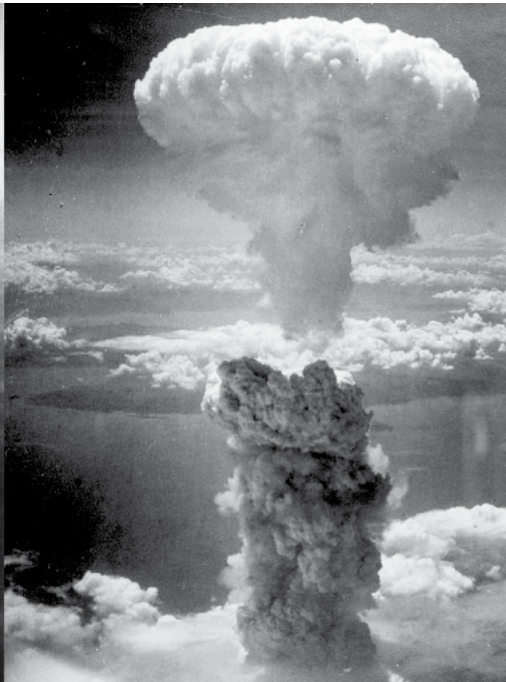
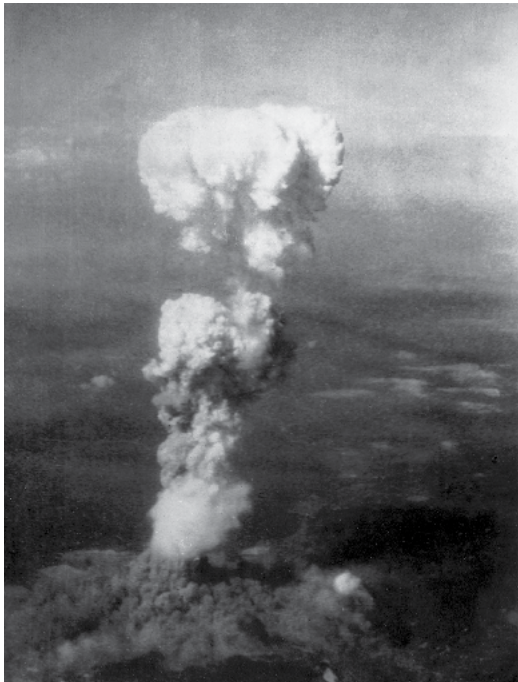


# OPINION

## As world marks 80 years since atomic anniversary, Canada has room to lead



The impact of the dropping of atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945 continues to reverberate 80 years later, writes Earl Turcotte. Photographs courtesy of the U.S. Government

Canadian diplomacy can and has had major impact on global affairs in the past, and the country is extremely well placed to take substantive action in support of the total elimination of nuclear weapons.

Earl Turcotte

Opinion



On Aug. 6, 1945, the United States of America unleashed atomic horror upon the people of Hiroshima, Japan. Three days later, Nagasaki suffered the same fate. Two rudimentary, and—by modern standards—tiny atomic bombs ended the lives of more than 200,000 people. Most were incinerated instantly. Thousands of others died in excruciating

pain in the weeks and months that followed. The impact of these most violent of acts continue to reverberate 80 years later.

Modern thermo-nuclear weapons are typically 80 to 100 times more powerful than the atomic bombs used on Japan in 1945, and global tensions have spurred a new nuclear arms race. At the same time, the international nuclear arms control treaty architecture has all but disintegrated. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action with Iran, the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty and Open Skies Treaty between the U.S. and Russia have all faltered. Prospects for renewal of a New START treaty in 2026 appear grim, and both the U.S. and Russia have lowered their respective thresholds for the use of nuclear weapons. One threatens “fire and fury” in another context while the other explicitly threatens to use nuclear weapons if third parties directly intervene in defence of a nation that it has invaded. India and Pakistan continue to square off in Kashmir, North Korea remains a threat to the Peninsula and beyond, Israel is at war, and France and the United Kingdom are considering extending their nuclear “umbrellas” further eastward.

