

Redefining Canada's Role in an Evolving Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons Regime

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Issue

The international framework regulating the control and proliferation of nuclear weapons has weakened over recent years, owing to the open defiance of established global norms by various states. This weakening is intrinsically linked to the deterioration of the rules-based international order, of which Canada counts itself a strong proponent. The erosion of these regulatory frameworks will pose significant challenges to states compliant with the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), including Canada. In light of this erosion of the rules-based international order surrounding the proliferation of nuclear weapons, Ottawa must re-evaluate its dedication to the NPT regime and the global institutions entrusted with the responsibility of upholding its principles.

Background

Since the ratification of the NPT in 1968, the nuclear landscape has changed dramatically. Created during the Cold War, the NPT is the cornerstone of the non-proliferation regime, bringing together 191 states committed to three pillars: nuclear weapons non-proliferation, the peaceful use of nuclear energy and eventual universal nuclear disarmament. The growing geopolitical rifts of the post-Cold War, multipolar era have transformed the postwar international system and generated fundamental questions about, and challenges to, its effectiveness. This has provoked a renewed sense of

urgency to reaffirm and strengthen the NPT and norms surrounding non-proliferation. Given the fact that no one is immune from the threat of nuclear war, multilateral dialogue and forums play a critical role in addressing and tackling the dangers posed by nuclear weapons, their proliferation and potential use. The NPT regime has come under an increased level of precarity in recent years; the escalating conflict between Russia and Ukraine, rogue states such as North Korea and Iran, the modernization of the United States' nuclear arsenal and Russia's suspension of its involvement in the New START Treaty exemplify a shifting global security arena. The landscape has changed so dramatically, yet protractedly, that we are currently living in a world seemingly apathetic to the horrors of nuclear war.

Canada's Role in the NPT Regime

Historically, Canada has been a leader in efforts relating to non-proliferation, arms control, and disarmament of conventional arms and weapons of mass destruction (Government of Canada 2021). However, in a twenty-first century context, many rogue states openly flaunt the norms and rules surrounding nuclear weapons and Canada must put forward ways to strengthen a flagging rules-based international order to which it is so resolutely committed. Being an avowed non-nuclear-armed state, Canada does not have the same influence in the nuclear non-proliferation regime as states such as the United States, the United Kingdom or France, and there are gaps in Ottawa's policy surrounding nuclear weapons and the

broader NPT regime that could be filled on the levels of domestic and international policy making. Internationally, Canada is involved in key agreements, such as the NPT, the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, and the Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty (FMCT). However, it is currently not signatory to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), nor has it endorsed the original Joint Statement on the Humanitarian Consequences of Nuclear Weapons presented at the 2015 NPT Review Conference (Kmentt 2015). Domestically, there is a gap in Canadian policy aimed at raising the awareness of the Canadian public about the clear and present dangers posed by nuclear weapons, especially in an increasingly insecure global climate.

Recommendations

Awareness Raising. Canada can use its advanced media landscape, including both traditional (print media and television) and modern (social media) outlets, to restore awareness of the realities of nuclear war in the popular psyche. During the height of the Cold War, for instance, the use of media to prompt conversations about the dangers of nuclear war was incredibly effective at changing attitudes to the growing threat of nuclear aggression. The broadcasting of films, such as *The Day After* (1983) and *Threads* (1984), presented visceral depictions of the horrors of life after nuclear war, shocking the global public while also positively affecting nuclear weapons policy, contributing to the eventual signing of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (Stover 2018). The use of “shocking realism” (Pajkovic 2017) in media art, like that used in both *The Day After* and *Threads*, can counter the growing apathy that characterizes the global response to immediate nuclear threats to international stability, and the viability of agreements such as the NPT. For instance, when Russia stated that it was suspending its involvement in the New START Treaty, there was little to no public outcry outside of policy-making circles in the face of this brazen act. This might reflect the currently inadequate state of media coverage of the risk of a nuclear exchange, or it may indicate an even graver problem — public indifference to the dangers of nuclear war.

