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Stopping the Arms Race: Dealing with impediments to action

Abstract

There is a great danger that Canadians will be overwhelmed by the controlled information coming to them from the United States, and will automatically endorse their defence policies. Observers of the superpowers, who come from countries other than the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. often interpret events in a way different from the one Canadians get from the U.S. news media. Canadians would do well to question more the interpretations given to world events by others, to create their own policy, and to be seen as an independent nation, weighing in on the side of reconciliation.

Many Canadians are apprehensive about the continuing arms race and its meaning for our future, yet they hesitate to become involved. This is understandable. For years Western publics have been assured that everything is under control, the "experts" know best, and that we need not worry "for no one would be crazy enough to start a nuclear war." By implying that it is naive for citizens to believe they can become involved in such complex and controversial issues, these assurances deter us from acting and soothe us into believing that the ultimate tragedy will never happen. Yet such assurances do not stand scrutiny; they are based on false assumptions that should be discarded. Only then will we see that our involvement is needed to safeguard our future and that of our children. Let us examine some of these assumptions.

First there is the widely-held belief that since we have avoided war between the superpowers for forty years, in all probability we shall avoid war in the future if we continue on the same course. In short, deterrence works, so why rock the boat? Such optimism is unfounded. Rapid changes occurring in military technology, strategy, and weaponry are making the

arms race increasingly unstable. If not constrained it will become irreversible with an all-too-predictable end.

A second assumption suggests that we need not worry. No nation, knowing the risks, would dare to start a nuclear war. I do not agree. Quite apart from the real and increasing danger of war by accident or miscalculation is the danger posed by the unpredictability of human behaviour. In *Nuclear Crisis and Human Frailty* (Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, October 1985) the author describes how psychological stress can distort decision-making. He catalogues a "numbing litany of individual and 'committee' malfunctions along with coping mechanisms that distort objective reality." The list includes increased rigidity leading to fixation on one alternative; incomplete consideration of risks and contingency plans; belligerence and illusions of invulnerability; unquestioned belief in the group's moral superiority; a tendency to consult only those who agree with you; improper handling of information due to information overload; and worst-case analysis of the opponents' behaviour.

Reading this list produces nightmare visions of President Reagan dealing with an extreme crisis such as that faced by Kennedy during the Cuban missile crisis. For thirteen days messages went back and forth between Kennedy and Kruschev as each tried to resolve the crisis without giving ground. When it was over, Kennedy remarked to friends, "I had ten or twelve of the best minds in the United States with me in that process and believe me, if any one of half a dozen of them had been president, in all likelihood we would now be in the middle of a nuclear war." While Kennedy had thirteen days, today's leaders might have thirteen hours or thirteen minutes.

Can people make decisions involving the fate of the planet in such a short time? Clearly they cannot. Thus we face the prospect of decisions being made by computers programmed to respond instantly to crises, even to the point of "launch-on-warning" of missiles. We will then rely on combinations of human judgment and advanced technology to control weaponry with a destructive potential searingly demonstrated by the tragedies of the Korean 007 airliner, the Challenger, and Chernobyl.

A third assumption suggests that we can trust those in power because they genuinely want to stop the arms race, and are working to do so. If it can be done, they will do it. Such claims are ingenuous. For decades the arms race served the interests of the superpowers – they sustained and nourished it. In *The Game of Disarmament* the Swedish diplomat Alva Myrdal, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, described years of frustration at the U.N. as she and others saw their arms control efforts thwarted by the intransigence of the superpowers. The arms race allowed the U.S. to maintain its lead in nuclear weaponry, maintain its position of

world supremacy and protect its global interests. It enabled the Soviet Union to achieve nuclear parity with the U.S., achieve superpower status and have confidence in its ability to protect itself from a perceived threat from the West. It allowed both to intervene in the affairs of other nations without fear of interference, and to resort to nuclear threats. We should, therefore, treat with skepticism the claim that they put high priority on ending the arms race. The historical record suggests otherwise.

During the Seventies a change occurred. The Soviets had achieved nuclear parity with the U.S., and a new spirit of detente led to cooperation on arms control and the signing of important treaties. Regrettably this change did not last. At the end of the Seventies the relationship deteriorated again and arms control was put on hold. Although we are assured that the Soviet Union is to blame for the new cold war – they invaded Afghanistan, etc. – there is evidence that the Soviets wished to retain good relationships with the West. According to Geoffrey Pearson, former Canadian Ambassador in Moscow, the Soviets believed that peaceful co-existence was the best policy. This is not surprising, given their position vis-a-vis the wealth, economic power, and technological prowess of the Western alliance. They continued to press for arms control agreements, most importantly an end to all nuclear weapons testing, control of anti-satellite weapons (ASATs) and the prevention of an arms race in space. The importance they attached to these goals was underscored by actions such as their protracted unilateral moratorium on nuclear testing.

