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Canada still has obligation to participate in good faith in negotiations on nuclear disarmament

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Canada still has obligation to participate in good faith in negotiations on nuclear disarmament

If the NPT review conferences in 2021 and 2025 end in indecision, the nuclear disarmament movement, in Canada and abroad, will likely move its agenda outside of the UN's formal NPT regime to draw public attention to the humanitarian impact of use of nuclear weapons.



Canada's UN ambassador to the UN Bob Rae, pictured in a file photograph, and the Trudeau government face calls to consider the humanitarian impact of use of nuclear weapons and to sign onto the UN ban treaty. *The Hill Times photograph by Andrew Meade*

In the face of nuclear threats and renewed spending on nuclear arms, 122

nations, from Austria to Brazil to Ireland—not including Canada—proposed a [UN resolution](#) calling for the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) to establish a legally binding process to ban the manufacture, possession, stockpiling, and use of these weapons.

The UN treaty won an overwhelming majority of 122 votes in the 193-member General Assembly, [paving the way](#) for historic negotiations that began in 2017.

However, the nuclear-armed states exerted intense diplomatic pressure on their allies to [vote against](#) the treaty. The United States, and all its NATO allies, including Canada, ultimately voted “no” and refused to participate in negotiations. Among its NATO allies, [the Netherlands was the only party to abstain](#). Among the eight other nuclear-armed states, North Korea voted in favor, while India and Pakistan abstained.

Although the United States has [continued to pressure](#) countries to vote against the treaty, many countries decided to sign and ratify [it](#). “The world has been waiting for this legal norm for 70 years,” said Elayne G. Whyte Gómez, Costa Rica’s ambassador to the UN in Geneva and [chairperson of the conference](#).

In a historic milestone on Oct. 24, 2020, the TPNW reached 50 ratifications needed for its entry into force, and 90 days later, on Jan. 22, to be precise, the new [prohibition treaty](#) has now entered into international law.

According to Canada’s former ambassador to the UN [Paul Meyer](#), and Canada’s former ambassador for disarmament [Douglas Roche](#), the fact that NATO member states oppose the TPNW does not excuse them from the obligation imposed on all NPT parties under [Article VI](#) to participate in good faith in the treaty proceedings and work towards [nuclear disarmament](#).

Seven months from now, the NPT Review Conference will take place at the UN in New York in August, [reviving hope](#) the Biden administration will act responsibly on arms control. After the last 2015 review conference ended in debacle and deadlock, a growing accountability crisis regarding the lack of commitment of nuclear powers to disarm will likely be a core concern when the 189 states party to the NPT meet at the conference, delayed by 16 months due to the pandemic.

If the NPT review conferences in 2021 and 2025 end in indecision, the nuclear disarmament movement, [in Canada](#) and [abroad](#), will likely move its [agenda](#) outside of the UN's formal NPT regime to draw public attention to the [humanitarian impact](#) of use of nuclear weapons. [Scientific predictions](#) indicate that, even a limited nuclear exchange between India and Pakistan, using about 100 Hiroshima-sized "tactical-sized" weapons, would set off enormous fires that would throw millions of tonnes of soot into the atmosphere, blocking the sun and causing a worldwide temperature drop of at least 1.25 Celsius degrees. An estimated 20 million people would die within a week from the direct effects, while an estimated two billion would be at risk of [dying by famine](#) over the next decade, due in part to a huge drop in the production of grain.

[Increasing fears](#) about "whose finger could be on the nuclear trigger" have prompted [renewed calls](#) around the globe for the nuclear-armed states to reconsider their offensive nuclear postures and to end their reliance on nuclear weapons. Under a new U.S. Democratic administration, there could be adoption of a "[no-first use](#)" (NFU) doctrine on nuclear weapons—rather than the retention of the pre-emptive "first-use" posture. [Critics](#) have long questioned U.S. policy that advocates first use of nuclear weapons against conventional, biological, or chemical threats.

It could be possible that a few of the NATO allies—such as Canada, Denmark, and the Netherlands—spearhead a "review" of NATO's reliance

on nuclear deterrence in preparation for the 2025 NPT review conference. For its part, NATO has long maintained that its nuclear weapons are essential to the alliance's security, reiterating that "[as long as nuclear weapons exist, NATO will remain a nuclear alliance](#)."

Against the backdrop of intensifying great power rivalry, the demolition of arms control frameworks, and unreliable leaders, there should be more intense dialogues at the UN and in national capitals, like Brussels, Ottawa, and Washington, about whether moving toward nuclear abolition and away from nuclear deterrence is safer or more dangerous. It is well past time to hold more [discussions](#) among the NATO allies at headquarters about whether brandishing strategic and tactical nuclear weapons (that proponents of deterrence believe will never likely be used) can guarantee that a nuclear war will never be fought.

World leaders, like Trump, Putin, and Kim Jong-un should be harshly condemned for threatening to use nuclear weapons against each other. The Trump administration [repeatedly threatened](#) to use nuclear weapons [against North Korea](#)—and long before all options were put on the table. However, Russian President Vladimir Putin was also capricious and threatened Russia would aim hypersonic missiles at the U.S. if it were to move its intermediate-range missiles in Europe, [at the same time](#) as he spoke about how they are more dangerous now than during the Cuban missile crisis. Meanwhile, Kim Jong-un [continued to threaten](#) Japan and South Korea by firing rocketry and displaying several [new missiles](#) on parade, including some that could potentially hit the U.S. mainland.

If countries continue to allow the retention and expensive modernization of the nuclear arsenals of the "nuclear cartel"—namely China, France, India, Israel, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, the U.K., and the U.S.—then states without nuclear weapons, like Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Syria, could [reconsider their nuclear choices](#), leading to rampant nuclear proliferation and the higher likelihood of accidental or calculated use.

Erika Simpson is the president of the Canadian Peace Research Association, author of [NATO and the Bomb](#), and a past vice-chair of the Canadian Pugwash Group. She recently authored

*"[Addressing Challenges Facing NATO Using Lessons Learned from Canada](#)" in *The Brown Journal of World Affairs*, 27(1): Fall/Winter 2020, 1-29.*

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