

Toward a Nuclear Weapons Convention: A Role for Canada

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Round Table on Canada's Role

by Paul Meyer

Canada, these days, is conspicuous by its absence from international efforts to achieve a nuclear weapons free world. After years of commitment and leadership on the nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament file, Canada has withdrawn into the shadows and cutback significantly on the resources, human and financial, that it devotes to this subject matter.

So in my view the first order of business for Canada is to resume the role of an engaged and innovative actor on the multilateral stage that it once possessed. This will require some renewed display of interest regarding this realm on the part of our political masters. The indications to date don't exactly inspire confidence in this respect.

By way of illustration, in January of this year, Canada assumed the rotating presidency of the 65 nation Conference on Disarmament in Geneva. Given the number of members this honour only happens about once in a decade. The initial president of the annual session of the Conference has special responsibility to try and agree a program of work, a goal that has eluded the Conference for several years. If there was any time when our Ambassador for Disarmament in Geneva might have appreciated a little political support it was in these crucial days of his presidency. Coincidentally, the Canadian Prime Minister was in Geneva on January 26 one of the opening plenary meetings of the Canadian presidency. He was there for an international meeting on maternal health, but it would not have taken any great logistical feat to have him at least make an appearance at the CD in support of Canada's role and as an acknowledgment of Canadian interest in and concern for the CD. This did not occur, nor in the absence of the PM was the Canadian Foreign Minister sent, or the Parliamentary Secretary or even a Deputy Foreign Minister dispatched to provide this visible sign of interest. The political interest simply wasn't there. It was important enough for the UN Secretary General to travel to Geneva for the opening of the CD's annual session, but not a senior representative from Ottawa.

To be fair, Foreign Minister Cannon did travel to Geneva on February 28 after the Canadian presidency was over and addressed the Conference on Disarmament. He stated that "If consensus continues to be blocked on the CD's Program of Work, countries will increasingly look to find disarmament results in other for a, such as the General Assembly, where consensus is not required to do business". This is an opening to developing a diplomatic strategy to overcome the blockage in the CD, but it will require going beyond the non-committal "countries will increasingly look" to an express Canadian engagement to make this happen in concert with others.

So my first piece of advice for any country aspiring to play a role in a major international production, is that you have to show up at the audition and at least pretend to be enthusiastic about getting the part.

There is a primordial need for the political level to attach some sense of priority to any potential field of foreign policy if it is to be activated. I am using the term 'political level' here broadly. This includes the Government of the day of course, but also the totality of Parliament.

One of the initiating factors for this conference was the adoption last December of a unanimous resolution in the Senate and the House of Commons calling for Canada to launch a "major world-wide diplomatic initiative" on behalf of nuclear disarmament. I like many in this room applauded this demonstration of common purpose on a subject that impacts all of humanity. I hope however I will not offend anyone associated with our Parliament if I question the depth of interest and resolve embodied in that resolution. When was the last time that a House or Senate Committee has taken up this subject matter? When was the last time that Canada's Ambassador for Disarmament was invited to speak before a Parliamentary Committee even though annual appearances was a recommendation of the 1998 SCFAT report on Canada and Nuclear Challenges? I believe my appearance before that Committee in 2007 as Ambassador for Disarmament was the last time such a session was held.

I would hope going forward, after this current election, that the Foreign Affairs Committee of the House or Senate actually follows-up on the December resolution. I think it would be most informative for a hearing to be arranged at which representatives of the Government would be asked how exactly do they intend to implement the call for a major international diplomatic initiative by Canada to promote nuclear disarmament.

I hope I have not belabored this point about political interest, but as an ex-civil servant I can't overstate its importance if one wants to advance beyond square one of any initiative. Officials may be able to generate good ideas for action, but without some supportive political direction or up take; these will not see the light of day.

If the political interest is present, there is scope for significant action even by those states that are not great powers. Look at what Australia and Japan recently achieved when their Prime Ministers joined forces to establish an international commission on nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament. This commission headed by former foreign ministers Evans and Kawaguchi produced a solid report with a series of practical recommendations for future action. Australia and Japan followed up by submitting the report and a selection of recommendations as official documents to the 2010 NPT Review Conference. They subsequently displayed more leadership in convening a group of some dozen non-nuclear weapons states to consider further measures to revive multilateral efforts on nuclear disarmament. Meetings of this grouping are being held this month and presumably some public declaration will be produced. It is positive to note that Canada is among those states, but you can appreciate it if I voice some regret that Canada was not a leader on this occasion but only a

follower. While broad-based coalitions are the way to go to achieve progress on multilateral issues, I would like to see at times Canada also taking a turn at driving the bus or at least initiating the excursion.

