

Disarming by example

POSTED ON 06/15/06

Kim Campbell has a point. The former prime minister was in Ottawa this week to push a favourite cause: nuclear disarmament. She notes that while the world bites its nails over Iran's suspected drive to build a nuclear bomb, very little has been done about the thousands of bombs in the hands of the established nuclear powers -- 27,000 by one estimate, 12,000 of them active. That failure undermines the attempt to stop rogue regimes such as Iran's from getting the Bomb. Why should we get browbeaten about trying to go nuclear, those regimes complain, when the big powers are still nuclear-armed to the teeth? "Everyone agrees it's a double standard," says Ms. Campbell.

When the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty took effect in 1970, the acknowledged nuclear powers struck an implicit deal with the non-nuclear countries: If you refrain from building bombs, we will disarm ourselves over time -- and help you develop peaceful nuclear power to boot. All those who signed the treaty are committed to "general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control."

When the superpowers were at daggers drawn, they had an excuse for ignoring this commitment. But the Cold War has been over for more than 15 years. Progress over that time has been halting. The United States and Russia agreed in 2002 to reduce their arsenals to between 1,700 and 2,200 each, a reduction of two-thirds. That's still a lot of nukes. In addition to strategic weapons, Russia has thousands, and the United States hundreds, of tactical warheads -- the kind that can be fitted on artillery shells, ship-to-ship missiles and the like. Washington's decision not to ratify the Comprehensive Test-Ban Treaty is another sign of its lukewarm commitment to disarmament.

It's not quite fair to call the nuclear powers hypocrites. They argue that nuclear weapons are far less of a threat in the hands of big, stable countries, all of them on more or less friendly terms, than in the hands of the fanatics who rule Iran or North Korea. That's hard to dispute. But the veteran nuclear powers (the United States, Russia, China, Britain and France) may not always be such pals. What if Washington and Beijing come to blows over Taiwan, for example? And there is always the risk that their nuclear weapons might go off by accident, or fall into the hands of terrorists.

Ms. Campbell's point is that the world would be far safer if the nuclear powers did what they said they would and moved to reduce their arsenals much further. If they did, they would be in a far stronger moral position when confronting the would-be nuclear powers over their dangerous bomb-making schemes.