

# Disarmament or Doomsday? UN Responds to Nuclear Emergency

On March 27, over 130 states will meet at UN headquarters in New York to commence negotiations, mandated by the General Assembly last December, on a treaty outlawing nuclear weapons. This country, alas (see my January column, '[Divided Nations: Canada Ducks Disarmament Challenge](#)'), will be joining most of its NATO colleagues, the world's nine nuclear-armed states (US, Russia, UK, France, China, Israel, India, Pakistan, North Korea) and a handful of traditionally uncritical US allies (e.g. Australia, South Korea) in boycotting talks seeking, to quote the first ever General Assembly resolution, "the elimination from national armaments of atomic weapons."



Doomsday Clock, 2.5 min to midnight. (Source: [Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists](#))

The resolution – adopted unanimously on 24 January 1946, with Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the grip of a strange new “atomic sickness” – also demanded the elimination of “all other major weapons adaptable to mass destruction.” By the mid-1990s,

those “other weapons” – chemical and biological – had been banned, leaving a yawning ‘legal gap’ in the global disarmament regime, a vacuum filled by the most devastating and unconscionable weapons of all. In 1970, the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) not merely reaffirmed the goal of a complete and total ban but mandated negotiations “in good faith” to that end. Forty-seven years later, and a quarter of a century after the end of the Cold War, there are nearly 15,000 nuclear weapons deployed (on land, at sea and in the air) around the world, many – on high, hair-trigger alert – capable of killing millions of people in minutes and poisoning the earth for millennia.

On February 16, at an organizational meeting to prepare for the negotiations, Ireland, the first state to sign the NPT and one of its staunchest champions, argued that the abject failure of the nuclear-weapon states to honour their obligations compelled the non-nuclear majority to take emergency diplomatic action. The NPT, Ireland declared, “is a living document” which “never claimed to be the last word,” explicitly “envisaging...further effective measures” leading to “a complementary treaty.” But in recent years, that ‘living document’ has withered in the face of sustained, nuclear-armed bellicosity, for example “a worrying decrease in the taboo around threat of use” of nuclear weapons, “vast investment in so-called modernization” of existing stockpiles, and “talk of more strategic, more targeted, more usable nuclear weapons.”

Commending the “broad and brave participation from states here today,” both large and powerful and “less developed and smaller,” whose “voices, including many female voices” have been marginalized by ‘the big boys’ too long, the Irish statement concluded: “We are here to help those who still rely on these toxic weapons to view them as we do – as inhumane, indiscriminate, and beyond any possible legal use. Change only comes about when the status quo becomes less comfortable, when the discomfort of doing something new becomes less than

keeping things the same. Last year, over 100 states decided that it was time to change.”

## ‘Another bad deal’

The same sense of a nuclear ‘tipping point,’ towards either breakthrough or breakdown, this year prompted the Science and Security Board of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* to move the hands of its [famous ‘Doomsday Clock’](#) forward by 20 seconds to two-and-a-half minutes to midnight, the closest to Armageddon since the ‘birth’ of the H-Bomb – thousands of times more powerful than the ‘crude’ A-bombs of 1945 – in the early 1950s. The board explained that its “decision to move the clock less than a full minute – something it has never done before – reflects a simple reality: As this statement is issued [January 26], Donald Trump has been the US president only a matter of days.”



US President Donald Trump, official portrait. (Source: The White House, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons)

Although Trump told *The Times* on January 15, with reference to a possible deal with Russia, that “nuclear weapons should be way down and reduced very substantially,” in a February 23

interview with Reuters he denounced the 2010 US-Russia Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) as “another bad deal” and “one-sided,” even though it limits both parties to 1,550 warheads, and argued “it would be wonderful, a dream that no country would have nukes, but if countries are going to have nukes, we’re going to be at the top of the pack.”

Such a candid embrace of supremacy – an open invitation to a new arms race – may now shape the ‘Nuclear Posture Review’ ordered by Trump on January 27, aimed at ensuring the arsenal is “modern, robust, flexible, resilient, ready, and appropriately tailored to deter 21st-century threats.” For its part, Russia, whose military doctrine already countenances the first use of tactical nuclear weapons to ‘de-escalate’ a conventional confrontation with NATO, has reportedly deployed a new nuclear-armed cruise missile in violation of the 1987 Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, widely credited with helping to end the Cold War.

