



Pierre Trudeau and the “Suffocation” of the Nuclear Arms Race

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Abstract:

Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau is known for his challenge to Canada’s NATO policy at the beginning of his tenure in power and his peace initiative at its end. Less well known is his support for innovative arms control policies designed to eliminate the technological impetus behind the nuclear arms race between the US and the USSR during the Cold War. At the first UN Special Session on Disarmament in May 1978, Trudeau delivered a speech outlining a “strategy of suffocation” that provided a novel package of four arms control measures that, taken as a whole, would represent an effective means of halting and eventually reversing the nuclear arms race. Although the superpowers were largely indifferent to them, these ideas helped spur the Department of External Affairs to invest in developing the institutional capacity to enable Canada to play a leadership role in future disarmament diplomacy.

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Pierre Trudeau and the “Suffocation” of the Nuclear Arms Race

As prime minister, Pierre Trudeau’s involvement in issues of nuclear arms control and grand strategy is usually attributed to the early days of his government or to his final days in power. At the start of his leadership was the series of decisions beginning in 1969 to terminate nuclear weapon operational roles for Canadian forces, first in Europe and then in Canada.¹ Toward the end of his tenure as prime minister was his “peace initiative” of 1983–84 with its aim to revitalize East-West strategic cooperation during one of the darkest periods of the Cold War.²

Probably less well known is Prime Minister Trudeau’s address to the UN General Assembly’s First Special Session on Disarmament (UNSSOD I) delivered on 26 May 1978. In this speech, Trudeau set out what became known as a “strategy of suffocation” aimed at curbing the nuclear arms race underway between the United States and the Soviet Union, the superpowers of the day. This speech represented a major conceptual and practical contribution by the Government of Canada to moderating (and eventually reversing) the supercharged competition in nuclear forces pursued by the two superpowers. It also heralded an enhancement of Canada’s bureaucratic capacity as part of an effort to have Canada play a more active role in shaping the multilateral agenda for arms control and disarmament.

Given that public displays of original thinking by a NATO member on strategic relations were not exactly smiled upon by Washington, or by its junior nuclear weapon partner the UK, Trudeau’s speech was also remarkable in its willingness to advocate new policy directions for the nuclear powers that went beyond their comfort zones.

How such an innovative address was developed by the bureaucracy and championed by the highest political level is the focus of this article. It considers the context in which the Canadian position for UNSSOD I was formed and the aims the then Department of External Affairs developed for this unprecedented UN session. It then tries to identify the influences on

¹ Ivan Head and Pierre Trudeau, *The Canadian Way: Shaping Canada’s Foreign Policy 1968–1984* (Toronto: McLelland & Stewart, 1995), 65–95.

² J.L. Granatstein and Robert Bothwell, *Pirouette: Pierre Trudeau and Canadian Foreign Policy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 363–376.

the Canadian statement, *including the personal interest the prime minister showed in the initiative*, as it went through various drafts, and assess its key ideas. It concludes with some reflections on the impact of the speech and its significance for future Canadian and multilateral arms control and disarmament policy.

The UN and the Disarmament Issue

The United Nations General Assembly has been preoccupied from its inception with the pursuit of international security and the need for disarmament. Indeed, the first resolution adopted by the General Assembly at its inaugural session in January 1946 was devoted to these concerns and in particular to the threat posed by the atomic bomb. The title of the first resolution was “Establishment of a Commission to deal with the problems raised by the discovery of atomic energy” and the Atomic Energy Commission it created was tasked with developing proposals for *inter alia* “the elimination from national armaments of atomic weapons and of all other major weapons adaptable to mass destruction.”³

Initial efforts to reach a consensus on a mechanism for the international control of atomic energy and the elimination of nuclear weapons quickly foundered in the face of mistrust among the leading powers with the advent of the Cold War. The General Assembly’s concern with the threats posed by what became known as weapons of mass destruction only deepened in the subsequent years as the animosity of the Cold War and the arms race grew more intense. With the Security Council, the UN’s principal organ for dealing with threats to international peace and security, effectively paralyzed due to Cold War conflict, states had to look to the General Assembly to express the concerns of the UN membership. Its annual sessions would routinely generate several resolutions on the disarmament theme, but to scant practical effect. The “near death experience” of the Cuban missile crisis and growing public concern over the deleterious effects of radioactive fallout from atmospheric nuclear testing did lead in 1963 to the Partial Test Ban Treaty, but little else in terms of multilateral accomplishments. In 1969 the General Assembly declared a “Disarmament Decade” in an effort to encourage states to take further

³ UN General Assembly Resolution 1, 24 January 1946.

action. The conclusion of the (Nuclear) Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT, which entered into effect in 1970) was an important achievement in halting the spread of nuclear weapons but had little impact on the quantitative and qualitative growth of nuclear arsenals on the part of the nuclear weapon states. The negative implications of this superpower arms race for both the security and the developmental goals of the UN were increasingly in evidence.