What was the American response? Rhetoric to the contrary, they adopted a confrontational stance toward the Soviet Union and ignored, rejected, or ridiculed Soviet initiatives. We should ask, "Why?" Much of the answer lies in the role played by powerful conservative groups such as **The Committee for the Present Danger** that reject the idea of superpower parity and set as their goal restoration of American superiority over the Soviets. Launching nationwide campaigns at the end of the Seventies, they convinced the American people that detente had led to the erosion of American power and establishment of Soviet military superiority. They called for a massive military build-up to regain American supremacy. "Peace through strength" became their guiding principle.

This thinking was reflected in the actions of both the Carter and the Reagan administrations. Reagan took it to new extremes with talk of "the evil empire" and "consigning the Soviet Union to the ash heap of history." There was talk of breaking the Soviet economy by setting a pace in the arms race that the Soviets could not match, and of rolling back the frontiers of Eastern Europe. The Administration also embarked on an unprecedented military build-up, including first strike weapons such as MX, Pershing II, and Trident II missiles. It committed itself to the Strategic Defense Initiative ("Star Wars") and an increasingly provocative maritime strategy.

Defense Department strategists talked of war-fighting strategies and winning a nuclear war. "Decapitation" – fast, surprise attacks against the Soviet leadership and command, control and communication systems – was openly discussed. The build-up continues to this day. A recent report of the **Union of Concerned Scientists** indicates that the U.S. plans to deploy an additional 6000 extremely accurate ICBMs in the next few years. These will be capable of destroying all Soviet land-based missiles and many of their hardened command posts, and it must suggest to the Soviets an American interest in a pre-emptive strike capability.

The U.S. has also confronted the Soviet Union throughout the Third World by greatly expanding its Special Operations Forces. According to the Washington-based Centre for Defense Information,

> The renewed emphasis on special operations forces reveals the Administration's tendency to view all global issues as part of the East-West struggle, its penchant for relying on military initiatives for dealing with foreign policy problems and its support for covert operations. Special Operations are training armies in Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and Europe.

The Soviet response has been predictable. They have sought to match America weapon for weapon, strategy for strategy, and threat for threat. Who is most to blame? Each of us must decide for ourselves, but we should consider the historical record rather than accept at face value the self-serving rhetoric of either. After years of observing the behaviour of the superpowers, Alva Myrdal concluded that although both must share the blame for the arms race, Soviet foreign policy was predominantly defensive in character while American policy indicated world-wide aspirations, as reflected in "offensive scenarios" centred on the presumed need to fight the Soviet Union.

It is regrettable that during this period of heightened tension, Canada has chosen to join other members of NATO in supporting American policies. "Alliance solidarity" is repeatedly invoked and appears to take precedence over the international community's strong desire for an end to the nuclear arms race and Canada's long-term commitment to the United Nations' goal of arms control and disarmament. Prime Minister Trudeau spoke of the pressure to conform that even he as a prime minister felt when attending NATO meetings. Proposals for alternate policies were greeted with impatience and hostility. Similarly, his efforts at a Summit meeting to include statements about peaceful cooperation as well as statements about military preparedness were dismissed as "giving aid and comfort to the Russians."

The important question that we as Canadians should ask is why we have not understood the dangerous course upon which the world is

embarked. Part of the answer lies in the constant bombardment of the public with justifications, some truthful and some not, for Western alliance policies. Emanating primarily from the United Stares, these justifications are echoed by other NATO members, including Canada. Flawed arguments are endlessly repeated by our political and military leaders and the media, and, through constant and uncritical repetition, become "accepted truths." The Reagan administration acknowledges the effectiveness of the technique by calling it "perception management." Thus blame for the arms race and the long hiatus in arms control is seen as the fault of an aggressive and intransigent Soviet Union.

By such manipulation other assumptions go unchallenged. How often have we heard that the destruction of detente was entirely the fault of the Soviets – all was fine until Afghanistan? Many observers disagree, among them Paul Warnke, chief arms negotiator for the Carter administration. According to Warnke, detente was in serious trouble well before the invasion of Afghanistan. Towards the end of his presidency, Carter realized that he was seen as a weak president and feared that he would be defeated at the next election by a hard-line Republican candidate. Ronald Reagan was already on the horizon. Carter therefore became increasingly critical of the Soviet Union, confronting it over the Horn of Africa, the Soviet brigade in Cuba, deployment of cruise and Perishing missiles in Europe, and the signed, but as yet unratified, Salt II treaty. Relations deteriorated steadily and the Soviets saw no reason to believe they would improve. Warnke believes that had U.S.–Soviet relations taken a different course, in all probability the Soviets would not have gone into Afghanistan.

