

Policy Position Paper

Canada's nuclear policy: between realism and idealism (2000-2006)

Stiven de Jesús Tremaria Adan
Universidad Central de Venezuela
[Central University of Venezuela]
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From the advent of the nuclear age to the present, the member countries of the international community have viewed nuclear energy as a viable alternative for preventing energy shortages resulting from the proliferation of increasingly complex societies with growing needs, as well as a diplomatic and military means of obtaining prestige on the world scene and breaking with the status quo imposed since the end of the Cold War. As a nation of the Americas that effectively participates in the new international dynamics, Canada has not escaped those trends, maintaining an ambivalent policy on nuclear weapons that gives way to two levels of analysis based on two theoretical and epistemological constructs of the theories of international relations, along with their different variables: idealism and realism. This essay seeks to analyze Canadian nuclear policy on the basis of those theories, thereby contemplating the contradictions between the various levels of action at which Canadian diplomacy is at play in world decision-making forums on defence and disarmament.

Canada in the international arena (levels of ambiguity of the Canadian policy)

In its capacity as a permanent member State of the Disarmament and International Security Committee of the United Nations, the Missile Technology Control Regime and the Nuclear Suppliers Group, Canada has promoted—more earnestly since the year 2000—an internationally recognized policy of accession to and respect of the terms of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) of 1970, with the goal of moving towards effective non-proliferation by the countries of the world. This position has included a general ban on nuclear tests, a call for countries to accept the safeguards system of the International Atomic Energy

Agency (IAEA) and the sharing of Canadian nuclear knowledge and expertise with different States, including developing countries. Under the framework of this policy, which has remained unchanged for decades, Canada was the country that supplied the nuclear energy requested by India (1974), Pakistan (1975) and Argentina (1979) so that those countries could begin their respective nuclear programs during the seventies, all with successful results. Likewise, Canada currently has bilateral nuclear cooperation agreements in effect with 24 countries, including Brazil, China, Colombia, the United States, Japan, Mexico, Russia, Switzerland and Turkey.

At the same time, the political and military status of Canada as a member State of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) contrasts with its international diplomatic ideals and focuses to the effect of achieving progressive denuclearization, which are juxtaposed with the political and strategic interests of the foremost military organization of the world since its creation in 1948. While the arrival of the new millennium meant renewed Canadian efforts towards the responsible and peaceful use of nuclear energy, the new "Strategic Concept" adopted by NATO in 1999 "reaffirmed NATO's claims that nuclear weapons "fulfill an essential role" in NATO defence policies and that the strategic nuclear forces of the Alliance are the "supreme guarantee of the security of the Allies" (Robinson, 1999, 2). That is why many analysts feel that Canada's nuclear policy can be viewed as ambivalent in the international arena: on the one hand, it claims that the only sustainable strategy for the future is the elimination of nuclear arsenals entirely, while on the other, its NATO position in negotiating military and energy issues is consistent with the retention of nuclear weapons for the foreseeable future, as advocated by the NATO countries.

This contradiction has been noted at the United Nations, where, while Canada supported implementation of the NPT 13 steps by voting in favour of the New Agenda Coalition resolution adopted at the 57th Session of the UN General Assembly (2000), which called for the entry into effect of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty and urged nuclear States to not use their weapons against non-nuclear countries, Canada also abstained, together with 14 other NATO countries, from a second resolution by the Coalition that called for a comprehensive reduction of nuclear arsenals and a complete nuclear disarmament process.

Despite Canada's obvious efforts within NATO since 2000 to promote a review of the bloc's policy, the reshaping of the world strategic concept following the attacks at the World Trade Centre in September 2001 also forces Canada to review its position on defence and imposes new political challenges upon it. Canada thus maintains a policy of protection under the "nuclear umbrella" that the United States and other NATO allies have unfurled above the country in that it continues to provide physical and political support to the bloc "...to treat those same weapons as a useful—even necessary—element of Canada's defences and those of its allies" (Canadian Pugwash Group, 2003, 4). The "strike first" political concept in American diplomacy not only involves the mobilization of national forces from that country, but also from its "friends and allies", thereby subjecting Canada to political implications not directly acquired by the country.

It is for these reasons that the main thrusts of the Canadian policy can be referred to as ambivalent—the basic proposals of idealism are visible in its diplomacy, in which it heads global calls for the peaceful, scientific and responsible use of nuclear energy; while the dynamics of the international system, in which countries such as Iran, North Korea, Brazil and Israel are actively moving towards proliferation and rearmament, are forcing Canada to apply the basic assumptions of political realism characterized by the defence of the national interest over the collective interest, and the desire to construct a new, more balanced status quo. The challenge for the key decision-makers in Canadian diplomacy, as posed by international opinion and the various non-governmental organizations, is to substantively promote, together with its allies, the need to devise a balanced reform of NATO assumptions without infringing upon the very real dynamics of a multipolar system in crisis that is beginning to show signs of a real breakdown. At the major world decision-making forums, Canada must continue to promote the voice of the developed and developing countries that seek global and progressive disarmament, as well as to view the obligations to which it is subject with commitment and determination. However, such requirements cannot be taken out of context, or they will be reduced to mere political abstractions. The challenge for Canadian nuclear policy lies in balancing its political interests, responding to the social needs of the lobbies in its capacity as a pluralistic and

democratic country, and defending the disarmament that is necessary for world stability in keeping with its pacifist policy maintained over more than five decades.

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