

Canada's voting record at the UN First Committee

An analysis by Senator Douglas Roche, Canada's former UN Ambassador for Disarmament

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The Government of Canada declared in its formal response to the Parliamentary Committee's report on nuclear weapons that it wanted to devalue the political significance of nuclear weapons and work with the New Agenda Coalition in pursuing shared nuclear disarmament objectives.

This policy was tested this fall at the UN First (Disarmament) Committee. An analysis of how Canada voted on nuclear disarmament resolutions shows that the government is still not prepared to take a forthright position on action to rid the world of nuclear weapons.

The centre-piece resolution was submitted by the New Agenda Coalition (NAC) (Brazil, Egypt, Ireland, Mexico, New Zealand, South Africa and Sweden), which was formed last year to seek an unequivocal commitment from the Nuclear Weapon States (NWS) to commence negotiations leading to a program for the elimination of nuclear weapons. The NAC expressed deep concern at the deterioration of the non-proliferation regime and the spectre of new nuclear arms races.

Canada abstained on NAC's resolution at the 1998 session of the First Committee, claiming that the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade had not yet completed its review of Canada's nuclear weapons policies. The Committee, when it reported, recommended that "the Government must encourage the nuclear-weapon States to demonstrate their unequivocal commitment to enter into and conclude negotiations leading to the elimination of nuclear weapons." This was in fact the content of Operative Paragraph 1 of the NAC resolution.

This year, NAC returned with a resolution that was softened in order to appeal to NATO states, 12 of whom had abstained last year. The core of the resolution was contained in the new Operative Paragraph 1: "Calls upon the Nuclear Weapons States to make an unequivocal undertaking to accomplish the speedy and total elimination of their nuclear arsenals and to engage without delay in an accelerated process of negotiations, thus achieving nuclear disarmament, to which they are committed under Article VI of the NPT."

NAC and the Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs went into extended negotiations on the text. NAC agreed to remove the word "speedy" to get Canada's affirmative vote. The Foreign Affairs Minister gave his assent for a yes vote. The Defence Minister, whose department maintains a close link with the Pentagon, which is adamantly opposed to comprehensive nuclear negotiations, was opposed. The matter went to the Prime Minister, who took the position that Canada should not be leading a breakout of NATO states into the yes column.

Thus, Canada once again abstained on the NAC resolution. With Turkey and the Czech Republic, a new member of NATO, switching their previous no to an abstention, the total number of NATO states abstaining was 14. The other five -- the U.S., the U.K. and France, known as the P3, along with two other new NATO states, Hungary and Poland -- voted no.

Canada's explanation-of-vote was very revealing. After praising the NAC resolution, the Canadian representative said: "The Nuclear Weapon States and their partners and alliances need to be engaged if the goals of the New Agenda resolution are to be achieved." This was a tacit admission that Canada's hands are tied in voting for nuclear disarmament as long as the U.S. and the NATO leadership hold that nuclear weapons are "essential" to their military doctrine.

To drive home the point that the Canadian government considers itself not free to vote principled positions on nuclear disarmament, Canada also abstained on a new resolution introduced by

China and Russia on the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty. The ABM Treaty was established by the U.S. and the former Soviet Union in 1972 to limit defences against nuclear weapons in an effort to slow down the development of new nuclear weapons. The ABM Treaty has long been considered as a cornerstone for maintaining global peace and security and strategic stability.

Canada has always been an ardent upholder of the ABM Treaty. But now the U.S. wants to either weaken or abrogate the Treaty in order to deploy a new national missile defence system. Billions of dollars are being spent on the development of this system, and President Bill Clinton is scheduled to make a decision next June whether to start deployment.

Both Russia and China have protested vigorously to the U.S., claiming that such deployment will trigger new nuclear arms races, since neither country can accept the prospect of U.S. unilateral invincibility. Canada well recognizes that a missile defence system will de-stabilize the world community, which is why this country did not join in supporting the aborted, Reagan-inspired Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) of the 1980s. Now the U.S. is back and wants Canada's support.

The Russian-Chinese resolution called for continued efforts to strengthen the ABM Treaty and "to preserve its integrity and validity so that it remains a cornerstone in maintaining global strategic stability and world peace and in promoting further strategic nuclear arms reductions." The resolution went on to urge countries to refrain from the deployment of such systems and "not to provide a base for such a defence."

If Canada seriously intended to uphold the ABM Treaty, it would have voted yes. Even France voted yes. The U.S. voted no. Since there were 73 abstentions, Canada had plenty of company, but gave away a principled position.

