

The Ottawa Treaty: Trump has to be stopped from removing landmine protections

- Lloyd Axworthy and John English

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It was only a matter of time. U.S. President Donald Trump, who has been systematically dismantling any and all forms of arms control or limitations on weaponry, has now decided that the restrictions of former U.S. presidents on the use of personnel landmines should end.

This announcement came in the same tone of gobbledygook that has become a trademark signature of Trumpian perfidy, as he continues to take a wrecking ball to U.S. participation in a variety of international agreements that have been painstakingly negotiated to make the world a safer place.

U.S. Defence Secretary Mark Esper used the following rationale: "I think landmines are an important tool that our forces need to have available to them in order to ensure mission success, and in order to reduce risk to forces."

That specious reasoning was debunked effectively during the debate on the landmine treaty negotiations in the 1990s, when the International Committee of the Red Cross, supported by senior U.S. army commanders such as lieutenant-general James Hollingsworth, former U.S. commander in Korea, pointed out that the weapons were a huge risk to civilians and soldiers alike.

This was reinforced by veterans themselves when the Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation (now Veterans for America), under the leadership of its president Bobby Muller, was one of the founders in 1992 of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL), reinforcing the case that the military utility of personnel landmines was peripheral but the danger of killing and maiming soldiers and civilians was extremely high. Fifty per cent of victims are children.

The Trump administration's declaration ignores those compelling arguments. There is nothing new about his know-nothing approach to such important experiential evidence or his absence of concern about the risk to people.

Neither the President nor his acolytes take into account the effectiveness and impact of the 1997 United Nations Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on their Destruction, known as the Ottawa Treaty, to which 164 countries are signatory, the largest membership of any disarmament agreement. The ICBL's Landmine Monitor Report estimates the tally of people severely injured or killed from 1997 to the present to be in the range of 150,000. But after 1999 the levels dropped to less than 10,000 annually. Major de-mining projects are underway in countries where landmines corrupt large swaths of land. Figures for 2019 show that Cambodia, where the Canadian Landmine Foundation supports de-mining and educational efforts, still has millions of mines yet to be destroyed.

There is also an upward trend of casualties in places such as Myanmar, Yemen, Afghanistan, Syria, Mali and Ukraine where there is ongoing violent conflict or invasions. This increase in fatalities and injuries caused by landmines is covertly supported by both private and governmental arms dealers.

That is why the decision to lift restrictions is so damaging. It gives licence to rogue combatants around the world, to say nothing of major powers such as Russia and China, which will now feel free to amend their own no-use policies. This is a dog whistle that will be heard by authoritarians around the world.

The United States did not sign the original Ottawa Treaty because of Pentagon pressure. But since then, under successive Republican and Democratic administrations, the U.S. has adhered to the treaty limits and been a major donor to the cause of eliminating landmines.

Until now.

The Trump administration has turned its back on the risk of landmines, just as it has on international efforts on nuclear-weapons control, climate-change adaptations and refugee protection.

The federal government needs to speak out and express its strong opposition to this desecration of the Ottawa Treaty. We provided leadership in bringing the treaty to fruition, an apt demonstration of how we can and should be a continuing advocate for human security.

Canadians are supportive of their government being a leader in efforts to limit the untrammelled use of extreme nationalist attacks on global agreements and co-operation.

As Parliament is now debating a revised North American free-trade agreement, parliamentarians should consider that one of the partners to that treaty is using its passage to reinforce his misbegotten mission of malevolence to secure re-election.

Canada must take a stand to defend the integrity of a remarkable and historic treaty that bears the name of our national capital, restore funding for landmine removal and seek to mobilize other governments in a condemnation of the Trump administration's attack on landmine security and protection.

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