

Commentary

Thinking nuclear weapons were a thing of the past?

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The second nuclear age? If you thought the first one, the Cold War, was menacing, check in with Douglas Roche on the new era.

Brian Mulroney appointed the former Alberta MP as disarmament ambassador to the United Nations in 1984. Twenty-three years later, having worked the issue ever since that time, Mr. Roche surveys what is happening in Iran and India, Britain, the United States, Canada and the like and shakes his head in despair.

Nuclear weapons stockpiling proceeds apace. And, unlike in the Cold War, there are loose nukes, insecure systems, leakage of materials, risk of terrorism. It's more dangerous now, said Mr. Roche, and yet the issue gets little public notice.

A two-class system, as he described it, has become entrenched with nuclear weapons as permanent instruments in the military doctrines of the "have" countries - while the have-nots are supposed to just sit and watch. The notion that this can go on "without grossly destabilizing the security of the world" is a pipe dream, said Mr. Roche.

The 77-year-old retired senator, who heads an international disarmament group called the Middle Powers Initiative, testified before the foreign-affairs committee last week.

For double standards, Mr. Roche singled out Britain's outgoing Prime Minister, Tony Blair. While denouncing others in pursuit of nuclear arsenals, Mr. Blair pushed ahead with a major renewal of his country's Trident nuclear-weapons system at a cost of tens of billions. It's called leading by example.

Add to this his role in invading a country on the basis of bogus charges and killing thousands in the process and you have what is called moral clarity. Stand on the mountaintops, Mr. Blair.

Tell us about it.

For him and most of today's leaders, disarmament is mainly rhetoric. The Cold War's end, Mr. Roche explained, removed the nuclear-weapons issue from the high plains of public consciousness. In the calm that followed, nuclear powers secured their arsenals. The trend away from weapons of mass destruction, the one begun by Mikhail Gorbachev and seconded by Ronald Reagan, faded.

An ominous precedent is a Washington-India deal which, if carried through, will give New Delhi access to fissionable materials for weapons purposes. The world, says former UN secretary-general Kofi Annan, sleepwalks toward nuclear proliferation and terrorism.

Some try to raise a voice. Mr. Roche noted that four prominent American figures - Henry Kissinger, George Shultz, William Perry and Sam Nunn - published an article calling for the abolition of nuclear weapons. But the White House hasn't been listening. Of 31 nuclear disarmament resolutions voted upon at the United Nations last year, he said, "The U.S. cast the sole No vote 12 times."

World attention has justifiably been focused on North Korea and Iran.

"Of course neither country should be allowed to build nuclear weapons." said Mr. Roche. "But these states are flashpoints off of a volcano. The volcano is the present arsenal of nuclear weapons."

Where's Canada, the long-time campaigner was asked.

Treading water, he said. While the current disarmament ambassador, Paul Meyer sounds full of good intentions,

there is no political muscle behind what he says. It's explained, many think, by the government's fear of offending the Bush administration with disarmament talk.

But our responsibility, says Senator Romeo Dallaire, cannot be abdicated. "Why does Canada ... not take a leadership role and initiate the process to abolish and eliminate these nuclear weapons?" To begin with, Mr. Dallair said, there is a moral obligation to assume a proactive role to save the nuclear non-proliferation treaty. That treaty is "our last best hope to stave off a frightening cascade of nuclear proliferation from which there can be no rescue."

Mr. Dallaire appears to have forgotten that idealism is in short supply among today's leaders. The tireless and tenacious Mr. Roche is not entirely pessimistic. He will publish a book in the fall, *Global Conscience*, in which he finds hope in the determination of the many citizen movements around. The problem isn't the people, he said, but the lack of political leadership from the major powers.

I guess when most of the world's 27,000 nukes are in your own backyard, when you have the double-standard advantage, why take up the cause? Why not let root causes fester - and see what happens.

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