International Day of Peace  
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The International Day of Peace is a fitting moment to reflect on the development of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, and the 74-year-long pursuit of nuclear abolition.

In 1945 the United States dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, incinerating hundreds of thousands of people and leaving many thousands more with radioactive poisoning; destroying homes, schools, hospitals, and all the people in them. Since then, people around the world have demanded nuclear disarmament. The arms race that unspooled from that moment, in which trillions of dollars have been spent to make nuclear weapons bigger, more destructive; to build up arsenals beyond all reason—to 70,000 or so during the height of the so-called Cold War—has led now to nine countries in the world possessing the capacity to destroy entire cities, countries, and in the case of the United States and Russia, the planet, many times over.

And while so many people have demanded peace and disarmament, others have bought into this argument that nuclear weapons are necessary for security. The theory of nuclear deterrence has dominated academic and international discourse on the matter, while advocates for nuclear disarmament are treated as irrational—as naïve peaceniks that do not understand the mechanisms and dynamics of international security. When anyone—from government officials creating policy or scientists developing weapons or activists raising the alarm—has spoken out against nuclear weapons, mainstream media, academia, or politicians have suppressed their views. Daniel Ellsberg, who is the whistleblower responsible for the Pentagon Papers, has also written about nuclear weapons and war planning in The Doomsday Machine. He describes the practices employed by those controlling the dominant narrative around nuclear weapons to maintain an “objective,” dispassionate discourse, and to dismiss those who want to talk about nuclear weapons for what they really are as “emotional rather than rational,” as “non-expert,” and as “irresponsible”.

I want to say a few words about this from a feminist perspective, because this is highly gendered.

Feminist scholars have shown how social constructions of gender ascribe contrasting characteristics to masculinity and femininity that are seen as mutually exclusive and in which the “masculine” attribution is valued more highly than the “feminine”. Descriptors such as strong, rational, serious, and truth tend to be associated with masculinity, while weak, irrational, emotional, and fiction tend to be associated with femininity. And there is certainly nothing in between in this construction—no non-binary or non-conforming option. In this framing, concern for human welfare is also seen in contrast to “national security” concerns and is feminised. Carol Cohn describes an encounter with a white male physicist in the 1990s. He
was working on modeling nuclear counterforce attacks and exclaimed to a group of other white male physicists about the cavalier way they were talking about civilian casualties. “Only thirty million!” he burst out. “Only thirty million human beings killed instantly?” The room went silent. He later confessed to Cohn, “Nobody said a word. They didn’t even look at me. It was awful. I felt like a woman.”

The association of caring about the murder of thirty million people with “being a woman” is all about seeing women as being weak, caring about the wrong things; letting your “emotions” get the better of you; focusing on human beings when you should be focused on “strategy”. Caring about the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons is feminine, weak, and not relevant to the job that “real men” have to do to “protect” their countries.

This patriarchal framing positions disarmament as weak, utopian, unrealistic. It is why nuclear-armed governments have gotten away with claiming that nuclear weapons are necessary for their national security, and thus, that complete nuclear disarmament is not possible. The United Kingdom, for example, says, “we do not yet have the right political and security conditions for … those with nuclear weapons to no longer feel the need to keep them. Nor is it possible to identify a timeframe for those conditions.”¹ The US government even has an official tagline for this: Creating the Environment for Nuclear Disarmament. In advocating for the creation of this “environment,” the US government has asserted that every commitment it has made over the past 70 years are “from a different time and a different security environment than we currently face”²—this is why it is currently ripping up its nuclear arms control agreements with Russia.

So basically, the most militarised, weaponised countries in the world are blaming everyone else for making them feel insecure. At the same time, they accuse everyone else in the world of not understanding their security needs. And of not having any security interests of their own.

This patriarchal and racist framing is also how the nuclear-armed states continue to justify spending massive amounts of money on nuclear weapons.

