

Canada and NATO's Approach Toward Nuclear Weapons

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Dangerous American attitudes toward pre-emptive nuclear war

Sir Joseph Rotblat has courageously drawn our attention to the dangerous attitudes of the current US administration toward pre-emptive nuclear war. Many Europeans and Canadians (not just Senator Roche and those in this room) fear that the Bush administration will resort to using nuclear weapons in a future conflict. Obviously Russia, China, France, and Britain officially retain the use of strategic nuclear weapons. But American development of new theatre and battlefield nuclear weapons (including the 'robust nuclear earth penetrator') is frightening many because of the US administration's apparent willingness to resort to their use. As the Bush government has declared: "Given the goals of rogue states and terrorists, the United States can no longer solely rely on a reactive posture as we have in the past... To forestall or prevent such hostile acts the US will, if necessary, act pre-emptively."¹ The use of nuclear weapons seems more 'credible' now than it has been since the Cuban missile crisis.

To give you just one example, Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld is contemplating the possible use of nuclear-tipped interceptors in a national missile defense system, reviving an idea that US and Canadian authorities rejected three decades ago as technically problematic and politically unacceptable. William Schneider Jr., chairman of the Defense Science Board, says that he has received encouragement from Rumsfeld to begin exploring the idea as part of an upcoming study of alternative approaches to intercepting enemy missiles. As the United States' partner in NATO and NORAD, the Canadian government will need to decide if it supports the previously-rejected concept.

¹U.S. National Security Strategy: Prevent Our Enemies From Threatening Us, Our Allies, And Our Friends with Weapons of Mass Destruction, September, 2002, p. 1 available at www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/wh/15425.htm

As many of you will recall, in the late 1950s, the Diefenbaker government agreed to deploy, in partnership with the United States, nuclear-armed interceptors—CF-101s in Canada and CF-104s in Europe—as well as an anti-missile system that relied on nuclear-tipped Bomarc missiles. But the notion of nuclear explosions going off high overhead to intercept Soviet bombers and block incoming missiles proved unsettling for many people in the peace movement, like then-Minister of External Affairs Howard Green, and Diefenbaker eventually decided not to arm Canada with nuclear warheads—indeed, during the Cuban missile crisis, they were filled with sand ballast and Diefenbaker’s vacillation on the issue eventually led to the fall of his government.

Yet we must not forget that Canadian decision-makers eventually decided to acquire all these nuclear-capable weapon systems and the country was a nuclear-armed power between 1959-1971. It took many years for our politicians—including Prime Ministers Diefenbaker, Pearson, and Trudeau—to conclude that American plans to help Canada deploy “defensive” nuclear weapons were problematic and unacceptable.

America’s current trajectory will result in a greater likelihood of nuclear war

Now, it is easy to say that the US should follow Canada’s example and abolish nuclear weapons but September 11 frightened many of them into supporting some of Bush and Rumsfeld’s crazier ideas (like invading Iraq). Whereas it is certainly true that the Americans cannot sit idly by while their security is undermined, it is easy to see that the route they are taking—asserting nuclear credibility—will result in a more insecure world with a greater, not less, likelihood of nuclear war.

What does this mean for Canada's approach toward the US and the NATO alliance? The Western alliance's concepts of nuclear deterrence and nuclear pre-emption must move away from the traditional notion of 'defending' against threats—such as strategic/tactical nuclear weapons, rogue states or terrorists—towards an emphasis on minimal deterrence—and eventually nuclear abolition. But if Americans continue on their present trajectory—threatening to respond or pre-empt a nuclear, biological or chemical attack with nuclear weaponry—they will incite an arms race where many more states will also seek to deter or pre-empt using new types of weapons like 'enhanced radiation weapons', 'space control satellites' and 'nuclear-survivable communications systems.' The costs for the world will be enormous as countries compete to design weapons for possible use against undeterrable terrorists, on rogue-state battlefields or in outer space. As a new statement on nuclear weapons policy issued by the board of the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation states:

It is the US insistence on retaining a nuclear weapons option that sets the tone for the world as a whole, reinforcing the unwillingness of other nuclear weapons states to push for nuclear disarmament and inducing threatened or ambitious states to take whatever steps are necessary, even at the risk of confrontation and war with the United States, to develop their own stockpile of nuclear weaponry. In this post-September 11th climate, the United States has suddenly become for other governments a country to be deterred rather than, as in the Cold War, a country practicing deterrence to discourage aggression by others.²

Reassessing NATO's reliance on nuclear deterrence strategy:

Curiously, the NATO allies (including Canada) continue to profess their reliance on the strategy of nuclear deterrence while the US moves toward a pre-emptive 'first-strike' strategy that promises to retaliate with nuclear weapons even in the event of a

²“The Challenge of Nuclear Weapons in the Twenty-First Century: A Path Forward,” June 15, 2003, http://waginpeace.org/articles/03.06/0613kireger_21centruy.htm

'limited' chemical or biological attack. The situation is similar to the 1960s when the allies continued to rely upon mutual assured destruction (MAD) even as the US developed 'flexible response'.³

Senator Roche mentioned in his compelling address that while NATO recently conducted a review process, its reexamination of the Strategic Concept simply reaffirmed its central tenet—that nuclear weapons are “essential”. Although NATO decision-makers assert that the “Paragraph 32” process is finished, the door needs to be re-opened to further engagement on the question. Pugwash Canada made that same argument to DFAIT last April in a presentation that all of you had a chance to read in our mail-out.⁴

We need to remember that all these types of efforts to change NATO's deterrent policy can begin at the individual and nation-state level. The thrust for NATO's recent review essentially began because Canada's parliament released a report calling for a re-examination of NATO's reliance on nuclear deterrence and the Strategic Concept.⁵ The Canadian Foreign Minister Lloyd Axworthy committed his department to attempt to change NATO's nuclear doctrine—for which he was often labelled a 'nuclear nag.'⁶ Yet in the final analysis, I heard a few American diplomats behind-the-scenes at NATO headquarters laud the Canadian initiative and the determination of the Foreign Minister and his diplomatic aides, particularly the Deputy Ambassador Robert McCrae.⁷ In a

³For more information, see Erika Simpson, *NATO and the Bomb: Canadian Defenders Confront Critics*, (Kingston & Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press), 2001, ch. 3

⁴For further analysis, see Pugwash Canada's presentation to DFAIT, “The Only Absolute Guarantee”, April 2003, pp. 4-6

⁵Report of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade, “Canada and the Nuclear Challenge: Reducing the Political Value of Nuclear Weapons for the Twenty-First Century,” (Ottawa: Publications Service), December 1998.

⁶Senator Douglas Roche, Chairman, Canadian Pugwash Group and Ernie Regehr, Executive Director, Project Ploughshares, “Canada, NATO and Nuclear Weapons,” Toronto, March 17, 2001, available at <http://www.sen.parl.gc.ca/droche/writings/documents/nuclear/cannatonw.pdf>

⁷Interview by the author with Canada's Deputy Ambassador to NATO, Robert McCrae, February 2001 and off-record comments by senior members of the US Delegation to NATO, February 2001.

similar fashion, working together with other like-minded countries, such as Germany and Norway, it might be possible to reforge NATO's nuclear doctrine. Just because President Bush's closest cronies want NATO to support pre-emptive nuclear war does not mean that everyone in the American government thinks the same way. We have many potential allies.

Problems with traditional assumptions about nuclear deterrence:

One of the main assumptions the allies need to ask themselves in their re forging of doctrine is whether nuclear weapons protect the alliance by deterring potential aggressors from attacking. During the Cold War, strategists assumed that by threatening massive retaliation, nuclear weapons could credibly prevent an enemy from attacking. September 11th demonstrated there are no guarantees that the threat of retaliation will succeed in preventing an attack—indeed, it may be difficult to retaliate against a sub-state opponent, like a terrorist group. Also traditional arguments against deterrence still hold true. There are many ways that deterrence could fail, including misunderstanding, miscalculation, poor communication, irrational leadership, and accident.