By partnering with Global Affairs Canada and the Department of Canadian Heritage, Canada can promote the yearly broadcasting of anti-nuclear war films, such as *The Day After* and *Threads*, and wage an aggressive media

campaign highlighting Canada’s commitment to seeing the eventual, irreversible elimination of nuclear weapons worldwide (Government of Canada 2023). This can be reinforced with consistent and persistent media campaigns featuring notable Canadians, speakers, intellectuals, popular cultural figures and other influential individuals discussing the dangers of nuclear weapons, Canada’s non-proliferation policy, and what still needs to be done to realize the goals of the NPT, culminating in a week of remembrance of the nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. During this week of remembrance, films, documentaries and conversations with stakeholders can be utilized as a way of promoting the values of non-proliferation as uniquely *Canadian* values — something that is tied to an international imaginary of what it means to be Canadian. This is an initiative that should evoke a considerable amount of dread among Canadians about the possibility of a nuclear strike, and this is intentional; it is of the utmost importance to, as the 2012 Oslo Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons states, “look in concrete terms at the evidence of what would actually happen to people and human society in the event of a nuclear detonation” (Kmentt 2015).

Reaffirming Support for Existing Treaties and Establishing New Partnerships. As set forth in the Minister of Foreign Affairs’ Mandate Letter, a key pillar of the Canadian government is to “expand Canada’s engagement with allies, partners, and international organizations in order to promote peace and security, provide humanitarian assistance, and support international emergency responses” (Government of Canada 2021). As a non-nuclear middle power, Canada occupies a key, liminal position on the world stage, both by being a member of the North American Treaty Organization (NATO) (and a close ally of the United States), while at the same time maintaining amicable relations with other states with whom Washington has a more fraught relationship (Fuhrmann 2012). In order to strengthen its commitment to a nuclear-weapons-free world, it can form, along with other middle-power states, a Middle Power Non-Nuclear Partnership (MPNNP), which must be composed of NATO and non-NATO states. This partnership can enhance levels of trust between NATO nuclear weapon states, NATO non-nuclear weapon states, and non-NATO non-nuclear weapon states without compromising Canada’s commitment to NATO. Through the MPNNP, Canada can take on a broader leadership role on the world

stage in the area of non-proliferation, strengthen ties with both allied and non-allied states, and reaffirm its support for the NPT and the broader non-proliferation regime.

As mentioned, Canada is not currently signatory to the TPNW, and has not endorsed the original Joint Statement on the Humanitarian Consequences of Nuclear Weapons (Kmentt 2015). In order to reaffirm its role as a global leader in the pursuit of non-proliferation with the eventual aim of global nuclear disarmament, Canada must become signatory to the TPNW and endorse the Joint Statement. While these actions might provoke opposition from the United States, Canada must act as a leader in this regard, and in so doing strengthen any future claims and calls to action from Ottawa to hesitant states unwilling to join a proposed MPNNP.

Strengthening the Rules-based International Order. The preamble to the NPT emphasizes the importance of easing international tensions and strengthening trust between NPT partners, which Canada and the other signatories of the NPT can do by reusing tested and reliable diplomatic forums. This means re-engaging in multilateral dialogue and following up on earlier priorities, such as the FMCT, which Canada has long been associated with (Berger 2012). The FMCT is viewed by many as the next-level multilateral measure to halt nuclear proliferation and would limit the amount of fissile material available for nuclear weapons use by banning its further production for weapons or nuclear explosive purposes (Meyer 2015). Controlling fissile material is therefore fundamental for controlling nuclear proliferation and for providing the basis for deep, transparent and irreversible reductions in nuclear arsenals (Maerli 2001). By advancing the FMCT towards formal negotiation, Canada would rebuild confidence in the broader non-proliferation regime, which has been eroded by ongoing stalemate. The Conference on Disarmament (CD), which is the world's sole multilateral disarmament negotiating body, needs modernizing, as paralysis and gridlock have blocked that body's progress since 1996 (Berger 2012; Meyer 2021). Momentum needs to be prioritized in order to continue meaningful work in the field of disarmament, which will contribute to global security through easing international tensions and building trust. By innovating and finding new mechanisms and processes to reach disarmament goals, Canada can help strengthen the NPT through advocating for CD reform, working in conjunction with like-minded allies to this end. There remains strong support for the prompt negotiation

