

The nuclear threat is real

Canadian policy on nuclear disarmament can be summed up in one word: ambiguity. It's not a pretty word, nor is it a pretty sight watching Global Affairs Canada and the Prime Minister's Office trying to get their stories straight. Minister of Foreign Affairs Mélanie Joly, pictured May 9, 2023. Even though the prime minister has said publicly that Canada would remain engaged in nuclear disarmament discussions 'in all multilateral fora,' it appears that Joly did not get the message, writes Doug Roche.

OPINION | BY DOUGLAS ROCHE | May 25, 2023

EDMONTON—Despite Prime Minister Justin Trudeau signing onto a G7 statement in Hiroshima, Japan, on May 19 calling for “meaningful dialogue” on nuclear disarmament issues, Global Affairs Canada is digging deeper in its opposition to Canada attending a meeting this fall of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.

NATO is vigorously opposed to the treaty, which calls for the outlawing of nuclear weapons, a stand that directly contradicts the organization’s claim that nuclear weapons are the “supreme guarantee” of security. Canada meekly goes along with NATO, even though UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called the new treaty “historic.” The Prohibition Treaty, which entered into force in 2021 and is now ratified by 68 states, held its first meeting of states parties last year. Despite frowns from NATO headquarters, four NATO states—Germany, Norway, the Netherlands and Finland—attended the meeting as “observers.” But they received a lot of blowback from NATO bosses for their attendance. So it seems that a possible slap on the wrist now cowers Global Affairs Canada, the very department that, years ago, led the world in developing the Anti-Personnel Landmines Treaty, the International Criminal Court, and the Responsibility to Protect doctrine. Even though the prime minister has said publicly that Canada would remain engaged in nuclear disarmament discussions “in all multilateral fora,” it appears that Foreign Affairs Minister Mélanie Joly did not get the message. Here we have, on the one hand, Trudeau signing onto the “G7 Leaders’ Hiroshima Vision on Nuclear Disarmament,” which pledged to promote “meaningful dialogue,” and, on the other hand, Global Affairs Canada saying that the Prohibition Treaty does not count as a legitimate forum for dialogue.

No wonder the public doesn’t know what’s going on in the nuclear disarmament field.

The lengthy G7 statement, done at the behest of Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, who comes from Hiroshima, seems at first glance to support nuclear disarmament. It says: “We reaffirm our commitment to the ultimate goal of a world without nuclear weapons with undiminished security for all, achieved through a realistic, pragmatic and responsible approach.” That sentence, however, is loaded with code words that allow the nuclear powers, who continue to possess 12,705 nuclear weapons to escape their obligation, under the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), to pursue negotiations for nuclear disarmament, an obligation that has been reinforced by the International Court of Justice. The nuclear powers cling to the NPT while at the same time ignoring its central provision. That is why the Prohibition Treaty came into existence. For Trudeau to present himself as all for dialogue on nuclear matters while his officials shut the door on Canada attending, as an observer, the second meeting of the Prohibition Treaty to be held in New York in November is a profound failure in our diplomacy. I think that, if a motion emerged from Parliament calling for Canada to attend the Prohibition Treaty meeting, they would reconsider their opposition. We’ll have to see how much Parliament cares about this issue.

However, the news is not all bad. Canada—long a champion of a possible Fissile Material Cutoff Treaty, which would ban the production of fissile materials—is now willing to sponsor such negotiations in the UN General Assembly. Hitherto, Canada has always maintained that such negotiations must be held in the Geneva-based Conference on Disarmament, which operates on the consensus rule, meaning that any one state (in this case Pakistan) can for years block progress. In the General Assembly, whose work is gaining in stature as a result of the stalemated Security Council, the majority vote wins the day; that is how the Prohibition Treaty was produced.

All this is backdrop for the gravest crisis facing nuclear disarmament since the first atomic bombs destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. In the past two years, in addition to Russia’s unprecedented threats to use nuclear weapons in Ukraine, nuclear risks have worsened: from the fast development and modernization of nuclear arsenals, renewed dynamics of arms races, and continuing proliferation pressures. North Korea and Iran are vivid examples of what happens—with more to come—if nuclear weapons are not eliminated through a process of negotiations with requisite verification techniques. The nuclear threat is real and is made all the more urgent by the collapsing international nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament infrastructure. A first priority, despite the Ukraine war, is to get the United States and Russia back to negotiations for the resumption and extension of the New START Treaty, which constrains the numbers of their strategic nuclear weapons. Both these powerful states should agree to a No First Use policy and take their advanced weapons off alert status.

In the end, Canadian policy on nuclear disarmament can be summed up in one word: ambiguity. It's not a pretty word, nor is it a pretty sight watching Global Affairs Canada and the Prime Minister's Office trying to get their stories straight.