Against this backdrop, the General Assembly decided to convene the first special session of the assembly to be devoted to disarmament, and UNSSOD I was duly scheduled for the period 23 May to 28 June 1978. Commencing in the spring of 1977, preparatory committees were formed to develop the outcome of the special session, and the secretary general solicited the views of member states on what might be accomplished at the meeting.

Developing a Canadian Position

The responsibility for developing a Canadian reply to the secretary general's request fell to the Arms Control and Disarmament Division of the Department of External Affairs. Its director, T.C. Hammond, who had considerable insight into nuclear affairs from his earlier posting at Canada's delegation to the International Atomic Energy Agency, was the author of the initial memorandum outlining a possible course of action. Hammond proposed that Canada's priority goals for the special session should be to promote "effective measures to curb the superpower arms race" and to seek "to buttress the nonproliferation system by mitigating its current discriminatory features."⁴ The reference to "discriminatory features" reflected concerns that the recently concluded NPT set up a two-tier category of membership—the five nuclear weapon states and all the rest, the non-nuclear weapon states. While this was to be only a temporary distinction pending achievement of the nuclear disarmament foreseen in the treaty, the Cold War build-up of nuclear arsenals was already raising concerns that the categories of nuclear haves and have nots would become permanent.

⁴ T.C. Hammond (DFD), memorandum to Klaus Goldschlag (PDG), 13 April 1977, Department of External Affairs, RG 25 11525, Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa (LAC).

In his memorandum, Hammond related these broad goals to specific objectives such as extending the existing partial ban on nuclear tests to a comprehensive prohibition on nuclear testing and negotiating a convention to ban chemical weapons. Hammond also stressed the responsibility of the superpowers to take action to stem the nuclear arms race, urging “the two major nuclear weapon powers to intensify their efforts to reach further agreements to curtail the strategic nuclear arms confrontation in both its quantitative and its qualitative dimensions.”⁵ Behind all these proposals was a reflection of the strategic goals of curbing the nuclear arms race (by constraining vertical proliferation based on nuclear testing) and removing discriminatory features (both the comprehensive test ban’s and the chemical weapons convention’s prohibitions would apply to all signatories), as well as contributing to the longer term goal of eliminating weapons of mass destruction (WMD).

Demonstrating his awareness of the political/diplomatic context in which his proposals would be received, Hammond, in classic bureaucratic fashion, depicted his ideas as falling in the middle of a spectrum of international opinion on the subject. He wrote: “While some of its provisions may be considered too bold (by some of our NATO allies, for example) or too conservative (by some of the non-aligned extremists, for example), it does represent an attempt to sketch out roughly a reasonable, but activist approach.”⁶

The department’s senior officials seemed to receive Hammond’s memorandum positively, although it was deemed prudent, given that the Canadian reply would eventually be made public, to convey its gist to the secretary of state for external affairs (SSEA) to obtain ministerial approval for the proposed Canadian approach. In September 1977 a memorandum to the minister was forwarded by the undersecretary of state for external affairs, Allan Gotlieb, seeking concurrence on the UNSSOD I strategy and its public dimension.

⁵ Ibid., 6.

⁶ Ibid., 2.

UNSSOD and Public Diplomacy

The upcoming special session was generating considerable attention in Canada among concerned academics and NGOs and the September 1977 memorandum was perhaps most striking for the innovative steps proposed by the undersecretary for managing this new public aspect of the diplomatic process. Since his appointment as undersecretary of state earlier that year, Allan Gotlieb had championed a foreign policy that was more interactive with the public than the traditional practice. According to one observer, “Gotlieb had become the leading advocate in the Canadian Department of External Affairs [DEA] for the sophisticated and long term use of public diplomacy.”⁷ In so doing he was also reflecting Prime Minister Trudeau’s desire to “shake up the External Affairs bureaucracy” and relying on the trusted adviser role he had already established with Trudeau when the latter was minister of justice.⁸

