

OPINION

Nuclear weapons are a disgrace to humanity. Banning them is the only way forward

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A mushroom cloud rises from a nuclear explosion at the Trinity Test Site near Alamogordo, N.M., on July 16, 1945.
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We know that the danger of nuclear war is real, and we should know that it is increasing. The increase stems from reciprocal threats which inch us closer to the brink. No nation wants war, but fearing that they may be disarmed by an opponent's nuclear strike, they are under pressure to strike first.

The evidence is to be found in the fact that the U.S. and Russia, with 90 per cent of the existing 13,000 weapons, keep them always ready for firing. Their plans for nuclear "launch on warning" leave minutes for a leader to authorize attack. To ensure prompt action, each leader has the awesome power of decision. Once that action is initiated, it is irrevocable; missiles cannot be recalled. But the evidence of impending attack may turn out to be faulty, and the attack, therefore, a crime against humanity.

It is this predicament that led U.S. President Barack Obama to declare, in the first foreign-policy speech of his presidency in April, 2009, that the United States – the only country to have ever actually employed nuclear weapons – accepted the responsibility of launching an era of nuclear disarmament. He assured the world of "America's commitment to seek the peace and security of the world without nuclear weapons." He spoke hours after North Korea test-launched a long-range Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM), which could reportedly reach across 8,000 kilometres to the U.S. mainland.

North Korea is only the most recent entry into the supposedly exclusive club of nine nuclear-armed nations. The membership of that club has steadily increased, despite the restraining hand of the 50-year-old UN Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). This treaty nonetheless constitutes a vital bargain, committing the original five nuclear-weapons states “to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures” for elimination of their nuclear arsenals.

They are far from having yet done so, and the NPT’s future is correspondingly threatened. So are we all.

This summer, the world celebrated the 75th anniversary of the nuclear age without nuclear war. This peace, however, is being threatened by two arms races; one with the spears of ICBMs, and one with the shields of ballistic-missile defences.

Just last week, the U.S. Navy reported success with a new ship-launched ballistic missile defense (BMD) interceptor. This, they believe, represents an important advance on the previous ground-launched interceptor. This will surely draw billions more dollars of investment into defence, thereby inciting more sophisticated offence.

This cycle cannot repeat indefinitely. Ultimately, it will end – and in all likelihood, in tragedy. That tragedy was already in sight 50 years ago when President Richard Nixon remarked in horror, “I can pick up my phone and in 25 minutes, 70 million people will be dead.” We know now that nuclear winter would multiply that number.

However, this folly is not immutable. In January, when the U.S. will inaugurate a new president, a new international agreement will come into force: the UN Treaty on The Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), signed by 122 nations and ratified by the required 50.

How much of an achievement is this new law? Can it seek to establish a new norm, so clearly foreshadowed in Mr. Obama’s Prague speech? Since not a single nuclear-weapons state has signed the TPNW, we have reason to ask.

But the importance of this gesture will not be lost on the Canada-U.K. colloquium, meeting this week in Toronto. For half a century, the colloquia have fostered debate between Canada and the United Kingdom, who, during the Second World War, collaborated in the development of nuclear power. Each had the option after the war of acquiring nuclear weapons, and the U.K. joined the U.S. in doing so. Canada, however, after intense public debate, broke with its closest allies, declining to develop nuclear weapons and refusing even to allow allies to station weapons on Canadian soil.

This was not an easy decision. It strained alliances. However, it made a far-sighted point. The proliferation of nuclear weapons poses a threat to humanity – and the time to acknowledge that is now.

The new TPNW was helped into existence by Canada’s gesture half a century ago. But Canadians could only speculate on how history will judge them. It is always that way with a new beginning. One thinks of William Wilberforce musing, in the U.K. House of Commons in the debate on the abolition of slavery in 1791, that “history will scarce believe that slavery has been suffered to exist so long, a disgrace and dishonour to this country.” The ties that bind us to threats of nuclear extermination are no less a disgrace and a dishonour.