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By Douglas Roche

NEW YORK — When I sat through the speeches at the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) meeting at the U.N. last week, I felt I was watching — again — the Groundhog Day movie, you know, the one where the weather forecaster is doomed to repeatedly reliving the same day. The film was so popular, the term "groundhog day" is now used to describe a recurring situation in government and military arenas. It's supposed to be funny.

These NPT meetings, however, are not a comedy. They sometimes dissolve into farce. But they are increasingly tragic.

The NPT is the most important arms control and disarmament agreement in existence. Now on the eve of its 50th anniversary, it comprises 191 states which have agreed to "pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date." I was present in 1995 when the Treaty was indefinitely extended, with all states promising "systematic and progressive efforts" to reduce nuclear arms, an effective test ban on nuclear weapons, and negotiations to ban the production of fissile material. None of that has been achieved in the last quarter century.

But they keep talking at their meetings, which can best be characterized as a ritualistic facade. In fact, the speeches are now, to borrow a phrase from my colleague Paul Meyer, also a former Canadian Ambassador for Disarmament, "sterile discourse."

In the year 2000, the high-water mark for the NPT, the parties unanimously made an “unequivocal undertaking” to the elimination of nuclear weapons and backed this up with a 13-point action plan. The next year, George W. Bush entered the White House and pulled the U.S. away from two of the plan’s pillars, a Comprehensive Nuclear Treaty Ban, and the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, which was designed to stop the building of missile defences on the grounds that they merely spur a renewed nuclear arms race. The viability of the NPT has been in deep trouble ever since, especially since the U.S. maintains a fleet of nuclear weapons in five NATO countries, a violation of the Treaty, and a promised conference to discuss the possibilities of making the Middle East a zone free of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction has never been held, thanks to the blockage of the U.S. and Israel.

Instead of leading the pursuit of comprehensive negotiations to eliminate the 13,850 nuclear weapons held by nine states, the U.S. is roaring ahead with a modernization program and is now spending \$100,000 per minute on nuclear weapons. Perhaps, in the spirit of Groundhog Day, I should repeat that: the U.S. spends \$100,000 per minute on the maintenance and expansion of nuclear weapons. Russia, China, India and Pakistan are also spending on nuclear weapons, but their sums, combined, are much less than the U.S. spends. The U.S. intends to spend \$1.2 trillion over the next 30 years rebuilding its nuclear arsenals.

Moreover, when a group of non-nuclear weapons states created, in 2017, the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, the U.S. expressly warned its NATO partners not to sign on. At the NPT meeting, the U.S., apparently seriously, said that, because of the deterioration of international relations, the world will have to await the return of “favourable conditions” before starting a “new disarmament discourse.” Hypocrisy knows no bounds at the NPT.

Canada tried to take the high road in New York. In Canada's opening speech, Cindy Termorshuizen, director of International Security at Global Affairs Canada, appealed for a "spirit of compromise" to maintain the NPT as a "noble and good cause" in making a better world. She warned that the deteriorating international security environment risked igniting a global nuclear arms race. She called on Russia to return to compliance with the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty and for both the U.S. and Russia to ensure the START Treaty, due to expire in 2021, is renewed.

Canada's second speech remarkably led off by quoting from the 1955 Russell-Einstein manifesto, in which the two philosophical and scientific giants, Bertrand Russell and Albert Einstein, set out the basis for the Pugwash peace movement: "We have to learn to think in a new way. We have to learn to ask ourselves, not what steps can be taken to give military victory to whatever group we prefer, for there no longer are such steps; the question we have to ask ourselves is: what steps can be taken to prevent a military contest of which the issue must be disastrous to all parties?"

This appeal to the higher angels was a refreshing moment at the U.N. Sadly, the demons soon reappeared. The meeting ended on what has become the normal strangulation of the NPT: no substantive agreement on the way forward to the 2020 Review Conference. The Doomsday Clock of the Atomic Bulletin of Scientists says the danger of nuclear war is at two minutes to midnight. But the institutional groundhog prevails.

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