Notwithstanding his own considerable knowledge of multilateral disarmament affairs, gleaned during a posting at Canada’s delegation in Geneva, Gotlieb suggested that in order to assist in development of Canadian policy for the special session, DEA should convene a consultative panel of up to twelve persons “representing a cross section of views and selected on the basis of their ability to make a contribution to the development of Canadian policy.”⁹ Furthermore, in order to provide a focal point for the department’s interaction with interested NGOs, Gotlieb proposed the “designation of a senior department official to serve on a full-time basis as coordinator with particular responsibility for liaison with NGOs and the Canadian public.”¹⁰ This early example of a dedicated consultation with a stakeholder community and the provision of a capacity for ongoing “public diplomacy” and “outreach” was an innovation for the department and a test for some of its habitual practices. This novelty was evident especially in Gotlieb’s recognition that such liaison duties could not simply be an add-on to regular responsibilities, and that the officer in question would have to be taken off-line and be free to travel outside Ottawa to fulfill this new mandate. Ken Williamson, who had previously

⁷ Andrew F. Cooper, “Playing by numbers: Allan Gotlieb, public diplomacy and the management of Canada-US relations,” *The Fletcher Forum* (Fall 1989): 96.

⁸ Granatstein and Bothwell, *Pirouette*, 11–12.

⁹ Allan Gotlieb, memorandum to the Minister for External Affairs, 23 September 1977, 1.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

established an Academic Relations Division for the department, was the chosen official. In making this appointment, Gotlieb may have been counting on Williamson making good use of the ties he had established in academic circles to bring on board individuals whose expertise could generate alternative views to those emerging from the bureaucracy itself. *He may also have hoped that by “co-opting” some of these individuals, public criticism of governmental policies would be muted.*

The policy development process for UNSSOD I went into higher gear early in 1978 with attention focused on how specifically the goal of curbing the superpower arms race could be carried out. One step would be to stop the production of the fissile materials (i.e., the enriched uranium and plutonium) that were the essential ingredients of nuclear weapons. The idea of a treaty to ban the production of fissile material for nuclear weapons, an objective the UN General Assembly had endorsed since 1957, was a natural link to the goal of countering both vertical and horizontal proliferation. If the fissile material tap were turned off, no new nuclear weapons could be manufactured. References to the envisaged Fissile Material Cutoff Treaty (FMCT) began to feature in departmental communications although, given the possibility of a cool response from some nuclear allies, the minister was consulted in February 1978 regarding whether to include the FMCT among the Canadian proposals to be put forward at the UN. Ministerial guidance was cautious, suggesting that the department “continue our soundings about attitudes of other governments towards cut-off idea” and flagging that a “crucial factor in Canada’s decision will be attitude of Americans.”¹¹ DEA officials working on international security files would be equally sensitive to the views of Canada’s principal ally.

While consultations were pursued with US officials, Washington did not appear to oppose the FMCT idea, and there was even evidence that the Americans were contemplating putting forward at UNSSOD a proposal similar to the Canadian one. The US Arms Control and Disarmament Agency (ACDA) had been conducting a study on the cutoff idea, which was still ongoing at the time of UNSSOD but led allies to inquire as to American intentions.¹² Communications from the Canadian High Commission in London reported, however, that the

¹¹ Telegram DFD 96 to PRMNY (Permanent Mission to the UN New York), 22 February 1978.

¹² ACDA telegram to US Embassy Bonn, 1 May 1978, www.wikileaks.org.

UK was concerned with the non-discriminatory feature of the proposal and the requirement to accept intrusive verification that would flow from any such treaty. Hammond was robust in rebutting this concern, writing that “Verification remains fundamental and integral part of Canadian arms control and disarmament policy and without this element, proposal would be meaningless and unacceptable.”¹³ Although Allied reaction was a concern, the FMCT proposal was retained for the time being in the Canadian repertoire for UNSSOD.

A Metaphor Emerges and Prime Ministerial Engagement

While Hammond and his colleagues regarded maintaining the integrity of the Canadian proposals as a prime concern, there was also the question of how best to depict these proposals when they were eventually presented in public as part of the Canadian statement at UNSSOD I. The metaphor of suffocation that was ultimately applied to the Canadian ideas for countering the arms race appears to have originated in a communication from Hammond to Klaus Goldschlag, the responsible assistant undersecretary, when the former noted that regardless of the actual outcome of the special session, Canada “can make a clear statement based on a serious analysis of the present strategic situation and advocating specific steps to initiate the process of throttling the nuclear arms race.”¹⁴

Hammond may have been playing back a variant to his superior that the latter had already introduced into the departmental vocabulary. According to Legault and Fortman, in their study of Canadian disarmament policy, “The term ‘suffocation’ was first coined by one of Canada’s most brilliant diplomats, Klaus Goldschlag, during private discussions at a symposium attended by the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister was intrigued by this turn of phrase, and it became part of diplomatic usage.”¹⁵

Whatever the true origins of the “suffocation” term, the image may well have been used during a meeting with the prime minister organized in early April to consider preparations for

¹³ Telegram DFD 98 to LDN (Canadian High Commission) 24 February 1978.