In 2018, global military sending reached approximately 1.7 trillion USD. In addition to this, estimates from experts suggest the nuclear-armed states spend from about 2 billion to 30 billion USD each per year.³ The cost of modernisation of nuclear forces in the nuclear-armed states is budgeted to run into the billions—and in the US case, one trillion—dollars.⁴ Who is profiting from all of this? Corporations such as BAE Systems, Bechtel, Boeing, General Dynamics, Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman, Raytheon, among others, build nuclear weapons, their delivery systems, and related infrastructure such as nuclear weapon laboratories. Most of these companies also produce other goods and are open to public investment. Three hundred and twenty-five (325) financial institutions from around the world are investing hundreds of billions into the companies that generate and sustain nuclear arsenals.⁵
Meanwhile, there are extreme social costs associated with the development and production of nuclear weapons, the major burden of which will always “be borne by the most vulnerable sections of society.”6 The exploitative conditions for uranium mining and radioactive waste storage, and the land appropriation and destruction for nuclear weapon testing, have disproportionately affected Indigenous communities. Then there is the money. In 1998 a group of Indian antinuclear feminists warned that “the inevitable cutbacks in social security and welfare will hurt and damage all poor people,” and “the proportion of the poor who are steadfastly denied a fair share of even the scarce resources, will undoubtedly become larger.”7

We have seen this again and again. Austerity in the United Kingdom, for example, decimated public sector jobs—the employees of which are majority women—as well as social welfare. It is estimated that women have borne the brunt of funding cuts, approximately 86 percent. Single mothers, women of colour, and women with disabilities have disproportionately suffered.8 And these cuts have been implemented at the same time the government decided renew its Trident nuclear missile system, which is projected to cost 256 billion USD.9

The use of nuclear weapons, of course, would have devastating impacts around the world. It would disrupt weather patterns and food growth, exacerbating the climate crisis we already face. Developing countries and poor populations will suffer the most, as we can see with any crisis. The humanitarian and environmental consequences of nuclear weapons are well known—the Red Cross, UN agencies related to development, humanitarian coordination, human rights, and the environment, major humanitarian NGOs—all have said there could be no adequate response to the use of even a single nuclear weapon.

And yet: we are told that nuclear weapons keep us safe. In the right hands.

But this narrative does not hold. The hypocrisy and injustice of this situation is untenable. And it is beginning to crack.

One crack is the abrogation—the lighting on fire of—bilateral nuclear reduction and arms control agreements. The US government is the midst of a rollback to the Cold War, and if this is the direction things continue to go, we are going to see a resumption of nuclear weapon testing, increased rates of nuclear weapon “modernization” and an expansion of nuclear arsenals, and probably more countries with the bomb.

But the other direction is the one that non-nuclear-armed states have tried to take by negotiating the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. This Treaty is an attempt by the majority of the world’s governments to say enough is enough. Nuclear hypocrisy cannot stand. The Treaty is the most peaceful, nonviolent means by which countries could exercise their rights and powers—by creating international law at the United Nations; by prohibiting nuclear weapons to help stigmatise them to achieve their elimination.

We have seen how stigmatising weapons or other practices has had incredible impacts throughout the course of human history: abolishing slavery, women’s right to vote, civil rights,
LGBT rights. Human society has progressed by identifying and condemning bad behaviour, which informs the building of norms and legal and political responses. Of course, laws and norms do not fix everything straight away—and whatever gains are made are assaulted by pushback from those who fear loss of their privilege and power. But things do change. Throughout history, systems of oppression and inequality have cracked, crumbled, and been decimated. The changes necessary to achieve this were mostly not instant, but iterative. They happened because of the persistence of people who believed that change could and must occur, who fought even when the odds were stacked against them. People who took the smallest gains as immense victories because they could recognise that every chink in the armor of power weakens its foundations, making it more and more vulnerable to pressure. The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons must be seen in this context.

The Treaty prohibits nuclear weapons for everyone. It creates space for the negotiated elimination of nuclear weapons. It provides for victim assistance and environmental remediation, in accordance with other humanitarian disarmament treaties such as those prohibiting landmines and cluster munitions.

In fact, the development of the nuclear ban learned many lessons from the prohibitions of those weapons—the importance of reframing the discourse away from military priorities to humanitarian harm. The importance of including survivors and others affected by nuclear weapon in policy debates and decisions. The understanding that through stigmatisation, economic incentives for weapons are undermined. The US government may not have joined the cluster bomb ban, for example, but the last producer of cluster munitions in the US said it would no longer produce them because of the lack of economic incentive.

