

OPINION FOREIGN AFFAIRS



Tariq Rauf, who specializes in nuclear disarmament, says Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, 'seems disengaged on nuclear arms control.' UN photograph by Amanda Voisard

Canada turns back on UN plan to ban nuclear arms

At the very moment Canadian leadership was once more needed, the country took a dive.



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EDMONTON—In an amazing diplomatic volte-face, the Canadian government last week in Geneva voted against starting, in 2017, negotiations to ban nuclear weapons. The government turned its back on an important nuclear disarmament initiative and sided

with the nuclear weapons states that want to keep and modernize their nuclear arsenals for the rest of the 21st century.

This is an astounding Canadian action and has given the back of the government's hand to civil society groups across Canada and 900 members of the Order of Canada who have urged the government to join in nuclear negotiations as called for by United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon. The Mexican government hailed the Geneva vote as the "most significant contribution to nuclear disarmament in two decades." But the Canadian government scorned it.

The vote took place at the Open-Ended Working Group on Nuclear Disarmament, established by a United Nations resolution, which has been meeting throughout 2016 to find a legal path to the elimination of nuclear

weapons. The meeting ended with 68 nations voting yes, 22 voting no, and 13 abstaining on a report containing a wide range of well-considered measures, including negotiations, to break out of the nuclear disarmament logjam that continues to endanger the world community.

The blame for the Canadian diplomatic debacle belongs squarely on the desk of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, whose office won't even answer letters or phone calls from high-ranking persons trying to alert him to the need for Canadian action. Tariq Rauf, one of the world's leading experts on nuclear disarmament, says that Trudeau "seems disengaged on nuclear arms control" and that the government has "undermined" the nuclear disarmament work so valiantly championed by Pierre Trudeau.

In 1983, at the height of the Cold War, Pierre Trudeau led a peace mission to Moscow, Washington, and other nuclear capitals to call a halt to the nuclear arms race. In 1998, a Liberal government caused NATO to review its nuclear policies. In 2000, the government was a chief negotiator in obtaining a consensus at the Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference.

The Harper government showed little interest in nuclear disarmament, but when Justin Trudeau revived Canada's involvement in the United Nations' agenda, many observers, both in Canada and abroad, expected

he would turn his attention to the worsening nuclear weapons threat to world peace.

However, United States-Russia relations deteriorated and NATO toughened all its stands. Neither the current prime minister nor Foreign Minister Stéphane Dion has shown any inclination to challenge NATO's outmoded Strategic Concept, which holds that nuclear weapons are the "supreme guarantee" of security. The Foreign Affairs officials just follow along, and so Canada joined with NATO states in opposing the new Geneva report, the very essence of which expressed "deep concern over the threat to humanity posed by the existence of nuclear weapons and the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any detonation." At the very moment Canadian leadership was once more needed, Canada took a dive.

It's hard to overstate the dangers to the world posed by the 15,350 nuclear weapons in existence, many of them on hair-trigger alert.

Piecemeal nuclear disarmament measures have all failed to halt the modernization programs now being carried out by the nuclear powers, which are spending enormous amounts of money to keep their nuclear arsenals.

So frustrated are many nations with the big powers' continued violations of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which calls for "good faith" negotiations, that they started a process to highlight the threat to human-

ity. This led to a UN resolution setting up a working group in Geneva. The five major nuclear weapons states—the U.S., Russia, the United Kingdom, France, and China—boycotted the process. And Canada joined a group of Western states calling themselves "progressive," but who actually undermined comprehensive efforts to eliminate nuclear weapons by holding out for piecemeal measures that have never stopped the nuclear arms race.

Mr. Dion openly admits that Canada won't support new efforts because of "obligations" to NATO. Well, what about our obligations to the United Nations, to the Non-Proliferation Treaty, to safeguard humanity from a nuclear catastrophe?

What is perplexing about the Canadian vote is that Canada gave up much of what it wants. The report supports a variety of approaches to achieve a legal prohibition of nuclear weapons, many of which, such as the Comprehensive Test Ban and a ban on the production of fissile materials, are in the Canadian catalogue of demands. It says explicitly that "there is more than one way in which nuclear disarmament can be achieved." But because it also includes negotiations, Canada opposes it.

Canada could have abstained, as Norway and the Netherlands, two other NATO countries, did. But Canada didn't even use this diplomatic device to at least keep the door to negotiations open. No, Canada slammed it shut. That is an insult to all those Canadians who do see the humanitarian value of a nuclear weapons-free world.

The report recognizes that, at the start, the nuclear powers won't participate and that merely prohibiting nuclear weapons does not mean their immediate elimination. But bringing willing nations together can lead to the "stigmatization" of nuclear weapons and further progress down the road.

Why is the Canadian government opposed to "stigmatization?" Because it will lead to delegitimizing the possession of nuclear weapons and challenge the military doctrine of nuclear deterrence. Washington definitely does not want that to happen.

The Canadian government is trying to have it both ways: to support the "unequivocal undertaking" it has made to the NPT to eliminate nuclear weapons, and to support NATO's fixation on the value of nuclear weapons.

Now what is the government going to do? There is bound to be a vote in the UN General Assembly in mid-October on a resolution establishing a negotiating process. Will Canada succumb to the nuclear hegemony of the big powers or will it stand up for Canadian values and support a UN-sponsored negotiating process? When Justin Trudeau is finally seized of the issue and sees it in the light of his aspirations for a Canadian seat on the Security Council, we may get the answer Canada deserves.

Former senator and ambassador for disarmament, Douglas Roche served as chairman of the United Nations Disarmament Committee. His forthcoming book is *Hope Not Fear: Building Peace in a Fractured World*.

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