¹⁴ Memorandum DFD to KGO (Klaus Goldschlag) 1 April 1978.

¹⁵ Albert Legault and Michel Fortman, *A Diplomacy of Hope: Canada and Disarmament 1945–88* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1992), 370.

UNSSOD I. There were both policy and political motivations underlying the prime minister's interest in arms control matters. Trudeau's antipathy to nuclear weapons and distrust of the military have been well documented. He had taken a political stance against nuclear weapons from the start and, as one historian has remarked, "Indeed in 1963 he had delayed his entry into politics to protest the Liberal Party's decision to accept US nuclear arms for the Canadian military."¹⁶ His anti-nuclear weapon disposition was also in line with contemporary public opinion. As noted by Robert Bothwell, "Trudeau's passionate opposition to nuclear weapons should have come as no surprise. They were consistent with his earlier statements and with faltering public support in Canada: by 1966 more Canadians opposed nuclear weapons than favoured them."¹⁷ This anti-nuclear public opinion was particularly salient in Quebec where the prime minister's political fortunes were engaged in the struggle against the PQ separatist government elected in 1976. Having gained attention and praise from some European leaders, notably Helmut Schmidt, with his earlier decision in 1969 to terminate Canada's nuclear strike role within NATO, Trudeau may also have been influenced by the German chancellor's thinking and his expressed fear over nuclear force postures that might provoke "an exchange of nuclear munitions which would reduce central Europe to an uninhabitable wasteland."¹⁸

Whatever the mix of motivations behind his policy direction, Trudeau appears to have provided a positive impetus to the forward-leaning ideas being generated by the Department of External Affairs for the special session. By early May, Undersecretary of State Gotlieb, in a memorandum to the minister, was able to state that the "Prime Minister expressed the hope that the Canadian statement would represent a fresh approach to disarmament." Gotlieb continued by characterizing the draft text of the statement appended to the memorandum as an attempt "to meet the Prime Minister's point without cutting across common Alliance interests." The

¹⁶ Greg Donaghy, "'The ghost of peace': Pierre Trudeau's search for peace 1982–84," *Peace Research* 39, no. 1/2 (2007): 39.

¹⁷ Robert Bothwell, *Alliance and Illusion: Canada and the World, 1945–84* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2007), 284. This view is corroborated by Legault and Fortman: "Trudeau was quite simply an antimilitarist, distrustful of the military, and above all totally opposed to nuclear weapons," *A Diplomacy of Hope*, 203.

¹⁸ Head and Trudeau, *The Canadian Way*, 273.

department, while endorsing the proposals generated by Hammond and company, was also sensitive to their compatibility with existing NATO policies and postures.

The suffocation motif is explicitly used within the draft text of the statement: “the best way of arresting the dynamic of the nuclear arms race may be by a strategy of suffocation, by literally depriving the arms race of the oxygen on which it feeds.”¹⁹ Although this image must have appealed to many as a vivid way of describing the effect of the specialized constraints on nuclear weapon development Canada was proposing, no doubt others would have been anxious about how Canada’s advocating the “strangling” of the superpowers in their pursuit of military advantage might be perceived by those concerned. At the same time, Trudeau may have believed that his advocacy of a new level of cooperation between the superpowers would enjoy support from US president Jimmy Carter who, at their February 1977 meeting, had encouraged the prime minister to promote nuclear non-proliferation.²⁰

It seems clear that the prime minister’s personal engagement in the nuclear disarmament file imparted a priority to this subject that the responsible departments would not have granted it if left to their own devices. In an illuminating observation, George Ignatieff, who served as departmental adviser on disarmament as well as Canadian ambassador to the Disarmament Conference, having noted that he received his instructions from a joint DEA-DND committee, remarked, “To say that disarmament did not rank as a high priority with either department would be an understatement.” What support for robust action there was, he continued, “was largely because of the importance the prime minister personally seemed to attach to the issue. To my pleasant surprise he invited me to spend an evening at 24 Sussex Drive when I was in Canada for a brief visit, and I found that we were in fundamental agreement on the need to do whatever we could to slow down or preferably reverse the nuclear arms race.”²¹

The development of the draft speech seems to have fallen largely to Klaus Goldschlag who, while careful to put each successive draft before Minister of External Affairs Donald

¹⁹ Memorandum to the Minister from A.E. Gotlieb, 2 May 1978.

