

2017

H-Diplo

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Article Review
No. 687
16 March 2017

Article Review Editors: Thomas Maddux and Diane Labrosse
Web and Production Editor: George Fujii

Paul Meyer. "Pierre Trudeau and the 'Suffocation' of the Nuclear Arms Race."

International Journal 71:3 (2016): 393-408. DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0020702016662798>.

URL: <http://tiny.cc/AR687>

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When, at the height of the Cold War, Canadian diplomat T.C. Hammond proposed that Canada adopt a "reasonable, but activist approach" to nuclear disarmament (396), it immediately seemed well-suited to Canada's dual status as a non-nuclear-weapon state firmly embedded in a nuclear weapons alliance. And even though the activist side of that equation has only sometimes been pursued with the vigour that disarmament advocates prefer, that 'reasonable activism' was on full display in Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau's 'strategy of suffocation.' The strategy was an ambitious effort to build major power support for measures to constrain the competitive pursuit of technological advantage in the nuclear arms race. Now, three and a half decades later, Paul Meyer has done the arms control/disarmament community an important service by leading us through a detailed recounting of that important, though insufficiently recognized, moment in Cold-War disarmament diplomacy.

The individual elements of the strategy (a ban on warhead testing, ending test flights of warhead delivery vehicles, prohibiting further fissile materials production, and cuts to nuclear weapons spending) were not, by Trudeau's own admission (403), particularly new, but putting them all into a single proposal and binding them together with an effective metaphor created a new and innovative package of measures. As Meyers points out, Trudeau's speech to the First United Nations Special Session on Disarmament in 1978 (UNSSOD I), in which he first set out the strategy of suffocation, struck a positive chord with a non-governmental disarmament community well-disposed towards its activism, even if some of Canada's allies, not to mention some Canadian newspapers, felt it failed the reasonableness test.

Meyer's description of the process will be highly informative, even for people who thought they were well-versed insiders in Canada's disarmament community. It is a revealing account, documenting among other things the attention paid to Canada's disarmament Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), the inevitable deference shown to Washington, and Trudeau's personal determination to make an impact at a moment when the UN session was focusing world attention on the nuclear disarmament challenge.

Meyer's account is also a good reminder of the positive legacy that remained in the wake of what was in the end a failed initiative. Canada's Foreign Affairs department and its foreign service had in the process acquired a significant enthusiasm and capacity for ongoing engagement in disarmament diplomacy—an activism that has continued, to significantly varying degrees, over the decades.

Following UNSSOD I, the global climate became even less amenable to disarmament.¹ The 1979 U.S.-Soviet SALT II agreement failed to find support in the U.S. Congress and thus was never ratified. Also in 1979, NATO decided to deploy intermediate range cruise and Pershing missiles in Europe,² with Canadian support for that decision coming via the brief interlude of the government of Joe Clark (Clark's minority Government lasted less than a year and Trudeau was returned as Prime Minister in the February 1980 election). Later in 1980 Ronald Reagan defeated Jimmy Carter to become U.S. president in 1981.

By then the Canadian approach to disarmament had retreated from the strategy of suffocation. The House of Commons Standing Committee on External Affairs and National Defence recommended in a 1982 report that the government continue its support for nuclear arms control, notably the comprehensive test ban, but the focus on suffocation had given way to a call for a verifiable ban on any new weapons that were based on new scientific principles or on new technologies, with a minority report by Committee members from all three of the main political parties calling on the Trudeau Government to continue to press for the full strategy of suffocation at the then forthcoming UNSSOD II.

In 1982 Trudeau also announced that his government would permit cruise-missile testing in Canada. He explained, in a speech at the University of Notre Dame in May 1982, that “in the absence of a positive response from any quarter [to the strategy of suffocation], the Canadian Government subsequently endorsed NATO's two-track approach—seeking to improve our defensive position by preparing to introduce new immediate range weapons in Europe, while at the same time pursuing arms reduction negotiations.”³ Trudeau did go to UNSSOD II to give the Canadian speech, confirming that the strategy of suffocation had been reduced to a focus on “inhibiting the development of new nuclear weapons systems.”⁴ He emphasized the importance of verification and pledged more funding for it. His Foreign Minister subsequently set out the intention to take advantage of Canadian expertise, in government and the private sector, in “seismology,

¹ The following discussion of Canadian policy after UNSSOD I relies on John Barrett, “Canada's Arms Control and Disarmament Policy: Redefining the Achievable,” in Ernie Regehr and Simon Rosenblum, eds., *The Road to Peace: Nuclear weapons, Canada's military policies – on NATO, NORAD, Star Wars and Arctic defence – and strategies for disarmament in the era of 'glasnost'* (James Lorimer & Company, Toronto, 1988), 76-103.

² The 1987 US-Soviet Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty banned ground-launched cruise and ballistic missiles with ranges of 500 to 5,500 kilometers.

³ John Barrett, “Canada's Arms Control and Disarmament Policy: Redefining the Achievable,” in Ernie Regehr and Simon Rosenblum, eds., *The Road to Peace: Nuclear weapons, Canada's military policies – on NATO, NORAD, Star Wars and Arctic defence – and strategies for disarmament in the era of 'glasnost'* (James Lorimer & Company, Toronto, 1988), 82-83.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 83.

nuclear safeguards, remote sensing, toxicology and protective measures against chemical weapons, and communication satellites.”⁵

Understandably, many saw Trudeau’s decision, just ahead of UNSSOD II, to host cruise-missile testing in Canada as a major betrayal of the strategy of suffocation proposal to halt strategic missile testing. The decision was dressed up, by his then Foreign Minister Mark MacGuigan, as a matter of Canada’s commitment to NATO, and he notably accused the critics of “not [being] interested in the protection which that alliance gives us in its reliance on nuclear weapons.”⁶ That resounding endorsement of deterrence was a major departure from Trudeau’s own assertion that “stable deterrence remains an inadequate concept,” and that “such a concept is a poor substitute for genuine world security” (402).

