

Opinion: Nuclear weapons policy incoherent

BY DOUGLAS ROCHE, EDMONTON JOURNAL OCTOBER 6, 2014



One one hand Canada supports NATO doctrine, which maintains that nuclear weapons provide the “supreme guarantee” of security. But on the other hand, Canada supports the UN Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which includes important nuclear disarmament obligations, writes Doug Roche.

Photograph by: Vahid Salemi, The Associated Press/file

Have the televised killings in the Middle East, Ukraine, Syria and Iraq made it impossible to focus attention on the 16,300 nuclear weapons still in existence, any one of which -- by design, accident or terrorism -- could set off a catastrophe of epic proportions?

Global instability is not a time to back away from the United Nations goal of a nuclear weapons-free world. When barbarism breaks out, it is time to redouble our efforts to develop a law to eliminate nuclear weapons.

Three events show disarmament is still very much on the international agenda.

The first UN Day for the Total Elimination of Nuclear Weapons — Sept. 26 — now provides a built-in mechanism focused on promoting multilateral negotiations for a nuclear weapons convention — a global treaty to prohibit and eliminate nuclear weapons.

On Dec. 8-9, the Austrian government will host in Vienna the third in a series of international conferences on the “catastrophic humanitarian consequences” of nuclear weapons. Earlier meetings have spelled out in excruciating detail the horrors that await humanity in the accidental or deliberate use of nuclear weapons.

Next May in New York, the Non-Proliferation Treaty will undergo its month-long quinquennial Review Conference, where the good-faith pledge of the five permanent members of the Security Council (the principal nuclear weapons states) to negotiate the elimination of their nuclear arsenals will again be tested. Since the NPT came into existence in 1970, the big five have been bobbing and weaving on their commitments, all the while modernizing their stocks.

Nuclear disarmament is not something that culminates the peace process, it stimulates it. A terrorist nuclear attack is an undeniable possibility. Comprehensive negotiations must lead to a legal framework for the verified, irreversible, and enforceable elimination of nuclear weapons.

But the nuclear weapons states, aided principally by NATO, are holding out for a step-by-step approach: First, get a ban on the production of fissile materials, bring the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty into force, get more U.S.-Russian reductions before attempting global negotiations. This approach, which has been embraced by Canada, has led to today’s virtual paralysis. U.S.-Russia bilateral negotiations for deeper cuts are stalled over such issues as the U.S.’s proposed missile defence system in Europe, the militarization of space and the U.S. intention to militarily dominate air, land, sea, space and cyberwarfare. The Conference on Disarmament in Geneva has become a ritualistic facade.

Canada participates in the 12-nation Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Initiative, which sees multilateral negotiations taking place only after the U.S.-Russia reduction process has greatly reduced existing stocks.

But this is a dead-end hope. This is why nations like Mexico, Norway, Austria, Switzerland and Indonesia are in the forefront of a new movement, emphasizing humanitarian law, to create a legally binding instrument to ban nuclear weapons. This is the movement Canada should join.

A chief impediment to such action is Canada’s membership in NATO, which keeps insisting that nuclear weapons are the “supreme guarantee” of security. However, a double standard has deeply conflicted NATO: While member states reaffirm their commitment to the Non-Proliferation Treaty, NATO remains dependent on nuclear weapons.

The continued deployment of U.S. tactical nuclear bombs on the soil of Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, Italy and Turkey, though resisted by growing numbers of people in those countries, is a standing provocation to Russia, which is consequently disinclined to lower its own huge numbers of tactical nuclear weapons.

About 15 years ago, Canada tried to get NATO to change its nuclear policies. When NATO resisted, Canada gave up. But Norway, another NATO country, is a leader in the new humanitarian movement. Why can't Canada give this effort full support?

The humanitarian movement to eliminate nuclear weapons fits in with long-held Canadian values. More than 750 members of the Order of Canada have called upon the Canadian government to take a major diplomatic initiative to support the UN Secretary-General's Five-Point Plan for Nuclear Disarmament, which centres on a nuclear weapons convention. A motion supporting this was unanimously passed by both the Senate and the House of Commons.

Canada should align itself with the highly respected New Agenda Coalition countries (Brazil, Egypt, Ireland, Mexico, New Zealand and South Africa) and commit itself to achieving "a comprehensive and legally binding framework" to eliminate all nuclear weapons in a defined period.

It is not NATO but the UN goals that should drive Canada's work.

Douglas Roche is a former MP, senator and disarmament ambassador. This article is excerpted from a collection of 20 essays on what Canada has done and should be doing at the United Nations.

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