## Mini-nukes

Trump’s views, unfortunately, cannot be dismissed as ill-informed extremism likely to be tempered by expert advice. In December 2016, the Pentagon’s Defense Science Board (DSB) issued a hair-raising public report advocating “a more flexible nuclear enterprise that would provide, if needed, a rapid, tailored nuclear option for limited use should existing non-nuclear or nuclear options prove insufficient.” The suggestion was slammed as “absurd” in a February 5 [New York Times editorial](#) and in a statement (February 1) by Democratic Senator Dianne Feinstein, who insisted “we cannot, must not, will not even countenance” the “actual use” of nuclear weapons as a battlefield option: “There’s no such thing as limited nuclear war, and for the Pentagon’s advisory board to even suggest such a thing is deeply troubling.”

‘Such things’ were, however, seriously contemplated by

President George W. Bush, whose plans for new weapons – such as a mountain-vaporizing ‘mini-nuke,’ the ‘Robust Nuclear Earth Penetrator’ – were beaten back in Congress. The new DSB report itself notes that though the “development” of new nuclear weapons has been outlawed since 1993, “research and development” has not, a loophole it wishes to exploit to the full. Such innovative designs would likely have to be tested (exploded underground), breaking a US moratorium dating back to 1991. The DSB, ominously, describes testing as “a powerful tool in advancing scientific understanding” and suggests it may in any event be necessary to “maintain confidence” in existing weapons (a claim vehemently disputed by many weapons scientists).



US President George W. Bush with the Joint Chiefs of Staff, May 2007. (Source: DoD photo by Staff Sgt. D. Myles Cullen, U.S. Air Force. (<http://www.dodmedia.osd.mil>), Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons)

Not content to going back to the 1980s, however, the DSB

report harkens back to the 1950s, advocating the need for both 'civil defense' (known popularly as 'duck and cover') and measures to ensure the US military can continue to wage war in the "post-detonation, right-of-boom" phase of a nuclear exchange. "Much of the civil defense guidance" of the 1950s, the report notes, "remains valid for a limited nuclear attack" and such preparations would help counter the "implicit assumption that the US has 'lost' if a nuclear weapon is detonated" in the homeland. Such assertions contrast utterly with the insistence of a near-consensus of states, experts and international relief agencies that (to quote the [International Committee of the Red Cross](#)), any nuclear exchange would "bring us to a catastrophic and irreversible scenario that no one wishes and to which no one can respond in any meaningful way."

Perhaps the most chilling aspect of the DSB is its view of America – a nuclear-weapons superpower engaged in a 30-year, \$1 trillion modernization of its land-, air-, and sea-based forces – as a country that has lost its "nuclear savvy," foregone its "nuclear literacy" and needs to re-master the "art of deterrence." "In short," the report repeatedly insists, "nuclear still matters, nuclear is a class of its own, and nuclear cannot be wished away." While disarmament, in other words, is wishful thinking, a survivable, winnable nuclear war is not!

## **Nuclear no-show**

The DSB's perverse vision, quite possibly 'beefed up' following Trump's election, may already have shaped – or, at least, may influentially dovetail with – the main contours of the brave new nuclear world envisaged (for America) by the Commander-in-Chief. Even if the Nuclear Posture Review returns a less intoxicating set of options, there is clearly no chance the US will spend a day of the next four years reviewing the merits of radically reducing, rather than exorbitantly and



extravagantly 'Trumping,' its arsenal. Given that, in such circumstances, the probability of any other nuclear-weapon state honouring its disarmament obligations is, likewise, zero, what merit or sense remains in the stance of Canada and the other nuclear negotiation no-shows that what matters now is the integrity and primacy of the NPT?



Source: [ICAN](https://www.nuclearban.org/)

As an [accessible new booklet](#) by the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) argues, the “vast majority of UN member states believe that weapons intended to inflict catastrophic humanitarian harm should, as a matter of principle, be prohibited under international law...[and] placed on the same footing as other weapons of mass destruction.” Furthermore, “experience shows that the prohibition of a particular weapon provides a solid legal and political foundation for achieving its progressive elimination.”

A path to disarmament, or a roadmap to doomsday. Which, in 2017, is the Canadian way?



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