²⁰ John English, *Just Watch Me: The Life of Pierre Elliott Trudeau 1968–2000* (Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2009), 377.

²¹ George Ignatieff, *The Making of a Peacemaker: The Memoirs of George Ignatieff* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), 245–246.

Jamieson, appears to have been interacting directly with the prime minister. Minister Jamieson's involvement in the development of the speech seems marginal and he may have judged it best not to get in the way of an initiative with which the prime minister was engaged. An initial text of 3 May was followed by a second dated 11 May, which Goldschlag indicated reflected the prime minister's comments and led to "the addition of a fairly extended historical section ... which lays an intellectual basis for the Canadian proposals."²² This elaboration of the intellectual foundation for Canada's specific proposals bears the hallmark of a prime ministerial intervention and transcends the usual bureaucratic emphasis on highlighting the proposals themselves rather than their philosophic antecedents. Despite Trudeau's evident oversight of the development of the Canadian statement, as late as 16 May there was still some question about whether the prime minister or Minister Jamieson would go to New York to deliver the speech. A third draft of the speech was conveyed by Klaus Goldschlag on 18 May and it was not until 23 May that the prime minister decided to deliver the speech himself. This choice was all the more remarkable given that he had not once addressed the UN General Assembly during his previous ten years in power and suggests a personal investment in the speech. Canada was assigned the first speaking slot in the afternoon session on Friday, 26 May 1978, a day after Vice President Mondale for the US and Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko for the USSR had spoken.

The Strategy of Suffocation Explained

The speech delivered by Prime Minister Trudeau still stands up, over three decades later, as a powerful example of oratory and model for generating a creative menu of measures available to the international community to counter the nuclear juggernaut, in spite of the fact that few were actually taken up in the form Trudeau advocated.

Trudeau, perhaps conscious that some might view his effort to advise the superpowers as presumptuous, begins by laying out Canada's credentials for addressing the nuclear problem. It is, after all, a country "geographically placed between two heavily armed superpowers, with an

²² Note from Klaus Goldschlag to PM, via Minister of External Affairs, 11 May 1978.

obvious stake in the prevention of war in a nuclear age.”²³ Despite belonging to a defensive alliance that includes three out of the five nuclear weapon states, “We are none the less a country that has renounced the production of nuclear weapons or the acquisition of such weapons under our control. We have withdrawn from any nuclear role by Canada’s armed forces in Europe and are now in the process of replacing with conventional armed aircraft the nuclear-capable planes still assigned to our forces in North America. We are thus not only the first country in the world with the capacity to produce nuclear weapons that chose not to do so; we are also the first nuclear-armed country to have chosen to divest itself of nuclear arms.”²⁴

Having broadcast Canada’s nuclear disarmament credentials, Trudeau sets the historical and intellectual stage for engaging the century-old “great debate” of “how to achieve security through disarmament.” The terms of this debate, he continues, have been altered in the last quarter of a century by two developments: “One was the advent of nuclear weapons which has forced us to assimilate the concept of unusable power. The other was the transformation of the political map which has brought a whole host of new international actors into the disarmament debate.”²⁵

He notes that a declaratory approach had for long characterized disarmament efforts, citing the 1928 Briand-Kellogg Pact, with its renunciation of war, as a classic example. This approach lives on in declarations of no-first use of nuclear weapons (declarations that the USSR had made without reciprocity from the West). While Trudeau acknowledges that such declarations “give expression and authority to a widely shared perception of international morality,” he continues, “it is important not to mistake the shadow for the substance. Declarations of good intent are no substitute for real disarmament.”²⁶

Real disarmament measures have been achieved in the past and Trudeau enumerates the existing treaty-enshrined prohibitions on biological weapons and the placement of nuclear

²³ UN General Assembly Tenth special session, “Provisional Verbatim Record of the Sixth Meeting” A/S-10/PV.6, 26 May 1978, 5.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 6.

