

If most oppose nuclear weapons, why do we still have them?

Robin Collins and Sylvie Lemieux

A recent Nanos poll found 80% across-the-board support for nuclear weapon elimination. A strong 74% majority believe Canada should join the new Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons ("the ban treaty" or TPNW), even if there is pressure from the United States to stay clear. Those results are no surprise. Similar enthusiasm is found in older polls, and in Canadian municipalities where Councils have supported "nuclear-weapons-free zones" for many years.

In an International Committee of the Red Cross 2019 global survey, millennials (those born between 1980 and 1994) in the 16 countries polled, overwhelmingly (82%) oppose the use of all weapons of mass destruction – be they nuclear, biological, or chemical – in any circumstance.

And yet, almost half "believe nuclear weapons are an effective instrument of deterrence."

How can this be?

There lingers a belief that possessing a nuclear arsenal may protect you from enemies. There is also a lack of political leadership countering this dangerous illusion.

For example, just recently the United Kingdom announced they would increase their Trident submarine nuclear warhead limit. There are also plans to "modernize" the arsenals of most nuclear-armed states, including Russia, the USA and China. Some militaries see these weapons as war-fighting options, or as an appropriate response to an overwhelming conventional weapon attack.

And the Canadian government has snubbed the new ban treaty. Rob Oliphant, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, said the ban is "inconsistent with Canada's collective defence obligations" as a member of NATO. Within the Canadian Network to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, however, we point to NATO's own policy in support of "eventual" nuclear weapons abolition. And Canada has options: Either sign the treaty while pushing back against alliance nuclear deterrence policy; or work harder for a nuclear weapons convention, as Canada did before. Get back in the game.

Canadian disarmament practice hasn't always been so hesitant – over decades, leadership was shown on antipersonnel landmines, but also nuclear weapons policy. A resolution was supported by all members of the House of Commons and Senate as recently as 2010. It called on the government to "engage in negotiations for a nuclear weapons convention" and to "deploy a major world-wide Canadian diplomatic initiative" towards that end. Despite the all-party mandate, the last ten years saw little initiative by Canada.

There is, however, a new effort — that includes Canada — known as the Stockholm Initiative. Sixteen states are engaged, including ban supporters New Zealand, Indonesia and Kazakhstan, but also NATO members Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, and Spain, as well as two non-NATO nuclear umbrella states (South Korea and Japan). Will this be a fresh start?

“The initiative is positive in principle, but it is too soon to tell whether it will have any meaningful impact,” says Cesar Jaramillo, Executive Director of CNANW member group Project Ploughshares. “Efforts to reframe, rename and relaunch a series of steps or stones or blocks are also not new.” Canada should participate, and at the ministerial level, if this is to be a serious contribution.

Canada can also at minimum sit in as observer to the inaugural meeting of States Parties (likely in January 2022) of the new TPNW to show solidarity with the goals of its 122+ supporting or signatory states. This is also being considered by Germany.

A new global campaign for No First Use (NFU) of nuclear weapons has been established and was encouraging U.S. and Russian leaders Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin at their bilateral meeting in Geneva on June 16 to engage in talks to reduce nuclear risks. Biden is on record as questioning “first use” of nuclear weapons for the U.S.

At the NATO summit of leaders this month, Canada had an opportunity to help promote NFU for the alliance as a game-changing safer policy, but also as an early step towards nuclear weapon elimination.

This opens up the urgently needed discussion of alternatives to nuclear deterrence, a shift to sustainable common security for all peoples, and protection of the global environment. Canada needs to be there.

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