



Getting to Nuclear Zero: Building Common Security for a Post-MAD World

Nuclear weapons pose an existential threat to humankind. But if we are to eliminate them from military arsenals, and displace their role in NATO's strategic concept, what is the process that will make that happen, what will the world without nuclear weapons look like, and once we achieve that world, how do we sustain it?

The Group of 78 conference, *Getting to Nuclear Zero: Building Common Security for a Post-MAD World*, was designed to consider a security framework without nuclear weapons. With the “NGO statement” produced in 2016, “A Shift to Common Security and Sustainable Peace”, as a starting point, participants were asked to explore the current state of international affairs, and particularly the tensions between Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty obligations and nuclear deterrence doctrines. Many countries and civil society have put pressure on nuclear armed states to take decisive action to disarm. On everyone’s mind was the escalating confrontation between North Korea (DPRK) and the USA. The conference also welcomed the arrival of the new prohibition treaty on nuclear weapons (TPNW), supported by 122 states. Several speakers argued the ban was a landmark event that challenged nuclear weapon- and “nuclear umbrella”- states. Others explored what leadership Canada might now provide, despite showing reluctance — indeed hostility — to the treaty negotiations.

To join the new treaty Canada would need to demonstrate clear commitment to changing its own nuclear policies, and to apply its influence within NATO to alter the alliance’s strategic concept. Some questioned the legitimacy of NATO itself, particularly in light of what most saw as a need to advance the United Nations as the pre-eminent institution for international peace and security. The UN’s foundation is its Charter-based commitment to common security and sustainable peace, the peaceful resolution of disputes, and the prohibition on use or threat of use, of force, in most circumstances.

Canada can be encouraging a wealth of risk reduction measures, even while nuclear arsenal elimination is stalled and modernization proceeds. They include advocating for non-proliferation, an improved verification regime, fissile material restriction and destruction, and policy changes that include taking nuclear forces off high alert status, adopting no first-use and ensuring adequate security of existing nuclear weapons.

Nuclear disarmament ultimately requires a shift from the doctrine of mutually assured destruction (MAD) to a commitment – in mind, policy and practice – to mutual security, through a sustainable common security regime rooted in global interdependence, the rule of law and a recognition of the limited utility of military force in responding to political conflict. Common security is built on UN Charter principles and on mutual security arrangements, rather than competitive military alliances, and focuses on war prevention and the peaceful resolution of disputes.

Lined up against these shared goals are major impediments that need to be addressed including: distrust between major nuclear powers, authoritarian states that draw energy from their nuclear weapons status, the underlying causes of conflict, and the military industrial complex. Threatening postures produce distorted views of security.

The Global Peace Index reported a 10-year decline in peacefulness and the annual cost of war to now reach a staggering US\$13.6 trillion. The traditional thinking on national security through primarily military methods and deterrence simply hasn't worked. We will still require conventional military capability to transition away from nuclear deterrence. But ultimately weapons are symptoms of insecurity. The more important shift will require reduction in threat perceptions, new and better diplomatic initiatives, industrial conversion and heightened interstate cooperation. And we need to look at this in new, transformational ways, for example by acknowledging ethnic and national identities through positive frameworks.

The umbrella concept of sustainable common security might help us as a unifying “one-world” perspective, a global culture of peace, and a movement of movements. That shift could include new ventures, such as the proposed UN Emergency Peace Service, but also must reflect upon and rejuvenate our existing UN responses.

Change will be a long-term project, but we can take heart that some components of the shift to sustainable peace and common security are already in place – notably the existing arms control architecture, the growing reach of the International Criminal Court and the deep interrelation between the Sustainable Development Goals and “positive peace”. They have established the foundation for future efforts.

Canada is well-placed to contribute. We should press for measures that exclude weaponization of the Arctic region. The Government should reactivate civil society consultative groups, create a civilian-led international peacekeeping training centre and establish an independent foreign policy think tank devoted to sustainable common security. We should forge ahead with other middle powers in reforming the UN Security Council and in strengthening the UN’s capacity for mediation.

Making the necessary shift towards sustainable peace and common security will change how we see the world and how we direct spending and the allotment of human resources. It will mean giving priority to the United Nations over short-sighted interests. It will allow us to reconfigure our security choices, and determine how quickly we move away from NATO nuclear deterrence as a core component of our defence orientation. We can move towards a more effective, much safer common security that will better discharge our global interdependent responsibilities.