



CANADIAN NETWORK TO ABOLISH NUCLEAR WEAPONS  
Le Réseau canadien pour l'abolition des armes nucléaires

**Report on November 29, 2022 Special Meeting of CNANW:  
Reducing the Nuclear Weapons Risks in the Ukraine Conflict**

**(Panelists at this event were Hon. Douglas Roche, Peggy Mason and Marius Grinius. The session was moderated by Robin Collins, CNANW Co-chairperson. Additional comments that were referenced have been added in this report.)**

In a recent statement, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, a former Norwegian social democratic prime minister, said the alliance will continue to support Ukraine "for as long as it takes." He added: "We will not back down." Prominent columnists in recent weeks have challenged the very idea that a ceasefire in the Ukraine crisis is possible or even that it might lengthen the war on Russian President Putin's terms. Some press for a "fight to victory" by Kyiv, given recent gains on the battlefield. Sometimes the nuclear weapons threat is seen as blackmail, a bluff, or a risk worth ignoring. And what might a Russian defeat look like? How can Canada constructively contribute to peace?

Panelists at the CNANW discussion were asked to consider opportunities for reducing the nuclear weapon threat. All acknowledged the dire situation in Ukraine following the illegal Russian invasion.

Douglas Roche asked if peace was still possible, while reminding us that a ceasefire alone is not a stable peace. That ceasefire needs to lead to a peace agreement that includes demilitarization.

A range of threats now face humanity. So many are simultaneous and intermingled (including war in Ukraine, a pandemic, and climate disruptions) that they have been labeled a "polycrisis". UN Secretary-General Guterres suggests we are "gridlocked". But crisis is also an opportunity to reassess. This could ideally lead us closer towards a common security understanding of conflict and conflict resolution. However, Roche said, there can be no permanent peace without the abolition of nuclear weapons, rejection of militarism and an espousal of non-violence.

### **Difficulties and Opportunities**

There is some hope issued out of the G20 statement in Bali (Nov 15-16). While there was not consensus for that statement, a majority agreed a peaceful outcome to disputes is desirable. "The use or threat of use of nuclear weapons is inadmissible. The peaceful resolution of conflicts, efforts to address crises, as well as diplomacy and dialogue, are vital. Today's era must not be of war."

This could be considered a cynical position particularly if states were only paying lip service, and not really making any great effort to find a mutual resolution. NATO and G7 states have also shared a position regarding the Minsk Accords but subsequently they seemed to show no interest in full implementation of the agreements. Similarly, Putin's reference to "one people" as a justification for aggression was for the benefit of his domestic audience. Marius Grinius added that Putin has been stymying any independent criticism by nongovernmental organizations in Russia by arresting brave dissenters, and promoting "alternative histories".

Can Putin be trusted to negotiate in good faith, and what will be the future status of Crimea and the Donbas be? The argument about “NATO’s fault” is growing thin, said Grinius. Russian and Ukrainian core interests are incompatible if (in Putin’s rhetoric), “Ukrainians are just Russians.”

Peggy Mason said that many have argued against NATO enlargement for decades, and most agree not expanding was part of the deal at the end of the Cold War. For Russia this is a practical question of Eastern European countries formerly within the Soviet orbit, now holding weapons and forces on behalf of NATO on Russia’s borders. Real or imagined, Russia sees this as a form of encirclement and Russia’s retaliatory capacity, in the event of war, compromised. Richard Sakwa has written<sup>i</sup>, in this light that:

Above all, it is now clear that no effective system of European security and political order was established in the post-Cold War era. It is not helpful to look for people to blame for this lamentable state of affairs, but instead we should look to the structural causes....

These lie in the asymmetrical end of the Cold War and the failure to create an inclusive and equitable system of European security...

However, despite this, there have been civilian corridors established, and temporary ceasefires to allow grain shipments (enabled by Turkey, the ICRC and the UN) for mutual benefit. The security services of the US and Russia have been in contact with one another.

### **Canadian Role**

There was some debate about the usefulness of Canada in the Ukraine context because this country is not seen as neutral, is loudly backing one side, and is showing little interest in a peace negotiations track. Deputy Prime Minister Freeland referred to a necessary "vanquished Russia".

As a middle power country with some credibility, however, advocacy for de-alerting and No First Use within the NATO alliance is possible. There is surely an opportunity for Canada to call for reduced salience of nuclear weapons in NATO policy, and to press within the alliance for negotiations between Russia and Ukraine. Similarly, an opening up of the dialogue about the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) might be pursued.

Bringing experts together might provide an opportunity to make some headway, but we do not seem able to do that right now. Nonetheless there is no shortage of good advice as to what might be put on the table. President Zelensky also has a hard sell, now, given some recent momentum for Ukraine in the war. These gains can, of course, fade or be reversed over time.

Mason said that one proposal, made by Ernie Regehr and others, is that an international forum should be convened. Turkey, which has good relations with both Ukraine and Russia, could be a helpful interlocuter. Regehr<sup>ii</sup> recently wrote that:

A continuously operating dialogue forum – one that stays actively engaged with representatives of the parties (at whatever level of representation they might be prepared to send at any given time), that regularly tests the parties’ openness to considering options/negotiations and particular formulas, and that continuously develops and explores settlement options. Such a forum could, among its activities, maintain an inventory of credible negotiating ideas and proposals available to the parties.

