

“Prospects for Nuclear Disarmament: A Canadian Perspective”

By Paul Meyer, Adjunct Professor of International Studies and Fellow in International Security, Simon Fraser University, and Senior Fellow, The Simons Foundation

Panel on *Nuclear Dangers from Hiroshima to Fukushima*

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It has been sometimes said that a diplomat is a professional optimist. As a former member of the Canadian Foreign Service I can attest to the accuracy of the saying in that the practice of diplomacy requires a certain conviction that something better than the status quo is possible and it is for you to devise the means to achieve it.

However when I find myself now assessing the prospects for nuclear disarmament from my current academic vantage point, even my inner diplomat finds it difficult to be sanguine about progress towards the goal of a world free of nuclear weapons. The phrase may have become wide spread, since President Obama’s 2009 Prague speech, but tangible action towards making it a reality is noticeably absent in official circles.

Canada, with a tradition of leadership on multilateral arms control and disarmament, is emerging from a dark decade in its foreign policy. A period marked by thinly veiled disdain for multilateral diplomatic work in this realm. When Canada dragged its feet about ratifying the Ban on Cluster Munitions and refused to sign the Arms Trade Treaty. When the only nuclear miscreants in the eyes of Ottawa were North Korea and Iran against which a fiery press release or two would be launched before attention passed on to other matters. Even the very terms “Arms Control and Disarmament” disappeared from the title of the bureau responsible for these matters at the Department of Foreign Affairs (It is called the Nonproliferation and Security Threat Reduction Bureau). We hope that the advent of the new Government will lead to changes in this posture and a reassertion of leadership in the international arena. However we should not underestimate the inertia that can drain a bureaucracy whose policy capacity has progressively been degraded and whose officials have been discouraged to pursue initiatives in a field deemed to be a non-priority.

Internationally, Canada managed a modicum of cooperation with like-minded states on nuclear nonproliferation and disarmament issues, particularly the former. It agreed to become a member of the Australian and Japanese co-led grouping of non-nuclear weapon states known as the Nonproliferation and Disarmament Initiative, numbering originally 10 and now 12. Formed in 2010 to promote implementation of the 64 point action plan adopted at the 2010 Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference, it looks to be at a loss in the wake of the failure of the 2015 NPT Review Conference to agree an outcome document. The last ministerial communiqué of the NPDI I could find was from their April 2014 gathering in Hiroshima.

Despite the moral impetus that must infuse any nuclear disarmament gathering in Hiroshima, the NPDI statement issued reads as a list of calls unheeded, of proposals ignored, of states repeating themselves in the face of an indifferent audience of Nuclear Weapon States and a largely apathetic one of non-nuclear weapon states.

Let's take another prominent international grouping in which Canada (and Japan) are members: the G7. The Foreign Ministers of the G7 met last month in Hiroshima and issued a Declaration of Nuclear Disarmament and Nonproliferation (at least the word order gave disarmament pride of place this time). In comparing it with the NPDI statement of two years earlier, it is striking how little progress there has been on these issues. With the one promising exception of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action Agreement with Iran, there was no real accomplishment for the Ministers to applaud.

Instead we are left with a collection of stale slogans and pious aspirations devoid of any serious plan of action to advance concrete nuclear disarmament goals. There is a commitment to "creating the conditions for a world without nuclear weapons in a way that promotes international stability". We are not enlightened as to what those conditions are, or how the goal of "international stability" (stability mind you not security) is to constrain this effort.

The Ministers pledge of course to promote the early entry into force of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) – they have been doing this regularly since 1996 when the treaty was concluded to no avail and with no recourse to any action that might actually persuade the eight outliers to drop their obstruction of this treaty. The fact that the US is among those eight may help explain this oversight.

With respect to the Fissile Material Cutoff Treaty (FMCT) a long-standing agreed objective it is frankly painful to read the communiqué text which substitutes "action adverbs" for true action. "As a priority, we call upon the Conference on Disarmament to immediately begin negotiations on a treaty banning the production of fissile material for use in nuclear weapons..". Given that this same Conference on Disarmament, a 65 member body that operates under a strict consensus procedure has been deadlocked for twenty years – to assign a key negotiation to it seems the height of folly or cynicism or both. The CD's impasse has rendered it incapable of deciding anything, immediately or otherwise.

