

Revitalizing Canada's role in the disarmament and non-proliferation debate

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One of the most important shifts Canada should undertake is to prioritize disarmament.

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The past 10 years of Conservative-led government have seen Canada move to the periphery of global efforts to accelerate disarmament and maintain non-proliferation.

This was most starkly illustrated during the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference in May, when Canada sided with the United States and the United Kingdom alone to block consensus on a final document, leading to the conference's failure.

Canada's once value-driven approach, often viewed as an indispensable tool within the international community, was marginalized in favour of a combat-focused foreign policy. This shift neither advanced multilateral co-operation nor enhanced Canadian standing in the world.

Having made his debut on the world stage at this week's G20 summit in Turkey, there is a palpable sense of optimism that Prime Minister Justin Trudeau will begin reversing this decline. There is cautious hope that Canada will again pursue constructive engagement with the broader global community instead of repeating the antagonizing and recalcitrant positions so characteristic of the past decade.

We believe that one of the most important shifts Canada should undertake is to prioritize disarmament. Canada can and should play a key role in updating NATO policy to ensure that it meets Canada's obligations under the NPT.

While NATO summits often conclude with high-minded calls for a world free of nuclear weapons, the alliance's political and tactical attachment to nuclear weapons tells a different story. Canada should be willing to pose difficult questions to the alliance, asking it to specify how exactly it is contributing to a nuclear weapons-free world.

This means more forcefully lobbying NATO to pursue broad-based, gradual nuclear disarmament, which will reduce the threats of proliferation, early or even accidental use of nuclear weapons, and will increase collective security. Canada should also support ongoing efforts to declare the Arctic a nuclear-weapon-free zone.

Furthermore, Canada can play an active role in the movement toward a verifiable treaty banning nuclear weapons, joining with the 158 states moving in this direction. More comprehensively, this government must recognize that a global treaty on nuclear weapons, as well as treaties that restrict and ban other weapons of mass destruction, are both humanitarian imperatives and crucial for increasing international security.

Owing to its technical know-how, Canada could contribute to the verification capacities that would be required of a global ban on nuclear weapons. Of course, such efforts are complex and success is hard to achieve, primarily because they require significant investments in long-term multilateral co-operation.

We have recently returned from the 61st Pugwash Conference in Nagasaki, Japan, where we shared in the commemoration of the 70th anniversary of the atomic bombing of that city. We witnessed first-hand the long-lasting devastation caused by the use of nuclear weapons; we heard directly from the Hibakusha, the survivors of the A-bomb, how their terrible ordeal continues to this day as they relive the past in graphic detail and still deal with chronic health-related anxieties; and we learned from the people of Nagasaki how to peacefully cope with this awful legacy.

Nuclear weapons are not a relic of the Cold War; their existence today poses significant and direct global threats, which far transcend national borders. In light of the tragedy in Paris, one shudders to think what would happen should a terrorist group like Daesh acquire enough radiological material to build even a rudimentary “dirty” nuclear bomb.

Given this, we have been inspired by the courage of the Hibakusha, who continue to use their horrific experiences to educate both younger and older generations about the existential dangers of nuclear weapons and the prevailing insecurity that emanates from their possession.

Prime Minister Trudeau has a unique opportunity to leverage significant influence on the disarmament and non-proliferation agenda. We hope that he seizes on this in May 2016 when Japan hosts the G7 summit.

During the 2015 NPT Review Conference, Japanese Foreign Minister Kishida invited world leaders to visit the bombed cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki—we urge Mr. Trudeau to heed this call. As young people of this country we feel that Canada can, and must, do more.

Heeding the chilling testimony of the Hibakusha and restoring Canadian leadership on disarmament and non-proliferation would be a significant and much-needed start.

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