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At the unholy altar of nuclear weapons

Canada has a key role to play in preventing erosion of non-proliferation pact, *says Douglas Roche*

This year marks the 60th anniversary of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the 35th anniversary of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which was supposed to lead to a nuclear-weapons-free world. Both anniversaries remind us of the stark dangers nuclear weapons still pose to the world.

It is a moment of intense diplomatic challenge for Canada, a country at the centre of the debate over the future of nuclear weapons. That debate will take place at the NPT Review conference May 2-27 at the United Nations.

In recent years, Iran, Libya and North Korea have pursued illegal nuclear programs with the assistance of a secret Pakistani network.

A high-level U.N. panel recently warned: "We are approaching a point at which the erosion of the Non-Proliferation regime could become irreversible and result in a cascade of proliferation." It is truly shocking that the public seems oblivious to the 34,000 nuclear weapons still in existence, most of them with an explosive power several times greater than the bombs that destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The NPT was obtained through a bargain, with the nuclear-weapons states agreeing to negotiate the elimination of their nuclear weapons and share nuclear technology for peaceful purposes in return for the non-nuclear states shunning the acquisition of nuclear weapons.

Adherence to that bargain enabled the indefinite extension of the treaty in 1995 and the achievement of an "unequivocal undertaking" in 2000 toward elimination through a program of 13 Practical Steps.

Now the United States is rejecting the commitments of 2000 and premising its aggressive diplomacy on the assertion that the problem of the NPT lies not in the nuclear-weapons states' own actions, but in the lack of compliance by states such as North Korea and Iran.

Brazil has put the issue in a nutshell: "One cannot worship at the altar of nuclear weapons and raise heresy charges against those who want to join the sect."

The whole international community, nuclear and non-nuclear alike, is concerned about proliferation and wants strong action taken to ensure that Iran and North Korea do not become nuclear weapons states.

But the new attempt by Washington to gloss over the discriminatory aspects of the NPT, which are now becoming permanent, has caused the patience of the members of the non-aligned movement to snap.

They see a two-class world of nuclear haves and have-nots becoming a permanent feature of the global landscape. They see the U.S. researching the development of a new, "usable" nuclear weapon and NATO, an expanding military alliance, clinging to the doctrine that nuclear weapons are "essential."

Compounding the nuclear risk is the threat of nuclear terrorism, which is growing day by day. It is estimated that 40 countries have the knowledge to produce nuclear weapons and the existence of an extensive illicit market for nuclear items shows the inadequacy of the present export control system.

The task awaiting the 2005 review of the Non-Proliferation Treaty is to convince the nuclear-weapons states that the only hope of stopping the proliferation of nuclear weapons is to address nuclear disarmament sincerely.

This is precisely the stance taken by foreign ministers of the New Agenda Coalition (Brazil, Egypt, Ireland, Mexico, New Zealand, South Africa and Sweden), who recently wrote:

"Nuclear non-proliferation and nuclear disarmament are two sides of the same coin and both must be energetically pursued."

The New Agenda, which showed impressive leadership at the 2000 NPT review in negotiating the 13 Practical Steps with the nuclear weapons states, is now clearly reaching out to other middle-power states to build up what might be called the "moderate middle" in the nuclear weapons debate.

Eight NATO states — Belgium, Canada, Germany, Lithuania, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, Norway and Turkey — voted for the New Agenda resolution at the U.N. in 2004, an action that effectively built a bridge between NATO and the New Agenda. The new "bridge" shows that a group of centrist states may be in position to produce a positive outcome for the 2005 NPT review.

Here is where Canada can shine.

In 2002 and 2003, Canada was the only NATO nation to vote for the New Agenda resolution. That was an act of courage, for Canada likes the "good company" of its alliance partners when it takes progressive steps. But the action was rewarded in 2004 when seven other NATO states joined Canada.

I recently held meetings with the governments of some of these key countries — Germany, Norway, The Netherlands and Belgium — to discuss how to make a success of the NPT review conference. These countries look to Canada, as an important centrist state, to maintain its

leadership position in upholding the integrity of the disarmament and non-proliferation goals of the NPT.

When I was in Europe, news came of the Canadian government's decision not to join in the U.S. Ballistic Missile Defence system.

This move won the unanimous admiration of the officials I talked to. Clearly, they would like to work with Canada in proposing workable solutions to the NPT crisis.

For Canada, working in a collegial manner with other centrist states is much easier to do than the action it boldly took in confronting the U.S. alone on missile defence.

In the present political climate, no "grand solution" is possible. Rather, a set of incremental steps could be achieved if the moderate middle states use their influence to convince the U.S. that it is in American interests to protect the NPT's ability to curb would-be nuclear proliferators.

These steps include: the start of negotiations for a ban on the production of fissile materials; the striking of a new committee at the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva to deal with nuclear disarmament questions; the U.S. and Russia taking their strategic nuclear weapons off "alert" status, and beefing up the ability of the International Atomic Energy Agency to ensure that nuclear fuels for civilian purposes are not diverted to nuclear weapons.

This is a modest program. Many nuclear weapons abolitionists will not be satisfied with it, for it falls far short of negotiations for a Nuclear Weapons Convention.

The world is a long way from obtaining such a treaty, which would need a strong verification system to ensure the safe elimination of all nuclear weapons. But the interim program would at least save the NPT.

By working diligently and diplomatically with key NATO states and the progressive New Agenda states, Canada can live up to its own values of making the world safe from the spread of nuclear weapons.

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