A consequence of U.S. determination to develop the technology for a missile defence system was Canada's loss of consensus for its traditional resolution calling for a committee at the Conference on Disarmament to negotiate a treaty banning the production of fissile material for nuclear weapons. China balked on the grounds that it would need new fissile material for nuclear weapons to counter the U.S. missile defence system. Having abstained on the ABM resolution, Canada was not in a position to argue with China and withdrew its resolution. The prospect now for a fissile material ban is practically zero.

The annual Malaysian resolution revealed that Canada has not moved away from ambivalence about the elimination of nuclear weapons, the government's new policy notwithstanding. The resolution called for endorsement of the unanimous conclusion of the International Court of Justice that nations have an obligation to conclude negotiations leading to nuclear disarmament under strict and effective international control. Canada voted yes to this paragraph. But the next paragraph, calling for the commencement of "multilateral negotiations in 2000 leading to the early conclusion of a nuclear weapons convention" drew a no. Then Canada abstained on the resolution as a whole.

A similar resolution calling for immediate negotiations in the Conference on Disarmament "on a phased program of nuclear disarmament" was turned down by Canada, which has customarily voted against time-bound programs for disarmament. This policy was turned on its head when Canada supported the package accompanying the Indefinite Extension of the NPT, which stipulated that a Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty be achieved by 1996).

Canada, of course, voted for the resolution endorsing the CTBT and urging States which have not yet ratified the CTBT to accelerate their ratification processes. Even the U.S. voted for this resolution. Canada also joined the great majority of states in voting for the Japanese resolution reaffirming the importance of the NPT and calling for "the determined pursuit by the Nuclear Weapon States of systematic and progressive efforts to reduce nuclear weapons globally, with the

ultimate goal of eliminating those weapons, and by all states of general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control." The key word here is "ultimate." Canada votes to uphold the "ultimate" elimination of nuclear weapons but resists negotiations now that would lead, in a measured way, toward that goal. By insisting on the maintenance of nuclear weapons, the NWS have manifestly demonstrated their insincerity in implementing Article VI of the NPT.

Canada's continued weak voting record on nuclear disarmament resolutions -- the rhetoric of the government's policy notwithstanding -- is robbing this country of credibility in the nuclear disarmament field. Canada proclaims that it must take a "balanced" approach between its desire for nuclear disarmament and its loyalty to NATO. But there is nothing "balanced" in its voting record. The record shows clearly that Canada refuses to support any resolution that specifies immediate action on a comprehensive approach to ridding the world of nuclear weapons. Canada follows the U.S. and NATO line on the tough nuclear disarmament resolutions.

Canadians who followed the Parliamentary hearings on nuclear weapons issues and who took hope in the government's response had a right to expect that Canada would take bolder positions at the UN. It is true that Canada took a step forward in urging NATO to review its nuclear weapons policies. But this is only calling for a review. When it comes to voting for comprehensive negotiations Canada says no or abstains. The failure to support the New Agenda resolution is a bitter disappointment to Canadians who expected that this year, in the face of the crippling of the non-proliferation regime, Canada would at least support a moderate resolution.

The failure to do so in the face of a highly-informed public opinion as contained in statements by the Canadian Pugwash Group, the Canadian Network to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, the UN Association of Canada and the Simons Foundation Strategy Consultation indicates the government's capitulation to the hard-line Cold War elements that still drive U.S. and NATO nuclear policies. Since there is a strong public opinion in Canada to abolish nuclear weapons and virtually no public opinion to maintain nuclear weapons, the question of the subversion of democracy is opened up by the government's continual refusal to call forthrightly for an end to nuclear weapons for the sake of all humanity.

The failure to move ahead through the NAC resolution means that Canada is crippled going into the NPT 2000 Review. Last spring, Canada offered the outline of a new set of Principles and Objectives to shore up the NPT. These Principles and Objectives are confined to the step-by-step approach, which in the thirty years of the existence of the NPT has produced a situation where there are virtually as many nuclear weapons now as when the NPT came into existence.

As a result of the UN voting, it now seems that Canada will not be able to support the growing demand for the NWS to make an unequivocal commitment to the elimination of nuclear weapons through negotiations. Canada, which holds the NPT at the centre of its policies, will find itself on the margins of the debate -- all because it refuses to throw off the intimidation of the Western nuclear powers.

In the Japanese resolution, there is a paragraph which: "Encourages the constructive role played by civil society in promoting nuclear non-proliferation and nuclear disarmament." Canada voted for this. In Canada there is a highly developed civil society waiting for the opportunity to work with the government, as was done in the Ottawa Process that secured a Landmines Treaty. But a vibrant partnership between civil society and the government to advance nuclear disarmament must await the day when Canada makes an unequivocal commitment to the obtaining of a Nuclear Weapons Convention that will ban forever the production and deployment of nuclear weapons anywhere on the globe.