

The anti-nuclear mountain is being scaled

By Doug Roche, *The Embassy* 22 June

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***“The new world doesn’t have the time or money to continue stockpiling nuclear weapons”
says retired senator-turned-nuclear non-proliferation activist Douglas Roche***

“A three-week global speaking tour has convinced me that the world is moving into a new stage in the long quest to eliminate nuclear weapons. Weakened government ideology in support of nuclear weapons is now colliding with chronic deficits and other economic realities that make them unaffordable.

I found this a consistent theme in meetings with senior government officials in China, India, Russia, Sweden, Norway, Germany, Belgium and the United Kingdom. In the discussions surrounding my lectures to university students, think tanks and civil society groups, it became clear to me that the intellectual case for nuclear deterrence is crumbling. Even in NATO headquarters in Brussels, where my arguments for nuclear disarmament in past visits were greeted by the derisory comment, "mission impossible," the response this time could be characterized as "mission maybe."

In addition to speaking on the themes of my book, *How We Stopped Loving the Bomb*, I presented a new brief, "A Global Law to Ban Nuclear Weapons," prepared by the Middle Powers Initiative (MPI) and containing a central message: "It is urgent to seize the present opportunity, and to begin, soon, collective preparatory work leading to enactment of a universal, verifiable and enforceable legal ban on nuclear weapons."

MPI has drafted a UN resolution, which would request the UN Secretary-General to convene a diplomatic conference in 2014 to negotiate a global ban on nuclear weapons. But governments are balking at such "swift action," and it may be that the best that can be obtained at the moment is agreement to have an Experts Group advise on steps that could lead to a Nuclear Weapons Convention.

The reluctance by governments to actually start working comprehensively on at least preparations for a convention, which would be a global treaty, appears on the surface to be yet another rebuff to nuclear disarmament advocates. "It's like a bucket of cold water thrown on us," an activist in London complained. But a physician of long experience likened the campaign to abolish nuclear weapons to the early days of the anti-smoking campaign when the scorn of smokers evolved into a new societal attitude against smoking.

My world tour showed me that the anti-nuclear weapons campaign is following the classic lines of other great social movements, such as the end of slavery, colonialism and apartheid: at first, the idea is dismissed by the powerful, then when the idea starts to take hold, it is vigorously objected to until, by persistence, the idea enters the norm of public thinking and laws start to be changed.

The emerging campaign to abolish nuclear weapons does not follow a straight path. In China, I was told that the government is ready to engage in multilateral negotiations but first wants to see more progress in bilateral agreements between the US and Russia, which hold the lion's share of the 20,000 nuclear weapons in existence. In India, the public takes pride in their new acquisition of nuclear weapons in the mistaken belief that they would be of some use in the continuing conflict with Pakistan, but senior political officials are looking for a way to get global negotiations started. In Russia, officials told me that US plans for a missile defence system in Europe along with other aspects of American military dominance, such as the weaponization of space, are an impediment to further agreements to lower the level of nuclear weapons.

All governments make excuses for resisting collaborative efforts for a global ban. Even in Norway, Sweden and Germany, three countries thought to have progressive policies, the bureaucracies are sluggish, playing an "After you, Alphonse" game of delaying the definitive action of calling a conference to start working on a ban. The UK officials I talked to conceded the merits of the MPI brief (and even invited me back), but are locked into temporary growth of their unaffordable Trident nuclear system by a combination of political pressures from the right wing and the felt need for coherence with the US and France.

Governments around the world today are relying on obfuscation to make their case for the retention of nuclear weapons. The ideology that drove the escalation of nuclear weapons in the Cold War is long gone, younger officials are coming into status positions, and pragmatics are starting to determine how to maintain security without spending the \$100 billion a year now devoured by the nuclear weapons industry for weapons whose use has been ruled out on military, political and moral grounds. Only the building of a global law, as was effected to ban chemical and biological weapons, remains to be done to free humanity from the spectre of mass destruction.

The nuclear mountain is high indeed. Scaling it is not for the faint-hearted. But a historic shift in attitudes is under way. And that shift is being hastened by the gradual recognition that the processes of globalization, which are elevating the standard of living for millions upon millions of people, should not be jeopardized by the squandering of money on military "junk."

One unforgettable sight caught, for me, what the nuclear struggle is all about. In Shanghai one evening, I stood on the walkway along the Bund. On one side was the array of graceful 19th-century buildings, lit in soft amber colours. Then, turning, I saw across the river a dazzling spectacle of new skyscrapers garishly lit with flashing electronic signs. The old China and the new. The contrast is startling.

The new world, unfolding before our eyes, has huge problems, such as feeding the people and stopping pollution. It's starting to realize it doesn't have the time, or the money, to continue stock-piling nuclear weapons."

Former Senator Douglas Roche, author of How We Stopped Loving the Bomb, gave the Singhmar Family Foundation Lectures on his world tour.