So, middle powers like Canada could credibly support a just outcome to the war and encourage an early end to the devastation by devoting some material and political capital in support of a Ukraine peace platform – to promote early attention to the negotiations that will in the end be absolutely essential for ending the current crisis and building a basis for future stability.

Sylvie Lemieux and Bev Delong suggested that a neutral civil society organization like the International Pugwash Movement’s European contingent might offer to coordinate an exchange of views by setting up a negotiating table where expert opinion could be taken to heart, offering concrete proposals to end the war.

Grinius said that the soldier’s advice to decision makers is to face the worst case, whereas the diplomat chases the best-case outcome. In Ukraine, the war crimes have been continuing. Even absent nuclear weapons, the AK47, tanks and artillery are the current “weapons of mass destruction”, added to which are the deployment of drones and missiles. With the destruction of infrastructure, including knocked out heating and electricity, Ukrainians are heading to a brutal winter. An estimated 100,000 have been killed or injured on each side.

Canada is not a neutral observer but can be engaged in training Ukrainians, providing winter clothing for the military and civilians, and sharing our expertise in demining. Peace negotiations might lead to imperfect results, too, as arguably occurred in ending the Vietnam and Afghanistan wars. Will it be possible to negotiate towards the status of pre-February 24, 2022 borders, to guarantee that Ukraine does not join NATO? The involvement of India, Turkey and China might help. The Ukraine conflict has longer roots, and perhaps the trashing of the ABM treaty set in motion a series of destabilizing events, suggested Gordon Edwards.

## **UN Reform**

While the influence of the United Nations, which came out of the destruction of WW II, has been diminished in the light of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, its stature has grown somewhat in the South. The problem of the veto remains but is likely a non-starter. Middle powers can work together to rebuild international peace and security. It will in the end be up to the International Criminal Court to assess war crimes and crimes against humanity.

## **Nuclear Weapon Threat**

Marius Grinius noted there was a reluctance of militaries to accept that nuclear weapons are *passé* in terms of their utility. Politicians seem unable to grasp this too. Cesar Jaramillo said that the risk of nuclear weapon use is intolerably high but not only due to the rhetorical statements of Putin or Medvedev. Nuclear deterrence is a continuing unacceptable risk. Each day is a high-risk day.

Russia’s defeat is difficult to imagine. For that reason alone, any strategy that might lead to Russian humiliation, and then to the possible use of nuclear weapons, is very dangerous. We need to ask, therefore, where NATO’s strategy might lead. We should not conflate Putin’s invasion, and his rhetoric, with Russian longer-term irritation at NATO expansion. These problems, and a real perception of threat can all be operating at the same time.

As Peggy Mason noted, ending the war is the only way to end the current heightened nuclear weapon threat. This requires negotiations but many are uninterested. Russia was sabre-rattling early on, speaking of an escalation to nuclear use, with loose talk about tactical missiles. This rhetoric was eventually walked back. In late October, Russian President Putin said there was “no point” in this approach, and US

President Biden agreed. This lowered hype was not matched in practical terms, however, and the risk of unintended use of nuclear weapons will remain without an end to the war.

### **Defeat of Russia, Victory for Ukraine**

We should consider what defeat of Russia looks like in practical terms at the end of day and be careful not to back Putin into a corner where he is humiliated. Bev Delong suggested more efforts should be made to sit down with Russia to enhance confidence building measures at their borders -- to address the weapons parked there and to arrange humanitarian aid.

Paul Rogers has said that a victorious Ukraine would still be left with a “bitter and vengeful Russia sharing a long common border for years and even decades to come.” A de facto partition like Cyprus could be an even more dangerous scenario, emboldening Russia to use the current war as a springboard for future aggression.

But another problem is that advocating for negotiations seems to be up against NATO’s war fighting strategy. Putin already is facing a significant defeat with Sweden and Finland joining the alliance.

All wars eventually end but how they end is also important. World War I ended with the Versailles Treaty that many argue led to unresolved grievances and another war. World War II was followed by the more benign Marshall Plan.

### **Options**

We find ourselves now walking into a winter stalemate rather than peace negotiations. Both Ukrainians and Russians are the ones suffering (as are many others affected by the economic and supply impacts of the war). This means that something other than total victory will be required for the peace.

### **Therefore:**

- We must all recognize that it may take more than total victory to achieve peace.
- Canada can pursue diminution of the role of nuclear weapons in NATO's Strategic Concept and reduce the possibility of their intentional or accidental use as a result of hostilities in Ukraine.
- Civil society can establish an international forum to coordinate an exchange of views with the goal of a peaceful outcome.
- Canada can devote resources to a peace platform for Ukraine that will ultimately be essential to ending the current crisis and laying the foundation for future stability.

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<sup>i</sup> See *Ukraine and Russia: People, Politics, Propaganda and Perspectives*, edited by Richard Sakwa and available in PDF format [here](#).

<sup>ii</sup> For a more detailed comment by Ernie Regehr, see “War in Ukraine: Possibilities for a Peace Settlement”: <https://group78.org/war-in-ukraine-possibilities-for-a-peace-settlement/>