

[CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY]

A CSO VIEW OF NATO¹

By Peggy Mason, President of the Rideau Institute, on the occasion of the GAC -CSO Consultations of 28 June 2023.

Thank you very much. And I thank the organizers for the opportunity to introduce the NATO discussion. I am going to start with a very brief overview of the disparate Canadian CSO views of NATO, despite which we are generally able to work together and reach common views on many issues related to NATO. I will then focus on what I believe is an urgent task for Canada within NATO in light of a glaring, in-your-face lesson from the Ukraine conflict – the impossibility of direct armed conflict between nuclear-armed adversaries because of the risk of escalation to all-out nuclear war.

The [research](#) on my introductory comments on Canadian CSOs and NATO [has all been done by Robin Collins](#), to whom I am indebted. Alas, I can only briefly touch on it.

Of course, what constitutes civil society and its organizations is wide and cannot be reduced to a single monolithic entity.

If we narrow the term CSO down to peace and disarmament groups, or even including humanitarian groups, it is fair to say that **there is certainly a widely held critique of NATO**, first as a military alliance because it is primarily about "the military" and what is widely seen as the undue militarization of security, but also because of some of the things that NATO does or has done (Kosovo, Libya, perceptions of interference in Ukraine pre-invasion, etc.) or not done. A much smaller group (almost non-existent) are overtly supportive of NATO.

There is a **wide divide** between those who may be critical of NATO (occasionally or regularly) -- and this group is LARGE and not silent -- and those who insist that

¹ This is the full text of my presentation. In the interests of time, some references were abridged when it was orally delivered.

Canada withdraw because NATO influence or activities are seen to be so egregious, that these groups want nothing to do with the alliance.

Nonetheless this LEAVE NATO NOW subgroup and the broader peace and disarmament grouping are able to work alongside one another because they agree about the need to criticise NATO and will work together in this effort whether they believe Canada should attempt to influence NATO policy from within or think Canada should just exit. An important example here was the joint submission to the [2017 Defence Review by a group of 11 CSO's, led by the Rideau Institute](#) (updated [in 2018 and supported](#) by 10 of the original 11 CSOs).

In summation then, there are many positions that could be taken regarding NATO. The ones most pertinent for the peace community, and anti-war, pacifist, and progressive global governance organizations, likely fall within the following **four categories**:

- Those calling on Canada to exit NATO (and for the alliance to disband)
- Those that don't take a position because it is divisive for their organization's membership
- Those calling on Canada to stay within the alliance (to keep a seat at the table) while the alliance exists, or in the short term in order to influence/block bad NATO policy or behaviour.
- Those who don't advocate for an immediate withdrawal from NATO but believe different mutual security arrangements would be better.

An important related point: there are some who see NATO (and leaders within like the USA and UK) as provocateurs or causal agents for conflict, rather than as a legitimate security enterprise. This perception is not significantly affected by the fact that **NATO member countries are very diverse politically**, and even include many of the most progressive states on earth.

It has not gone unnoticed that NATO overtly pressured its membership not to sign the [Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons \(TPNW\)](#), or even attend Meetings of States Parties (MSPs) as observers, or most egregious, even to participate in the General Assembly negotiations. For some, this was the last straw; for others, this was entirely predictable and did not substantially influence existing positions towards the alliance.

At the same time, it is generally conceded (although very reluctantly by some) that the **large majority of Canadians support the alliance**, have done so since NATO was formed, and it is politically difficult for members of parliament to oppose Canadian membership, even if some CSOs insist on it.

Generally speaking, while there are divergent views about the alliance as I have outlined, CSO peace and disarmament groups do not speak in support of NATO, even if they do not have a policy that supports withdrawal. RI is unusual in that we do regular commentaries on NATO in our blog posts, often drawing on the excellent international, [Brussels-based NATOWATCH](#) and while we are mainly criticizing bad policies in our view, we do certainly acknowledge positive steps when we find them; [e.g. pre-invasion [reiteration by NATO of the importance of Minsk II implementation](#), although we also pointed out the supportive rhetoric was not matched by action.]

And now a word about collective security.

Most mainstream and most visible CSOs are not opposed to the concept of **collective security on principle** (although some on the "margin" may be). While most think NATO is a forum that may be negatively distorted (or is inevitably distorted) by major powers, they still see “collective security” or even “collective defence” itself as not inherently a bad idea. Indeed, the United Nations is based on a shared security framework, which is most clear in its Chapters 7 and 8 collective security Articles.

Several CSOs support the OSCE over NATO.

Many CSO members are not necessarily familiar with NATO decision-making processes or how they might be influenced by a country like Canada.

And of course, there has been little publicly available evidence for some time of Canada seeking to influence NATO in what CSOs would see as a progressive direction, or even showing a modicum of independent action as we saw for e.g. with the Netherlands participating in the TPNW UN negotiations, unlike other NATO members including Canada.