We all have heard the claim that the American military build-up was a response to the massive increase in Soviet military power during the Seventies. Reagan has gone so far as to claim that the U.S. actually "disarmed" in that period but was forced by Soviet duplicity into a new arms race. Such claims invariably are buttressed by references to the alarming size of Soviet forces and military budgets. But are such claims to be believed? Comparing the strength of military forces by a numbers count or by estimates of military expenditures can be meaningless. One needs to consider the quality, operational efficiency, deployment, etc., of those forces and to be sure that budget estimates are reasonably accurate. What of the CIA admission in 1983 that for seven years it had exaggerated the rate of increase in Soviet defense spending by 50%, or the NATO admission that it had exaggerated the number of Warsaw Pact divisions facing the West? Such admissions seldom make the headlines. One must also consider the comparative wealth, economic power, technological capability, and alliance cohesiveness, for they can affect substantially the strength of an adversary. Those who take these factors into account seem far less alarmed by the Soviet threat.

We are often warned that the deployment of Soviet forces indicates a long-standing intent to invade Western Europe and are assured that only the presence of strong nuclear-armed NATO forces has deterred them. This is possible. But in assessing another nation's intentions it is necessary to analyze more than the size and deployment of its military forces. Eric Alterman, Fellow of the World Policy Institute, points out that one must also consider a nation's history, its geopolitical position, its economic interests, and all the other factors that influence its behaviour. He asks:

> What if by ignoring all these other factors, NATO strategy is based on a fundamental misreading of Soviet intentions? If this is indeed the case, is it not possible that the West is wasting vast sums of precious resources in order to defend itself against a chimerical threat? Worse, is it not possible in responding as it has, NATO is actually helping create a threat that might not have existed in the first place?

Public support for ever-expanding military power is also won by constant assertions that the Soviet Union is bent on world domination. Reagan goes so far as to suggest that if it weren't for the Russians, there would be no "hot spots" in the Third World. Such remarks only show the depth of his ignorance. Clearly the Soviets are interested in gaining influence and client states in the Third World, as are Western powers, but does this prove that they pose a threat to the West that calls for the aggressive response of recent years? Soviet ability to project military power around the world, though increasing, is still severely limited and has been largely unsuccessful. It might surprise us to learn that the invasion of Afghanistan marked the first time that Soviet troops had been used in combat outside Eastern Europe. In its 1986 report, *Soviet Geopolitical Momentum: Myth or Menace?*, the Centre for Defense Information points out that with the exception of Eastern Europe and Mongolia, the Soviet Union has been unable to sustain its influence in foreign countries over long periods of time, and today it has significant influences in only 18 of the world's 164 nations. The report concludes that:

> Temporary Soviet successes in developing countries have often been costly to the Soviet Union. They provide no reason for American alarmism or military intervention – overt or covert. U.S. policies should emphasize our non-military advantages in the competition for world influence.

Lastly, we are warned of Soviet intransigence on arms control and told that we must keep up our guard. Yet it is the United States that has refused negotiations on a nuclear test ban and ignored the Soviet moratorium. It is the United States that has thrown up barriers on verification rather than vigorously applying its expertise to find solutions. It is the U.S. that demands "linkage" to Soviet behaviour on human rights,

implying that arms control depends on Soviet good behaviour as defined by the Americans. It is the U.S. that insists on "balance" in weapons, an unachievable goal, and dismisses Soviet initiatives as attempts to divide the West. There is a Catch-22 in this. Soviet disinterest is interpreted as a sign that they are stronger than we, and arms control must be deferred while the West rearms. But if the Soviets are cooperative, however, we are told that they must feel vulnerable and the West should "hang tough" and not make deals. Thus a system such as SDI, originally justified as a bargaining chip, is taken off the table.

Thus, buttressed by myths about superpower behaviour, Western publics continue to buy into "peace through strength" rather than opt for political solutions that would enhance our security. We behave "like lemmings rushing to the sea." We will continue on this course until we challenge the myths and challenge our governments' policies. We should not be afraid to do so. In a recent appearance before a parliamentary committee, Admiral Falls, former Chief of Canada's Defence Staff, said, "Canada should question U.S. judgment on nuclear strategy and arms control; our vital interests are at stake."

It is ironic that the planet is threatened by an arms race that is, and perhaps has always been, unnecessary. George Kennan, a former U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union, admires both nations and gives them this advice:

> For all their historical and ideological differences, these two peoples – the Russians and the Americans – compliment each other; they can enrich each other; together, granted the requisite insight and restraint, they can do more than any other two powers to assure world peace. The rest of the world needs their forbearance with each other and their peaceful collaboration.

Many Americans understand this and are working with courage to change American policies. It is important that we, as Canadians, do our part to see that Canada weighs in on the side of reconciliation.