Foreign Minister, Stéphane Dion, has designated the FMCT as a priority for Canada. He has described it as "a realistic, achievable step, and one that Canada believes must move forward without forward delay". Yet to achieve something here means abandoning the bankrupt policy of the past that relegates the negotiation of this treaty to a dysfunctional body. A policy that Mr. Dion and his G7 counterparts have just reiterated last month. What is actually called for is an exercise of leadership that liberates the FMCT from the prison of the CD and makes it the subject of a UN General Assembly-mandated negotiation that is not vulnerable to a veto.

This way forward will not be readily embraced by all and it does require a willingness for non-nuclear weapon states to put their own and global interests ahead of those of the nuclear weapon states. The latter have set the pace and parameters of nuclear arms control and disarmament for far too long. Regrettably the allies and partners of the NWS have been all too willing to cover for these states and in doing so have been complicit in the NWS avoidance of their nuclear disarmament obligations under the NPT.

All of the five NWS party to the NPT plus the four nuclear-armed states outside this accord are engaged in nuclear force modernization programs of various dimensions. Why one might reasonably ask if a state is committed to getting rid of its nuclear arsenal does it direct its efforts and resources (and we are talking about multi-billion dollar programs) to ensuring these weapons extended shelf life and enhancing their capabilities?

Why are the US and Russia, the countries possessing over 90% of the world's nuclear weapons, deaf to appeals to reduce the high-alert status of at least a portion of their deployed nuclear forces, despite the risk of accidental or unauthorized nuclear weapon use? Did we need the Fukushima disaster to remind us of human frailties, of the limits of technology, and the impossibility of foreseeing every contingency? Apply these risks to the 15,000+ nuclear weapons in the world and one wonders how anyone manages to sleep at night.

Why, when out of frustration with the stagnation of international disarmament efforts the UN General Assembly established an Open Ended Working Group to consider ways to advance multilateral disarmament negotiations have all the nuclear weapon possessing states boycotted the initial session this February and seem bent on continuing this boycott in the second session now underway in Geneva. Non-nuclear weapon states dutifully participate in the various security initiatives launched by NWS, but when it comes to a process important in the eyes of the vast majority of states, these same NWS can't even manage the simple diplomatic courtesy of sending a representative to the meeting.

Part of the reason the NWS can get away with this behavior is the support they receive from their NNWS allies and partners. Like the abused parties in a co-dependency relationship, they act as apologists for those guilty of transgression. This phenomenon was much in evidence last fall when the UN General Assembly was voting on a resolution entitled "Humanitarian Pledge for the prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons". This resolution was the culmination of an extraordinary series of three conferences devoted to examining the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any nuclear weapon detonation and the need to prevent such an event from ever occurring. The Austrian government submitted a resolution calling upon all states "to identify and pursue effective measures to fill the legal gap for the prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons". The resolution was adopted with a vote of 139 for, 29 opposed and 17 abstentions.

The “no” camp comprised four out of the five NWS and some 25 NNWS allied to the Western NWS. Canada and other NATO NNWS alongside US allies such as Australia and South Korea were part of this rejectionist vote (Japan managed the courage to abstain).

In statements at the time of the vote offered by Australia and Germany on behalf of this dissident grouping it was stated: “All delegations must be able to engage in this important discourse on nuclear disarmament reflecting their distinctive national security and other circumstances”. Of course, but why direct this at the states that were quite open to such engagement as opposed to the NWS who were refusing to engage? The sub-text I suggest was that engagement had to be on the terms of the NWS. The second reason offered in the statements was that “security” was not given due consideration alongside humanitarian principles. But concern over global and human security is one of the driving forces behind those advocating nuclear disarmament. One suspects here as well, that the only valid “security” considerations were those undefined factors informing NWS positions.

If these appear as rather lame excuses for not supporting the Humanitarian Pledge resolution, it is because they are. As long as however a significant number of influential NNWS are willing to run interference for their nuclear weapon possessing allies, I fear that the political/diplomatic energy required to confront these states and to insist upon real as opposed to rhetorical acts of nuclear disarmament will be lacking. And thus I am obliged to conclude my talk by stating that the prospects for nuclear disarmament are presently quite dim.