and conclusion of an FMCT, and Canada can capitalize on this support by promoting the creation of an ad hoc committee of the UN General Assembly that is open to all states, unlike the CD, which is currently limited to only 65 member states. This would make it possible to build momentum and a broader coalition and generate political will from a greater number of actors to put pressure on those states that oppose an FMCT. Within the UN General Assembly, an issue can be put to a vote without struggling to achieve consensus, which could jumpstart progress on this front, and serve as a reminder of the importance of a rules-based international system. Owing to Canada's long-standing record of international peace and security building through innovative diplomatic and multilateral forums, as well as a record of interest in and commitment to non-proliferation and nuclear disarmament, Canada is an ideal candidate to pursue an alternative FMCT path.

Expanding the Role of Nuclear Energy in Tackling Climate Change. As the world shifts into combatting climate change and focuses on lowering carbon emissions, there is no question that nuclear energy will play a critical role as an alternative power source. Four hundred and forty-four nuclear power plants operating in over 30 countries are producing 10 percent of the world's energy without producing carbon emissions. The Nuclear Energy Agency (NEA), after assessing over 90 pathways to net-zero that were proposed by the United Nations Panel on Climate Change, estimated that nuclear capacity globally would have to be tripled to 1,160 gigawatts by 2050 in order to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees, which the world is not on track to achieving (NEA 2021). Canada has invested in nuclear research as a member of the Nuclear Suppliers Group, and it plays a central role in regulating nuclear/nuclear-related exports (Anthony, Ahlström, and Fedchenko 2007). The mandate letter of the Minister of Foreign Affairs highlighted key objectives of the Canadian government related to the NPT, including continued Canadian leadership in international efforts to combat climate change. Canada has done an admirable job of following Article 4 of the NPT and working with countries to develop nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, having signed 46 Nuclear Cooperation Agreements with key partners, such as India, China, South Korea, and the United States. These agreements ensure that nuclear technology is utilized only for peaceful applications, and engages in partnerships that allow for joint research, the exchanging of technology and supplying nuclear

equipment and fissile materials. It is recommended that Canada continue to be an engaging partner that helps develop nuclear programs and technology for developing states.

Tackling Emerging Threats in Cooperation with Global Partners. The Network for Strategic Analysis published a report that implicated the promotion of peaceful uses of nuclear technology guaranteed by Article 4 in the greater diffusion of fissile materials, thereby adding to the severity of the nuclear threat. In fact, in 2007, it was estimated that almost 40 countries had access to enough fissile materials to produce their own nuclear weapons. (Lafontaine and Lambert-Deslandes 2021). In relation to this threat, the Minister of Foreign Affairs' mandate letter expressed the need to expand Canada's engagement with allies and partners to promote peace and security. By engaging in Nuclear Cooperation Agreements, Canada is following the spirit of the NPT and engaging in the diffusion of nuclear technology and expertise for peaceful purposes. However, security actors agree that this could be creating a potentially more dangerous world (Fuhrman 2012). In order to balance these two items, Canada must implement stricter regulations and work towards continued dialogue with partner states and allies to better recognize and tackle threats to the NPT (Anthony, Ahlström, and Fedchenko 2007).

Recognizing the need to revive dialogue around the NPT amid new and emerging security concerns, it is recommended that Canada fill the role previously held by the United States and implement a biannual Nuclear Security Summit. Previously, these nuclear security summits spearheaded by the United States under President Obama led to tangible results in the securing of nuclear materials and strengthening international institutions that manage nuclear security. Canada leading the revival of the Nuclear Security Summit and convening like-minded partners would go a long way in recognizing and tackling new and emerging threats to the NPT (Robertson 2019).

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