²⁶ Ibid., 7.

weapons in outer space or on the seabed. He counters claims that such measures are peripheral and argues “they are a great advance over declarations of intentions because they deal with capabilities and they are therefore verifiable—which intentions are not.” It is all about foreclosing risky options “that are real and, in the absence of restraint, inescapable.” Restraint will require coming to grips with what Trudeau describes as “the technological impulse that continues to lie behind the development of strategic nuclear weapons.” Since it can take a decade to move a new weapon system from research through to production and deployment, governments are saddled with policies that are a function of weapon procurement decisions taken years before. In a warning that still resonates today, Trudeau observes, that in such a situation “there is a risk that foreign policy can become the servant of defence policy, which is not the natural order of policy-making.”²⁷

Recognizing that unchecked nuclear weapon development can heighten concerns over the possibility of a disarming first strike or complicate greatly the verification challenge by blurring the line between nuclear and conventional weaponry, Trudeau concludes, “stable deterrence remains an inadequate concept. And such a concept is a poor substitute for genuine world security.” Similarly, contemporary strategic arms limitation negotiations between the superpowers have demonstrated that while it is possible to codify an existing balance of forces via such arrangements, it is difficult “to go beyond that and to cut back on weapons systems once they have been developed and deployed.” This leads Trudeau to his conclusion that “the best way of arresting the dynamic of the nuclear arms race may be by a strategy of suffocation, by depriving the arms race of the oxygen on which it feeds.”²⁸

A Package of Measures

The striking metaphor is backed up with four practical measures for accomplishing the goal of arms race “suffocation.” Trudeau acknowledges that each of these measures has been independently suggested previously, but suggests that it is their combination that represents “a

²⁷ Ibid., 11.

²⁸ Ibid., 12.

more efficient and a more promising approach to curbing the nuclear arms race.”²⁹ The measures are 1) a comprehensive nuclear test ban, 2) a cessation of flight testing of new strategic delivery vehicles, 3) a prohibition on the production of fissile material for weapons purposes, and 4) an agreement “to limit and then progressively to reduce military spending on new strategic nuclear weapons systems.”³⁰

The “strategy of suffocation” represented by this package would transcend the merely declaratory and have a real impact on the nuclear arms race. It would have that impact, Trudeau expounds, “by freezing the available amount of fissionable material; by preventing any technology that may be developed in the laboratory from being tested; and by reducing the funds devoted to military expenditure.” Trudeau suggests that his strategy is a more realistic option than calls for total nuclear disarmament and could reduce the risks of a nuclear conflict that is fuelled by “the technological momentum of strategic competition.”³¹

Trudeau ends this section of his speech (which goes on to address issues of horizontal proliferation and conventional arms control) with a politic nod to the recent decision by US president Jimmy Carter to forego the development of the neutron bomb. Trudeau commends Carter’s “far-sighted postponement of a decision to produce a special battlefield nuclear weapon.”³² This is an example of the superpower restraint in the development of nuclear weapons that Trudeau believes could be rendered mutual and suitably codified if the US and USSR would only embrace the “strategy of suffocation” he has outlined.

Reactions and Outcomes

That embrace by the superpowers was not forthcoming, although elements of the Trudeau package have remained central to nuclear arms control and disarmament efforts up to the present. The goal of a comprehensive test ban was realized with the adoption of a Comprehensive (Nuclear) Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) in 1996: however, an extremely demanding entry into force

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 13.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 14.

provision of that treaty requiring the ratification of 44 individual states has prevented it formally taking effect. The ban on fissile material production for nuclear weapons has been repeatedly endorsed by the international community as a priority objective, yet its realization has just as frequently been stymied by one or more key actors, with the net result that negotiations of such a ban have never commenced. A ban on flight testing of all new strategic delivery vehicles has not featured in the negotiations between the US and the USSR/Russian Federation although similar constraints on the development of selected capacities and the deployment of existing ones have featured in their bilateral strategic agreements (e.g., bans on anti-ballistic missile systems, new “heavy” missiles, and MIRVed warheads). While the closing of the funding tap for nuclear weapon development was and remains a very effective constraint on the arms race dynamic, it too has proven beyond the capacity of the major nuclear powers to agree on, and all of the overt nuclear powers are engaged in modernization programs for their nuclear forces.

It appears that Trudeau’s speech was well received at the time as the general debate segment of UNSSOD got underway. Citing reactions from other delegations and UN Secretariat officials, the Canadian ambassador to the UN, Bill Barton, wrote on 2 June, “the speech was the most substantial and one of the two or three most important addresses of those delivered thus far.”³³ He noted that positive reactions had come from all quarters and that even the Soviet and Polish ambassadors had expressed their admiration. NGO representatives had given the speech particularly high praise, which would have come as a relief to those in Ottawa concerned with Canadian public opinion on this increasingly hot topic. The Canadian media gave it mixed reviews: positive on the part of the *Toronto Star* and *Le Devoir*, sharply negative on the part of the *Globe and Mail*. The prime minister seemed particularly upset at media suggestions that his address to UNSSOD was a publicity gimmick (as if a speech at the UN General Assembly actually generated media coverage).³⁴

Notwithstanding the positive reactions at UNSSOD, Ambassador Barton flagged that getting elements of Trudeau’s speech incorporated into the outcome document of the special session itself would be a challenge: “How we will fare remains to be seen, but we shall give it a

³³ Letter to Under Secretary of State A.E. Gotlieb from Ambassador W.H. Barton, 2 June 1978.