Part of the strategy of suffocation’s legacy was Trudeau’s reignited interest in nuclear disarmament and arms control. It found focus in his 1983 peace initiative, but was also evident in his decision to host a gathering on nuclear disarmament with national church leaders in December 1982 and again in December 1983 over lunch at his official residence. The church leaders prepared extensive statements for both occasions and the 1982 open letter⁷ that was published by the church leaders voiced strong support for the strategy of suffocation, but sharply criticized the Trudeau Government for its failure to back the then prominent ‘nuclear freeze’ movement. Key elements of the freeze closely paralleled the suffocation proposal—namely, a comprehensive test ban, a ban on the further manufacture and deployment of new nuclear weapons and delivery systems, and a cessation in production of fissile materials—but when Mexico, Sweden, and India promoted that packet of measures at UNSSOD II, there was no support from the Trudeau Government.

At the 1982 lunch with church leaders, Trudeau was openly critical of the Reagan White House and its confrontational approach to the Soviet Union and its deleterious effect on the international strategic environment. He was pessimistic about what Canada could accomplish and declared his hands to be tied. The church leaders charged that, despite Trudeau’s genuine concerns, Canada had in fact “accept[ed] the now prevailing view in the Reagan Administration ... that the West must mount a nuclear arsenal capable of threatening the Soviet Union with pre-emptive attack, and a nuclear arsenal capable of prolonged nuclear war.”⁸ At the close of the gathering, Trudeau declared himself to be largely in agreement with the thrust of the church letter, allowing, however, that it was somewhat naïve given the state of the Cold War at the time, and given that the global stockpile of nuclear warheads was at about 60,000 and still rapidly growing

⁵ Ibid., 84.

⁶ Ernie Regehr, “Canada and the US Nuclear Arsenal,” Ernie Regehr and Simon Rosenblum, eds., *Canada and the Nuclear Arms Race* (Toronto: James Lorimer & Company, 1983), 105.

⁷ *Statement of Canadian Church Leaders on Canada’s Nuclear Weapons Policies*, Project Ploughshares, December 1982. www.ploughshares.ca.

⁸ Ibid.

A year later the church leaders again came to lunch and again came with an open letter,⁹ supporting and congratulating Trudeau on his “special peace initiative,” but once again arguing that the freeze proposal was in fundamental accord with his strategy of suffocation, and once again registering “grave disappointment at Canada’s active opposition to freeze resolutions in the United Nations,”¹⁰ especially given that five NATO allies had either voted yes or abstained when Canada voted no. This time Trudeau’s mood had made a 180 degree turn. His peace initiative was well underway and he was enthusiastic and optimistic about his message and his mission to sell it to the still reluctant Cold Warriors.¹¹ He had just returned from a visit with President Reagan in Washington, where Reagan had joined him on the White House East Lawn and wished Trudeau “Godspeed in your efforts to build a durable peace.”¹² This time, after the close of the gathering, it was the church leaders who declared themselves to be in essential agreement with Trudeau and his disarmament activism, but they also observed, though only to each other, that the Prime Minister did seem a bit naïve—the combined Russian and American warhead total was nearing 70,000 and showed no signs of reversing.

In retrospect, the Cold War nuclear arms race was probably fueled more by the political calculations and follies of Cold War dynamics than by the technological innovations and competition. Warhead testing, delivery vehicle evolution, and fissile material production were more the smoke, fire, and heat produced by an arms race that was politically fueled.

In fact, this political dimension figured prominently in the peace initiative that followed the strategy of suffocation and that produced the more apt metaphor – that of the “third rail.” Trudeau called for a “‘third rail’ of high-level political energy to speed the course of agreement—a third rail through which might run the current of our broader political purposes.”¹³ He announced he would, with NATO allies, “explore ways to draw the two superpowers away from confrontation and into dialogue, to get all five nuclear powers talking at one table, to halt nuclear proliferation, and to improve European security by raising the nuclear threshold.”¹⁴ The peace initiative turned from a focus on technical fixes to the arms race to confronting the real fuel—the habitual, intransigent, political competition between the superpowers and the absence of any serious venue through which to moderate and mediate political confrontation.

The strategy of suffocation and the peace initiative together highlighted the value of middle and modest powers turning their diplomatic efforts towards articulating and promoting concrete alternatives to the paths

⁹ *The Church and Nuclear Disarmament: Therefore Choose Life...*, Project Ploughshares Working Paper 85-3, December 1983. www.ploughshares.ca.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ The following description of the Trudeau peace initiative relies on Greg Donaghy, “The ‘Ghost of Peace’: Pierre Trudeau’s Search For Peace, 1982-84,” *Peace Research: The Canadian Journal of Peace and Conflict Studies*, Volume 39, Numbers 1-2 (2007), 38-57.

¹² Ibid., 50.

¹³ Ibid., 44.

¹⁴ Ibid., 45.

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chosen by the leading powers. Real progress on nuclear disarmament happens when the political calculations and tactics of the major powers change, but smaller powers can help to build a more conducive context and to nudge the super powers in more constructive directions through a 'reasonable activism' that does the hard work of challenging the conventional wisdom, or folly, and of developing and promoting credible alternatives. When the political climate changes and the major powers start looking for ways to change course, it is useful for them to have, to add another metaphor to the mix, some 'shovel-ready' options to draw upon.

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