

# Nuclear standoff lessons from the past

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It is perhaps a coincidence in timing that Canada severed diplomatic relations with Iran at a moment when the world is observing the 50th anniversary of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Two different time periods, two different sets of events to be sure. But is there a single lesson to be learned?

Thirty nuclear disarmament activists addressed that question last week at a conference in Ottawa sponsored by the Canadian Network to Abolish Nuclear Weapons. They concluded that it was negotiations and mediation that saved the world from nuclear warfare when the Soviets and Americans went head-to-head over the stationing of Soviet missiles in Cuba. Similarly, it will be negotiations and mediation that could avoid military confrontation with Iran over today's red-hot issue of Iran's nuclear research.

"It is inexplicable that Ottawa severed diplomatic relations with Iran instead of supporting a stepped-up mediation process to ensure Iran does not get a nuclear weapon," said Erika Simpson, a political science professor at Western University and author of *NATO and the Bomb*. "Canada is losing its reputation as a mediator and peace-keeping nation."

The 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the famous superpower standoff brought a flashback to the Diefenbaker era in Canada. Although the Cuban Missile Crisis played out in the Kennedy-Khrushchev drama, popularized into a movie, "Thirteen Days," the repercussions were felt by the government of

Conservative Prime Minister John Diefenbaker. With the world apparently on the brink of nuclear warfare, Diefenbaker held an emergency meeting of his cabinet to determine whether to put Canadian forces onto alert status. Diefenbaker did not know that his defence minister, Douglas Harkness had already so ordered. The foreign minister, Howard Green counselled delay. Cabinet solidarity broke down. Then Diefenbaker decided that the Conservative government didn't want any US nuclear weapons stationed on Canadian soil. President Kennedy and his national security adviser, McGeorge Bundy, were outraged at what they perceived as lack of Canadian support for the doctrine of nuclear deterrence. The Defence Minister resigned in protest against Diefenbaker's decision.

Liberal leader Lester Pearson stepped in, saying he would support US nuclear bombs in Canada. Whether this was the act that led to Pearson's victory over Diefenbaker in the 1963 election is still being debated. But Kennedy's blossoming friendship with Pearson and his barely-concealed disdain for Diefenbaker have entered Canadian folklore. And all over nuclear weapons.

When Pierre Trudeau came to power, he turned Liberal policy around and put Canada firmly in the anti-nuclear weapons camp. Ever since, the Canadian government has exhibited a split personality on the contentious issue of nuclear disarmament: supporting the Non-Proliferation Treaty's call for negotiations to eliminate all nuclear weapons, and also supporting the US's continuing insistence that the doctrine of nuclear deterrence keeps the world safe from nuclear war and Canada better stay in line.

The panel discussing "Cuba, Iran and Other Lessons on the Value of Negotiations in Nuclear Disarmament" examined the dangers of nuclear brinkmanship, which characterized the Cuban crisis. The Americans

claimed that the Soviets "blinked" when confronted with US superior power. Over the years, that has evolved into what some called the "myth" that it's power, not negotiations, which really settles a crisis. In fact, U Thant, then the Secretary-General of the United Nations, played a crucial behind-the-scenes role in keeping negotiations going. The crisis was only resolved when the US secretly agreed to pull its missiles out of Turkey in return for the Soviet Union pulling its missiles out of Cuba. It was round-the-clock negotiations that saved the day.

Now the world is facing a possible military confrontation over the claim that Iran is developing a nuclear weapon. Under the terms of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, Iran has a right to enrich uranium to a low-grade for peaceful purposes and claims that is what it is actually doing. It is not clear that Iran is catapulting this process to develop a nuclear weapon. But negotiations, not a military attack, are the best way to resolve this crisis.

Negotiations between Iran and the big powers are continuing, and a way out is offered by the prospect of a Middle East nuclear weapons free zone conference, mandated by the 2010 Review Conference of the NPT, tentatively scheduled to be held in Finland in mid-December. Israel, which has an undeclared arsenal of more than 100 nuclear weapons, and Iran, which may or may not be developing its own nuclear weapon, are the stumbling blocks.

Israel has always held that it will only discuss nuclear weapons after a Middle East peace settlement is reached. Arab states generally hold that Israel's possession of nuclear weapons is an impediment to peace. At the root of this struggle is Israel's demand to be recognized by its neighbours as a state, and Iran's demand that it be left alone to develop peaceful nuclear energy. This is a classic conflict crying out for fair-minded diplomacy.

Canada, never a big player in the Middle East, has reduced its effectiveness in working for a resolution of the Middle East dilemma by breaking with Iran and being perceived as moving behind Israel, in the view of the participants in the Ottawa conference. This led to an examination of the legitimacy of nuclear weapons on a global basis. More than three-quarters of the countries of the world have already voted at the UN in favour of the start of comprehensive negotiations for the elimination of nuclear weapons, but Canada sticks with the NATO position of opposing such negotiations until a host of regional issues are resolved.

Is the doctrine of nuclear deterrence, which leads to the continued modernization of nuclear stocks, going to be continued indefinitely, or will the leading governments recognize that the continued dangers, not to mention costs, are intolerable? That question was opened up by the Cuban crisis, but American hubris shoved aside any real examination. Iran brings the question to the fore again. That's where the public debate should focus, and Canada, as a respected middle power, should be in the forefront of finding a diplomatic way out of the nuclear nightmare. Paul Dewar, NDP foreign affairs critic, came to the conference to pledge that the Official Opposition would press Ottawa to re-start nuclear diplomacy.

The Harper government is sitting on a motion both the Senate and House of Commons unanimously adopted in 2010, calling for Canada to take a major initiative in support of the UN Secretary-General's proposal for a Nuclear Weapons Convention, which would bar all nuclear weapons. The motion was sparked by members of the Order of Canada, now numbering more than 600, who have signed a statement calling for Ottawa to increase its nuclear diplomacy. An important segment of Canadian public opinion has been heard from. The Middle Powers Initiative, which convenes nuclear

conferences with a range of governments, is prepared to come to Ottawa if the government will host such an endeavour. The lessons of Cuba and Iran point to the potential value to Canada of initiating such an effort.

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