Through the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, ICAN is pursuing this same kind of divestment from nuclear weapons. We are asking people and pension funds and banks to stop supporting the production of nuclear weapons. You can find out where your money is going at dontbankonthebomb.com, and move it or demand your financial institution moves it. The Bank of Montreal invests in nuclear weapons, so does CIBC, Scotiabank, the RBC, and several other Canadian banks. The Canadian Pension Plan is investing over $400 million in fourteen nuclear weapon companies—six of which have subsidiaries in Canada.

We have had success so far with this campaign: pension funds in Norway, Sweden, and the Netherlands have divested from nuclear weapons; many financial institutions have also revoked funding for these companies. We have a lot do in Canada.

We’re also asking cities to step up to support the Treaty, including by calling on the federal government to sign and ratify the nuclear ban. So far, Toronto, Vancouver, Victoria, Saanich, and North Saanich, have signed the ICAN Cities Appeal. Why not Montreal? That is something that people in this room could work for immediately, to help mobilise public education and engagement against nuclear weapons, and to help compel the Canadian government—whomever that might be next month—to join the Treaty.
Justin Trudeau called the nuclear ban “sort of useless” before it was even negotiated. He has refused to meet with Canadian citizen Setsuko Thurlow, an atomic bomb survivor from Hiroshima who received the 2017 Nobel Peace Prize on ICAN’s behalf. Canada did not even participate in the negotiations of the Treaty. Canada! Which is supposed to be a humanitarian disarmament leader, which rests on its laurels for “leading” the ban on landmines and “inventing peacekeeping”—yet it will not show up to negotiate a treaty prohibiting the most destructive weapon of all. This is because Canada is part of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, which includes nuclear deterrence in its strategy, and because the Obama administration instructed its NATO allies not to attend the negotiations, and likely because of the Canadian money invested in producers of nuclear weapons.

These are damning and damaging reasons for Canada to stay away from one of the most important multilateral instruments negotiated in recent history. We still have a chance to get our country on track on this issue, but the government clearly will not do it of its own accord. It will join for the same reason that other governments have: their people have made it clear that they will not accept tacit or explicit support for nuclear weapons. And they put the rule of law and the security of the planet above any narrowly defined interest in acquiring weapons that can only be used to commit mass atrocities.

122 governments voted for the adoption of this Treaty in 2017; since then 70 have signed it and 26 have ratified. We are expecting several more countries to join next week at the United Nations. Canada may not be one of them now, but it must be soon.

As with the climate crisis, we are past the point where we can allow those interested in maintaining their privilege at the expense of the rest of the world to dictate our terms of engagement and the possibilities of what we can do make our world safer, more secure, and sustainable. It was women suffragists, not male political leaders, who won women’s right to vote. It was abolitionists, not slave owners, who outlawed the most horrific practice in human history. It will not be the nuclear-armed states that decide to end their addition to the bomb. It will have to be others who believe in the rule of law, international cooperation and integration, human security and environmental sustainability, that push for and create alternatives through developing new norms, laws, agreements, and commitments.

Yes, the nuclear-armed governments will need to be brought on board—but the leadership for an alternative future will not come from them. They will come along when it is clear that the status quo is no longer tenable. When the tides have turned against their weapons. When other governments have forged ahead with new plans. When their own citizens demand redistribution of resources away from weaponised security to security based on human rights, justice, and environmental sustainability. Yesterday people in record numbers around the world joined the global climate strike. People right now in the United States are fighting against the immigration concentration camps and abhorrent lack of gun control. People want a different future than the one currently on offer. A different future is possible. It’s up to us to shape it.

2 Robert Wood, Ambassador and Permanent Representative to the Conference on Disarmament of the United States, Explanation of vote on A/C.1/73/L.54, United action with renewed determination towards the elimination of nuclear weapons, to the UN General Assembly First Committee on Disarmament and International Security, New York, 1 November 2018.


5 Susi Snyder, Shorting our security—Financing the companies that make nuclear weapons (Utrecht: PAX and International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, 2019).