Since all the NATO allies depend on a relationship of 'extended deterrence' with the US (even if they profess to be nuclear-weapon free on their own soil), it is incumbent upon each of them to re-examine deterrence strategy. Our goal should be to generate a wide spectrum of alternative strategies ranging from reassurance to coercion. Verifiable treaties, well-funded inspection regimes, cutting-edge technology, strong sanctions, and enhanced control over fissile materials are needed in every region of the world. As history shows, the first steps towards a regional—then global—approach can be taken by

the leaders of individual NGOs and nation-states through regionally-based organizations like Pugwash, NATO and the EU. Each country needs to reconsider its reliance on extended deterrence in light of the new types of threats and challenges the international community now faces.

You may be thinking to yourself that it is easy for me to naively suggest that Pugwash work to change NATO's deterrent strategy. We all know it will be difficult for our government under Prime Minister Jean Chretien (and soon Paul Martin) to cope with American heavy-handedness. One fall-out of the war against Iraq relates to America's increasing heavy-handedness. To give two recent examples, US Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld recently threatened to pull NATO headquarters out of Brussels unless Belgium agreed to repeal a law which gives its courts universal jurisdiction to try cases of genocide, war crimes and human rights violations. While Belgian parliamentarians did agree to change the law (to cases in which either the victim or the accused were residents of Belgium), war crimes lawsuits had already been filed against US President George Bush, UK Prime Minister Tony Blair, US Secretary of State Colin Powell, General Tommy Franks, and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld.⁸

The new US propensity to threaten others with extreme measures is, perhaps, most telling in the United States' recent decision to suspend military assistance to six nations seeking NATO membership because they failed to exempt US citizens from prosecution in the new International Criminal Court (ICC). As the deadline passed for governments to sign exemption agreements or face the suspension of military aid, Bush issued waivers for 22 countries but he did not include Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia,

⁸For more information, see *The Sunflower*, July 2003, No. 74; *New York Times*, 14 June 2003; *Wall Street Journal*, 13 June 2003

Lithuania, Slovakia, and Slovenia.⁹ It is not yet clear whether these countries will sign bilateral waivers in order to obtain military aid; but what is clear is that the Bush administration is taking a more aggressive approach than has ever been seen in NATO corridors.

React to American aggressiveness with quiet dignity and sound proposals

I suggest that we respond to American aggressiveness with quiet dignity and a briefcase full of sound proposals. It seems ludicrous to me that in the wake of September 11, US President George Bush announced his plan to increase the defence budget in 2003 to \$380 billion, more than double that of the rest of NATO combined. By one estimate, the US is now spending 45 percent more on nuclear weapons activities than at the end of the Cold War. And many American diplomats have the temerity to lecture Europeans and Canadians about the need to increase their defence spending.¹⁰ We need to work with the other NATO allies, the Middle Power Initiative and the New Agenda Coalition to discuss whether American plans to increase defence spending to such high levels are a greater threat to the world's security than small-scale tyrants like Saddam. We could broach this topic at an international conference, as Doug is proposing.

In any discussion of whether the US itself now poses the most serious threat to allied security, some facts need to be highlighted. After all, it is better to judge a nation

⁹The first round of NATO expansion took place in the spring of when the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland were invited into NATO. Notably, all the Russian parties and most Russians were opposed to NATO's enlargement from 16 to 19 nations. The second round of expansion, agreed upon in 2002, also runs the risk of inciting old hatreds and new insecurities. The seven former Soviet bloc nations due to join the alliance in 2004 are: Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovenia, and Slovakia. At 25 members, will NATO have difficulty forging a consensus? The US has already expressed interest in working closely, if necessary, with a few close allies, not the entire unwieldy apparatus.

¹⁰Ambassador Gordon D. Giffin, "The Challenges of Shared Security," Remarks to the Canadian Club of Montreal, 11 January 1999

by what it does, not what it says. The US has yet to take its nuclear arsenal off the high alert status of the Cold War. It has not renounced first use of or threat to use nuclear weapons under all circumstances. It opposes the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and it has withdrawn from the ABM treaty. Plus it is making plans to shorten the time needed to resume testing of new and more usable nuclear weapons. The situation is similar to a boy's gang where the leader is hell-bent on a dangerous course. Do the other boys follow him blindly or do they call a meeting to argue about the club's rules and principles? Being a member of the NATO club does not entail unquestioning allegiance to the club's leader.