This brings me to my main point which is precisely the need for Canada to start once again to use its influence within appropriate NATO NACD forums. Or, in light of what I have heard here today, perhaps I should say, Canada should further up its game in terms of working within NATO to reduce nuclear risks and move us closer to our shared goal of nuclear disarmament.

Recall the unanimous resolution by the Parliamentary Standing Committee on National Defence (NDDN) in its June 2018 [report on Canada and NATO](#), referenced by many who have spoken before me today, including Cesar Jaramillo of Project Ploughshares and Robin Collins of the Canadian Network to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (CNANW).

Recommendation 21

That the Government of Canada take a leadership role within NATO in beginning the work necessary for achieving the NATO goal of creating the conditions for a world free of nuclear weapons. That this initiative be undertaken on an urgent basis in view of the increasing threat of nuclear conflict flowing from the renewed risk of nuclear proliferation, the deployment of so-called tactical nuclear weapons, and changes in nuclear doctrines regarding lowering the threshold for first use of nuclear weapons by Russia and the US.

As noted by the aforementioned group of CSOs who wrote to the then Foreign Minister, Chrystia Freeland, the National Defence Committee had identified a constructive and timely approach for Canada to begin a long-overdue conversation within NATO on how to move away from the nightmare of mutually-assured destruction (or even worse, the lunacy of nuclear war-fighting) toward the [vision of sustainable peace and common security](#) grounded in the UN Charter.

In her written response (to both the CSO Letter and to Parliament) Minister Freeland stated that the government AGREED with the recommendation but then proceeded to enumerate NACD work already underway, NONE of which related to work within appropriate NATO bodies.

But I am gratified to hear from officials today that Canada is pursuing a dialogue within NATO although not mentioned in the Government's official response to the Committee's recommendation.

Why am I referencing a 2018 recommendation?

This resolution is timelier than ever in light of the glaring lesson from the Ukraine war where nuclear deterrence has indeed worked to deter NATO from direct military involvement against a nuclear peer adversary because of the overriding risk of escalation to all-out nuclear war.

The actions of the USA and NATO – that is their military restraint - put the lie to NATO's [doctrine of flexible response](#) and to the absurd notion of nuclear war-fighting with so-called tactical nuclear weapons. **In short, how the USA and NATO are acting every day in the Ukraine conflict puts the LIE to ANY first use of nuclear weapons.**

The oft-repeated phrase by the 5 acknowledged nuclear weapons states under the [Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty \(NPT\)](#) - “that a nuclear war cannot be won; a nuclear war must never be fought” - has been shown by the Ukraine war to actually mean that ANY war between nuclear-armed peer adversaries cannot be fought because of the danger of escalation to nuclear war. (Note that Pentagon war gaming designed to prevent escalation to nuclear war in these circumstances [has proven unable to do so.](#))

This means that [NATO's recently updated Strategic Concept](#) is now in dire need of further updating to reduce nuclear risks by relegating nuclear weapons – **so long as they still exist** - clearly to one role only – to deter nuclear weapons from ever being used – which means a MUCH smaller number of “survivable” nuclear weapons (a solely retaliatory capacity, the original MAD but at lowest possible levels); no war-fighting role; and for this to be possible, the USA must put strategic Ballistic Missile Defence on the negotiating table, [as the prestigious US Arms Control Association has called for in the context of follow on strategic arms control](#) talks between the USA and Russia (and ultimately China). **And note that President Biden has offered talks without preconditions and Russia has responded positively – this just before the Wagner Group debacle. So, arms control is back on the table despite the war.**

BUT WHAT ABOUT THE ULTIMATE LESSON FROM THE UKRAINE WAR, WHICH IS THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF ANY WAR BETWEEN NUCLEAR ADVERSARIES BECAUSE OF THE UNACCEPTABLE RISK OF ESCALATION?

This, in turn, brings us back to the post-cold War work, tragically aborted, to replace dangerously competitive, zero-sum military doctrines, requiring ever more weapons in response to ever more on the other side (giving us the obscene nuclear weapons modernization programmes now underway), to a much more defensive approach as a first step in building security for all. This is not something new; it was really what the Stockholm process of security and confidence-building measures back in 1985 was all about for Europe and which led to the CSCE and then the OSCE, the ultimate aim of which was to build a truly cooperative security architecture in Europe, but which atrophied for many reasons, not least massive American arms industry lobbying for NATO expansion.

This cooperative security-building effort cannot wait until ideologies align; it is too important and the mutual value is mutual, that is, common security. And the alternatives are just too dangerous and inhuman as we see every day with the Ukraine war.

So the immediate work is for Canada to initiate or to enhance the dialogue within appropriate NATO NACD forums so as to “begin the work necessary for achieving the NATO goal of creating the conditions for a world free of nuclear weapons...” including moving to no first use and eschewing tactical nukes. How significant it would be for new members like Finland – and possibly Sweden – to witness NATO embarked on such discussions.

There is no time for Canada to lose, and one practical way that Canada might advance these efforts is to consider hosting, with a European partner, a [Track Two process](#) with officials in their “personal capacity” or perhaps former officials who have greater flexibility, and academic and CSO experts.