

Building a world community



Canada should support “No First Use” of nuclear weapons by Bill Pearce

Over a quarter century after the end of the Cold War, Russia and the United States are in a dangerous arms race that even President Trump has acknowledged recently as “getting out of control.” As a party to the Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT), Canada has an obligation to pursue effective measures for the “cessation of the arms race at an early date,” with the ultimate goal of nuclear disarmament.

Canada can satisfy its NPT obligations with the immediate goal of achieving a stable regime for those nations that presently possess nuclear arms -- by pursuing No First Use (NFU) strategies within the NATO Alliance.

Governments need to accept the reality that nuclear weapons should never be utilized first and that the only lawful justification for their retention is in the role of a deterrent to a nuclear attack. Robert McNamara, former U.S. Secretary of Defence in the 1960s put it this way: “Mutual Assured Destruction is the foundation of deterrence . . . If you want a stable nuclear world . . . it requires that each side be confident that it can deter the other. And it requires a balance -- the understanding that if either side initiates the use of nuclear weapons the other will respond with sufficient power to inflict unacceptable damage.”

In 1964 McNamara posited that a force of 400 strategic warheads (of one megaton each) would be enough for the basic “assured destruction” deterrence.. Daniel Ellsberg of Pentagon Papers fame was recently interviewed with respect to his new book on dismantling the doomsday machine.

On the question as to how much deterrent power is enough, he said that the suggestion of going down to 200 or 300 warheads was absurdly high and that if North Korea for example had a reasonable prospect of success in destroying one coastal city of the United States in a retaliatory attack that would likely deter a first strike by the United States, the point being you don’t need a large number of nukes invulnerable to a first strike to serve as a deterrent.

The world has about 15000 nuclear weapons. Of this total the U.S. and Russia each deploy roughly 1400 strategic warheads on various delivery systems with each having

over 5000 additional warheads in storage. A 2007 study on the consequences of a regional war involving 50 to 100 low-yield 15 kiloton bombs indicated fatalities would likely rival those of the Second World War. A 2011 study found that 100 lowyield bombs could create a nuclear winter disrupting the global climate for at least a decade, accompanied by a significant loss of the ozone layer, creating a massive global famine.

So why does the U.S. retain such huge quantities of nuclear weapons? The answer lies in the fact they are still locked into flexible war-fighting plans, which include the option to use nuclear weapons first. To have that option to respond to an adversary like Russia one has to have the ability in a first strike to knock out the adversary's ability to retaliate and cause unacceptable damage.

In the 1960's NATO's defence policy was altered to that of "Flexible Response." The Alliance deluded themselves into the thinking that they could counter a Soviet conventional attack with battlefield low-yield nukes, i.e. a "limited" nuclear response and achieve acceptable outcomes, but if necessary to go all out to 'win' the conflict. One does not have to be a student of war to know that once started it is highly unlikely that any use of nuclear arms would not remain limited, with the inevitable result that unacceptable civilian casualties would occur. Customary laws of war forbid the targeting of civilians. Our active collaboration in an Alliance that has such policies is also illegal.

The U.S. Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) released February 2018 is the most recent public statement of U.S. nuclear policy. It declares "... the United States has never adopted a "no first use" policy and, given the contemporary threat environment, such policy is not justified today. It remains the policy of the United States to retain some ambiguity regarding the precise circumstances that might lead to a U.S. response." The NPR mandates that all combat components "plan, train and exercise to integrate US nuclear and non nuclear forces."

In other words, nuclear weapons are treated as just another weapon to be used in any given situation. For a nuclear war-fighting policy there is never enough, because it is impossible to determine what a protracted war requires. This makes an arms race inevitable because there can never be an end to the development and deployment of new weapons to gain some illusory advantage in the hopes of prevailing. This policy is sheer madness. No country can fight and win a nuclear war. Their only purpose, paradoxically, is to prevent any use of them i.e. for deterrent purposes only, consistent with a NFU policy.

To change the mindset of the American body politic and the U.S. military industrial complex will take time, but Canada has an opportunity to try and make a difference by asking at the next Nuclear Planning Group (NPG) of NATO that existing 'Flexible Response' policy be jettisoned in favour of NFU, and by backing that up with a decision to remove all stockpiles from those NATO states that host U.S. nuclear weapons.

The Netherlands was the only NATO member state to join recent negotiations on the Treaty to Prohibit Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). Although most NATO states still oppose

the TPNW, that treaty represents a powerful instrument crystallizing norms in favour of abolition. Active support for a NATO NFU policy could allow NATO states like Canada to join the treaty, while also addressing the present contradictions between Canada's NATO obligations and our responsibilities under the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

It is past time for every Canadian citizen and our Canadian government to stand up and say "Enough is enough!" Let us act before it is too late.