not be easy to challenge the NATO doctrine, but it must be done because it is right to do so. It is wrong for NATO to maintain the nuclear weapons doctrine when most of the world wants to prohibit such instruments of evil.

As an old man now looking back in the distance to the horrors of Hiroshima, I never want to lose my sense of hope that an enlightened humanity can fight back against the shrill voices of fear still clamouring for the false security of nuclear weapons.

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