

NATO, nukes, and a time to act

By **LLOYD AXWORTHY AND PAUL MEYER** November 24, 2021

Canada can be a leader in pushing NATO to drop its hostility towards the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.

Earlier this year, Nanos Research conducted a poll on Canadian attitudes on nuclear disarmament. The results of this poll highlighted that [80 per cent of Canadians](#) believed the world should work to eliminate nuclear weapons. With new ministers of Foreign Affairs, Mélanie Joly, and National Defence, Anita Anand, the time is ripe to drive this popular policy forward. Unfortunately, the biggest hurdles in our path are the nuclear dogma of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and a lack of political will to push for change.

To describe NATO as a traditionalist institution would be an understatement. It seems at times to operate like a medieval monastic community where sacred texts are re-copied and periodically chanted by its 30-member choir. The chief of these sacred texts is the “[strategic concept](#)” which sets out the alliance’s tasks and operating doctrines. The most recent version of this concept was issued in 2010, so it is not surprising that NATO leaders last June called for a new concept to be developed. The updated policy will be submitted for approval at the next summit due to be held in Madrid in June 2022.

The likely content of this concept re-write was foreshadowed in a document titled “[NATO 2030](#)” prepared by a [reflection group](#) and issued in November 2020. This document noted that “NATO’s external security environment has changed dramatically since the 2010 strategic concept was published.” Yet, in spite of these dramatic changes, the group’s recommendations are best summed up as “stay the course”—boiler plate language from past communiqués, polished up and reused.

This recycling is clearest when reading NATO’s nuclear policy. According to NATO 2030, nuclear weapons are considered “a critical pillar of NATO’s collective defence.” The June summit statement recites that maxim stating, “As long as nuclear weapons exist, NATO shall remain a nuclear alliance.” Tacit support is expressed for the [Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty](#) (NPT) but given the “deteriorating security environment” it is clear that the NATO goal of a world without nuclear weapons is becoming ever more remote.

The contradictions of NATO’s nuclear policy are evident in its treatment of the [Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons](#) (TPNW) which entered into force last January. This treaty sets an even higher disarmament standard than the NPT by prohibiting the possession, use or threat of use of nuclear weapons. As this agreement stigmatizes nuclear weapons and nuclear deterrence, it has provoked NATO. Under pressure from the US, NATO allies boycotted the negotiations and have refused to sign the TPNW. The Alliance’s claim that the TPNW is “at odds with the existing non-proliferation and disarmament architecture and risks undermining the NPT” is groundless. Similarly, NATO’s assertion that the NPT “remains the only credible path to nuclear disarmament” is dishonest. The NPT sets a goal of nuclear disarmament but specifies no “path” to achieving it.

Today, there is a revival of global power competitions alongside a destabilizing arms race, nuclear sabre-rattling and the weaponization of emerging technologies such as AI. The need for sober voices in NATO councils grows in parallel.

Canada has a long history of pushing for nuclear restraint and progress on nuclear disarmament. In the leadup to NATO 50th anniversary summit in 1999, Canada espoused a “No First Use” policy for the Alliance. Canada was even willing to challenge NATO’s nuclear position to the point of being labelled “a nuclear nag”.

But this issue has been on the back burner in Ottawa. In 2018 all parties in the House of Commons National Defence Committee unanimously supported a [report on NATO](#) which recommended that “the Government of Canada take a leadership role within NATO in beginning the work necessary for achieving the NATO goal of creating the conditions for a world without nuclear weapons.” In its [response](#), the government agreed with this recommendation, yet there remains no evidence that it has acted on it.

Canada should mobilize like-minded allies to push the strategic concept in a new direction that emphasizes diplomacy and cooperative security measures. We can advocate for “No First Use” declarations, de-alerting of intercontinental ballistic missiles and removal of tactical nuclear weapons.

Canada can be a leader in pushing the alliance to drop its hostility towards the TPNW. Norway will attend as an observer the first meeting of states parties to the TPNW next March. It behooves Canada, with its self-image as the bridge builder to follow suit and participate as well. It is time to start mending the gap between supporters and opponents of the TPNW.

Actions speak louder than words, and the current NATO policy review is a great opportunity for Canada to act, proudly reclaim the mantle of “nuclear nag” and represent the vast majority of Canadians who want to see the end of nuclear weapons. The policy is clear and the time for the Government to act is now.

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