None of the nine nuclear armed states joined the 2017 Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. Nor have any that are party to the 1970 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty begun to fulfill their Article VI legal obligation to pursue “general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control.”

Add to this the terrifying possibility that non-state actors will acquire nuclear weapons and/or the ability to trigger a nuclear conflict through cyber warfare, and the risk of accident or human miscalculation that have already taken humanity to the edge of nuclear disaster on many occasions.

In the mid-1990s, after in-depth study of the many nuclear “close calls” around the world, then-Australian foreign minister Gareth Evans concluded, “It has not been a result of good policy or good management that the world has avoided a nuclear weapons catastrophe for 70 years: rather it has been sheer dumb luck.”

Global tensions have only increased since. The “Doomsday Clock,” established in 1947 by atomic scientists, has been advanced to 89 seconds to midnight, closer to “Doomsday” than at any point in history.

### A place for Canadian leadership on nuclear disarmament

Canada supplied and processed the uranium used in the development of the first atomic bombs, and hosted American nuclear weapons on Canadian soil between 1950 and 1984. While successive Canadian governments have supported NATO’s nuclear security doctrine, a Nanos national poll conducted in 2021 found that more than 80 per cent of Canadians believe that nuclear weapons make the world more dangerous and should be eliminated.

There has also been support for nuclear disarmament in Parliament. Building upon former prime minister Pierre Trudeau’s efforts in the 1980s to “suffocate the nuclear arms race,” a motion was adopted unanimously by the House of Commons and Senate in 2010 that “encourages the Government of Canada to engage in negotiations for a Nuclear Weapons Convention ... and to deploy a major world-wide Canadian diplomatic initiative in support of preventing nuclear proliferation and increasing the rate of nuclear disarmament.” No significant action followed.

In 2018, the House of Commons Standing Committee on National Defence issued an all-party recommendation: “That the Government of Canada take a leadership role within NATO in beginning the work necessary for achieving the NATO goal of creating the conditions for a world free of nuclear weapons. That this initiative be undertaken on an urgent basis in view of the increasing threat of nuclear conflict flowing from the renewed risk of nuclear proliferation, the deployment of so-called tactical nuclear weapons and changes in nuclear doctrines regarding lowering the threshold for first use of nuclear weapons by Russia and the U.S.” Again, no significant action was undertaken by the government of the day.

On Sept. 21, 2020, a historic open letter pleading for urgent action on nuclear disarmament was issued by 56 former senior statesmen including former United Nations secretary general Ban Ki-moon, three presidents, 11 prime ministers, 16 ministers of defence, and 24 foreign ministers—two of whom had served as secretary general of NATO. Among the signatories were former Canadian prime ministers Jean Chrétien and John Turner, as well as former ministers Lloyd Axworthy, Jean-Jacques Blais, Bill Graham, John McCallum, and John Manley. Of note, signatories included individuals from 19 NATO states.

Then-Pope Francis also vehemently denounced nuclear weapons, insisting that nuclear disarmament must be “thorough and complete, and reach men’s very souls.”

In his book *Value(s)*, Prime Minister Mark Carney cites past Canadian leadership on the international stage: Brian Mulroney driving sanctions against apartheid and the Montreal Protocol on chlorofluorocarbons, Axworthy’s work to ban anti-personnel landmines, and Grand Chief Wilton Littlechild’s pivotal role in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

One could add Lester Pearson’s role in resolving the Suez crisis and establishing UN Peacekeeping, Canada’s prominent role in crafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and in establishing the International Criminal Court, the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict, and the Commission on Intervention on State Sovereignty that resulted in the adoption of the bold concept of the Responsibility to Protect. There’s so much to make Canada proud. Clearly, Canadian diplomacy can and has had major impact on global affairs in the past.

As president of the G7, and a member of the G20, the Commonwealth, la Francophonie, and NATO, Canada is now extremely well placed to take substantive action in support of the total elimination of nuclear weapons. As many have said, “To get rid of them before they get rid of us.”

Earl Turcotte is chair of the Canadian Network to Abolish Nuclear Weapons.

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