³⁴ English, *Just Watch Me*, 378–380.

good try.”³⁵ He specifically raised the question of whether the Americans and Russians would be prepared to live with the proposal for a ban on flight testing of new strategic delivery vehicles.

Ambassador Barton’s diplomatic instincts were correct and it soon became evident that not all of the measures enumerated by Trudeau would find a home in the consensus outcome document. The US delegation indicated that both the flight-testing and fissile material production bans “were more specific than they would like the Plan of Action to be.”³⁶ In reporting back to the State Department, the US UN mission, which had not remarked on Trudeau’s speech as such, flagged that “Canada is the only country besides France to have introduced language that the US cannot accept: a call for a ban on flight testing of intercontinental missiles.”³⁷ In a not unfamiliar tactic, the Americans referred to the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT) being at a sensitive stage in Congress and the need to avoid the impression in Washington of external pressures being created. Overall, neither the US nor the USSR was open to considering ideas for strategic stability and arsenal reductions that did not originate with themselves. Despite this countervailing intervention, it appears that the minister of external affairs agreed that Canada should retain both items in its policy.

The final document of UNSSOD I, which was endorsed by all participating delegations, necessarily reflected a compromise among the varied priorities and interests of the states involved. Ambassador Barton in his wrap-up report on the special session gave a positive spin to the results in expressing satisfaction with the “implicit if not explicit coverage of elements in Canada’s suffocation proposals in appropriate paragraphs.”³⁸ Certainly the call for a treaty prohibiting nuclear testing figured in the final document, but beyond that widely shared goal it was difficult to identify much of Trudeau’s package of measures in the final text. The need for qualitative as well as quantitative disarmament measures for halting the arms race was noted at several places in the document, an important conceptual gain, although no specificity was given to how this objective could be achieved. Some echoes of Trudeau’s critique of nuclear deterrence

³⁵ Ambassador W.H. Barton, letter to Under Secretary of State A.E. Gotlieb, 2 June 1978.

³⁶ Telegram DFD 187 to MinDel 13 June 1978.

³⁷ USUN Status Report on SSOD, 21 June 1978 telegram to State Dept., www.wikileaks.org.

³⁸ Telegram from PRMNY/Barton to DEA HQ 30 June 1978.

could be found in the document and the high levels of military spending are roundly condemned, but essentially because they detract from development efforts without reference to their driving role in the nuclear arms race. A major measure like Trudeau's proposed ban on the production of fissile material for nuclear weapons was retained but diluted into a general call for negotiations to cease the production of all types of nuclear weapons and the fissile material from which they are produced. Any purposeful, near-term action on the fissile material ban was effectively killed by the nuclear weapon states that were still in the process of building up their nuclear arsenals and were not amenable to cutting off the oxygen supply to this or any other part of their nuclear weapons complexes. The *specific* "strategy of suffocation" proposals by Canada were relegated (like those of 32 other states submitting documents to the special session) to an annex-like listing at the end of the final document.³⁹

American diplomatic cables for this period indicate that Prime Minister Trudeau's SSOD remarks had received little attention and less concern. What had exercised the US Embassy in Ottawa and the State Department in May 1978 were Canada's objections to a draft NATO Long Term Program of Defense Spending (LTDP) that was to be adopted at an Alliance Summit to be held in Washington only a few days after the UNSSOD debate. Apparently, this objection originated with the prime minister and reflected "Trudeau's interest in making defense policy consonant with foreign policy" by ensuring that leaders set the priorities for the NATO bureaucracy and not the other way around. Whatever its origins, the Canadian stance was clearly alarming for the US and its NATO Summit planning. The American ambassador Tom Enders met with Deputy Undersecretary Goldschlag on 3 May to voice "our surprise and deep concern over GOC approach to LTDP." The effect of the Canadian campaign on LTDP "could be to blow major US initiative out of water just when it is about to succeed" according to Enders cabled account of his exchange with Goldschlag. He followed up this *démarche* two days later with De Montigny Marchand, deputy secretary to the Cabinet, who was described in the embassy cable as a close adviser to Trudeau. According to the American account, Marchand relayed a reply from Trudeau that "he [Trudeau] has no desire to be an obstructionist, and that he realizes the

³⁹ United Nations, Final Document of the Tenth Special Session of the General Assembly, S-10/2, 30 June 1978, UN, New York, 14.