In addition to political will there also has to be some real resources and capacities to underpin any form of diplomatic initiative. I am sorry if I will have to burst for some in the audience another myth of Canada's role of the world, but as was the case with our supposed leadership in UN peacekeeping, Canada's expertise in arms control and disarmament verification has essentially evaporated over the last couple of decades. The once vaunted Verification Unit of DFAIT was abolished years ago and the residual budget to support Canadian research in international security issues has been reduced to a pale imitation of its former self. Similar cutbacks of capacity have been underway at National Defence. So if we were ever to get involved again in a major international disarmament initiative, there would be a mad scramble on to try and locate whatever residual capacity is still present. New funding would be needed to commission necessary research (if we could still find qualified Canadians to carry it out) to support, for example, the development of verification procedures and technology accompanying the negotiation of a Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty. The few experienced Foreign Service Officers and experts from other departments such as DND and the Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission would have to be identified and seconded to a task force to support the eventual diplomatic initiative. To be effective and credible internationally, any initiative would have to go beyond a couple of nice speeches. This level of engagement presupposes a willingness to invest some capital, human and financial as well as political, for the success of the enterprise.

Perseverance will also be required. The sad reality is that the Nuclear Weapons States that are ultimately the essential partners in any exercise of nuclear disarmament are not always that keen to dance or even to show up at the party.

Take this conference as an illustration. It is gratifying to see several diplomatic representatives participating as speakers in this event. But regrettably, despite the best efforts of the organizers, it would appear that only one of the states possessing nuclear weapons saw fit to accept an invitation to participate. These states are often not eager to have a dialogue on the subject matter of nuclear nonproliferation and disarmament, especially when it is not one initiated by them and confined to their priorities. It will take some perseverance and even intestinal fortitude for states such as Canada to pursue a diplomatic initiative that makes a compelling case for co-operation by nuclear weapon possessing states. And by compelling, I also mean being prepared in concert with other like-minded states to make it known that the NWS cannot count on cooperation on international security issues of importance to them, unless these same states display an equivalent commitment to realize nuclear disarmament objectives.

I have chosen to elaborate here on what are the necessary conditions for Canada if it wants to contemplate launching a major international diplomatic initiative. The exact form of that initiative will need to be defined as part of a process of consultation with eventual partners. Although an exercise of

Canadian leadership in this realm would be welcomed by others, it still has to be part of a cross-regional team effort to succeed. The proposal by Doug Roche and Richard Butler for Canada to host a preparatory committee meeting next year prior to an envisaged UN-wide conference in 2014 is an excellent, practical idea.

Similarly, there are several pieces of unfinished multilateral business with wide support, such as CTBT entry into force and starting Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT) negotiations, both of which could benefit from the focused attention of Canada and other influential states. As noted earlier, researching and developing the verification and governance aspects of an FMCT or another nuclear disarmament accord would be a good niche for a Canadian contribution. This would entail some investment by the Government to be meaningful. But when I consider the millions the Government has committed to helping with the elimination of Cold War era weapons in the former Soviet Union through the Global Partnership program, I would hope that some fraction of those sums might be directed as well to supporting the achievement of new disarmament agreements.

I also believe that more should be done under the accountability and transparency rubric to build on the innovative proposals Canada put forward in the NPT context for overcoming that treaty's "institutional deficit". These practical proposals for initiating authoritative annual meetings of the NPT membership and establishing a one officer implementation support unit, unfortunately did not receive universal support at the 2010 Review Conference. They merit sustained support. There is a need to establish the practice of reporting and regular sessions of accountability for compliance with nuclear accords. Such accountability measures will be crucial for the credibility of any future agreements as well as the viability of existing ones.

In conclusion, there are no shortages of useful roles for Canada to assume on the global disarmament stage, once we assure ourselves we are ready for prime time.

Thank you.