

Sunnier times for Canada's disarmament diplomacy

<http://www.embassynews.ca/opinion/2016/03/05/sunnier-times-for-canadas-disarmament-diplomacy/48318>

The only thing more shocking than the Conference on Disarmament's dysfunctionality has been the willingness of leading states to tolerate it.



UN Photo: Jean-Marc Ferré

The Conference on Disarmament in 2015.

[Paul Meyer](#)

Friday, 03/04/2016

Foreign Minister Stephane Dion's March 2 [address to the Conference on Disarmament](#) in Geneva represents both a welcome re-engagement at a key if moribund multilateral forum, as well as an indicator that Canada is prepared once again to assume a leadership role in the demanding field of multilateral disarmament activity.

Dion's rebuke of the CD was amply deserved. After a 20-year failure to agree on any program of work (let alone undertake any official action pursuant to one) the 65-member state consensus-based forum has egregiously failed its core raison d'être—to serve as the UN's forum for negotiating multilateral arms control and disarmament agreements.

The only thing more shocking than the CD's dysfunctionality has been the willingness of leading states to tolerate it as long as they have.

Mr. Dion rightly recalls that the major multilateral arms control and disarmament agreements have all been negotiated outside the CD. The 1997 Ottawa Convention banning anti-personnel landmines and the 2008 Convention prohibiting cluster munitions were accomplished through ad hoc diplomatic conferences and the more recent Arms Trade Treaty through a negotiation authorized by the UN General Assembly.

If the CD does not find a way to liberate itself from the straitjacket of conflicting national vetoes, it will become irrelevant to the international security community.

There is no magic formula for overcoming the CD's impasse and Mr. Dion can only call on the states “to redouble our efforts to find innovative ways of moving forward” and “to set realistic objectives.”

Promoting a ban treaty on nuclear weapons is not, in Mr. Dion's opinion, a realistic goal at this stage as it would be rejected by the nuclear weapon possessing states and would not advance the achievement of nuclear disarmament.

Alternatively, Canada suggests a menu of measures within the context of the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty including increased transparency, moratoriums on nuclear tests and the production of fissile material, security assurances, the establishment of nuclear weapon-free zones and the universalization of the NPT.

The problem with this listing is that all the measures have already been advocated for years within the NPT and have found their way into several concluding documents of NPT review conferences as agreed political direction for the NPT's 190 states parties. The difficulty has been failures of implementation or worse actions that directly counter agreed objectives.

Take for example the moratorium on nuclear tests. It is very much a second best to the entry into force of the Comprehensive (Nuclear) Test Ban Treaty which was concluded back in 1996 but still has not become fully operational due to the failure of eight states (including China, the US, India and Pakistan) to either sign or ratify it.

This was a top priority of the NPT when it was indefinitely extended in 1995 and its failure to enter into force undermines the credibility of the NPT.

Similarly successive NPT review conferences have called for the immediate commencement of negotiations of a Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty, albeit within the confines of the CD. This in turn has ensured that given the CD's paralysis such negotiations have never seen the light of day, representing a further unfulfilled promise of the NPT membership.

Canada can take some pride in the leadership it has shown on the FMCT file, including the championing (and chairing) of a UN Group of Governmental Experts whose 2015 report represented a thorough examination of the substantive issues of this treaty.

However to date Canada has not taken the necessary steps to remove the FMCT from the deadly embrace of the CD and work to initiate negotiations in another multilateral forum not vulnerable to the spoilers who have blocked action on this priority goal for two decades.

In their frustration over the impasse on nuclear disarmament, many non-nuclear weapon states supported the creation of an Open Ended Working Group at last year's UN General Assembly. That group has just completed its first session in Geneva, although its work has suffered from the decision of the nuclear weapon possessing states to boycott its proceedings.

The global nuclear governance regime represented by the NPT cannot be sustained if the existing divisions between those states possessing nuclear weapons and those which have foresworn these arms are exacerbated by a breakdown in communication and co-operation between the camps. The disarmament and nonproliferation commitments of the NPT are inter-dependent: to neglect one is to neglect the other with potentially dire consequences for international security.

Canada to its credit has been an active participant in the OEWG from the start and delivered a statement on behalf of 20 like-minded states at the group's inaugural session.

While that statement was largely constructive in tone it did contain a problematic reference: that new nuclear disarmament initiatives posed a "risk that their [nuclear weapons] unilateral elimination would be destabilizing and harmful to both our national security and to international security more broadly."

As no state (nor NGO) to my knowledge is espousing unilateral disarmament, this statement seems to be setting up something of a straw man. It also appears to tarnish proposals aimed at accelerating the

achievement of nuclear disarmament through agreements amongst those states possessing these weapons with the charge of “unilateralism.”

It will be important that Canada in its espousal of “incremental” progress on disarmament, not denigrate those who seek more rapid advances along the disarmament road. Minister Dion should recall that if Canada had only been willing to consider “incremental” progress on the disarmament of landmines back in 1997 we would still be in a world awash with these weapons.

*Paul Meyer is a fellow in international security at Simon Fraser University and a senior fellow at the Simons Foundation in Vancouver. A former career diplomat, he served as Canada’s ambassador and permanent representative to the UN and the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva (2003-2007).
editor@embassynews.ca*