President, as host of the Summit, should have primary say on this problem.”⁴⁰ While the prime minister seems to have been willing to concede the point on alliance defence spending targets in deference to President Carter and his role as host of the NATO Summit, he evidently believed strongly in the need for political control and direction of military affairs. His reference in his UNSSOD speech to the “risk that foreign policy can become the servant of defence policy” is further evidence of this conviction.

Conclusions and Legacy

Given the diplomatic context of UNSSOD and the necessity to forge an outcome that all participating states could accept, it would have been unrealistic to expect more extensive take-up of Trudeau’s proposals in the final document. At the same time, his speech was an impressive example of an intellectually coherent critique of the existing nuclear disorder and a practical set of measures that *if taken up comprehensively* could effectively halt the arms race that was the core concern of the international community. The speech’s emphases on tangible over declaratory measures and the importance of verification and transparency provisions to support agreements have been refrains of Canadian policy for some time. The military-technical dynamic that propels the constant search to obtain strategic superiority over potential adversaries was rightly viewed by Trudeau as a motor of the arms race requiring political control and mutual restraint. The United States and the Soviet Union were taking initial steps in this regard during the UNSSOD period, having concluded SALT II and initiated discussion on further reductions, but the checkered record of bilateral strategic limitations agreements since then has demonstrated the difficulty of curbing existing arms races and preventing new ones.

Perhaps the most enduring effect of the prime minister’s “strategy of suffocation” speech was the impetus it provided within the Canadian bureaucracy to build the capacity required to play a significant role in international arms control and disarmament affairs. In a memorandum to the prime minister shortly after the conclusion of the UNSSOD, the minister of external affairs, noting that “the Special Session on Disarmament had aroused the expectations of many

⁴⁰ US Embassy Ottawa cables to State Department, 3 May and 5 May 1978 (www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1978OTTAWA).

Canadians,” announced that he was creating a new office of the Advisor on Disarmament and Arms Control Affairs. The first incumbent would be Geoffrey Pearson, the then director general of the UN Bureau. The prime minister simply wrote “excellent” in the margins of the paragraph referring to the new office and its staffing.⁴¹ As with the earlier decision to appoint Ken Williamson as a public liaison officer for disarmament matters, the Department of External Affairs, with prime ministerial blessing, was establishing some of the institutional capacity necessary to exercise leadership in the demanding realm of international arms control and disarmament.

Looking back at this engagement in arms control and disarmament a few years later, Allan Gotlieb presented it as something of a Canadian vocation. He wrote: “Canada’s strong role in disarmament activity has always been a natural calling, with broad public support and strong specialized constituencies.”⁴² He also indicated that Canada’s investment in technical as well as diplomatic capacities would enable it to contribute to the development of arms control agreements. As he stated, “the Canadian reputation for multilateral diplomacy and technical skill enables a national contribution to the technical side of arms control negotiations—such as on the principles and techniques of verification.”⁴³

It was indeed for its contribution to arms control verification, especially through the work of DEA’s Verification Research Unit established in the wake of Prime Minister Trudeau’s peace initiative of 1983, that Canada was best known and celebrated within the multilateral disarmament community. The political and financial support for this verification focus and the diplomatic activism that built on it enabled Canada to assume leadership roles on several arms control and disarmament files. These included work on a Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (one of the specific measures from Trudeau’s speech), contributions to the International Monitoring System underpinning the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty concluded in 1996 (another goal of the speech), innovative work on the verification of outer space arms control (the “PAXSAT” study),

⁴¹ Memorandum to the Prime Minister from the Minister of External Affairs, 17 July 1978.

⁴² Allan Gotlieb and Jeremy Kinsman, “A practical agenda for arms control: A Canadian view,” *McGill Law Journal* 28 (1983): 795.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 797.

and the technical studies supporting the successful advocacy by Canada of a ban on anti-personnel landmines (the Ottawa Convention of 1997). This was emblematic of the leadership Canada was able to exercise for several decades following UNSSOD I under the continuing impetus and influence afforded by Pierre Trudeau's "strategy of suffocation" and the institutional support provided to implement it.