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Point and counterpoint

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While we focus on nuclear newcomers like North Korea, the real nuclear powers are making no progress in disarmament

Erika Simpson, Special to PostMedia Network
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On Feb. 7, North Korea fired a long-range rocket, which critics say is a test of banned missile technology, and announced it had conducted a nuclear test of its first hydrogen bomb on Jan. 6.

The Great Powers are pointing accusatory fingers at Pyongyang, but they should point fingers back at themselves. Though the global total has been cut to 15,850 nuclear weapons, 95 per cent of the world's nuclear arsenal belongs to the U.S. and Russia.

The U.S. and Russia still retain more than 5,000 nuclear weapons on alert, ready to launch in minutes, and now China may be contemplating putting its smaller nuclear arsenal on hair-trigger alert, too.

People no longer hear much about the revived Cold War and the dangerously pre-emptive doctrines of China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States. Instead, the focus is on criminal elements in Russia bent on stealing plutonium, rogue states like North Korea and Libya, and terrorists in al-Qaida or ISIL intent on purchasing nuclear weapons on the black market.

Yet the sheer enormity of the size and cost of the arsenals belonging to the former superpowers simply defies human comprehension. And their modernization programs will ensure that nuclear weapons, costing more than \$100 billion a year, are retained for the rest of the 21st century.

There needs to be much more vigorous progress on Russian and American arms control and disarmament.

The Russians are considering deploying nuclear weapons in Kaliningrad, its enclave close to the Baltic countries. Meanwhile, the Germans are wondering whether to agree to the U.S. proposal to modernize the B-61 bomber that carries NATO's tactical nuclear weapons.

London's ruling Conservative party and Edinburgh's Scottish National Party disagree about the modernization of the U.K.'s Trident nuclear submarines. France has rejoined NATO but its independent nuclear arsenal seems to reassure only Parisians.

Yet another option, which relies less on state-level change and more on parliamentary bodies, is to call for members of parliaments and legislatures around the world to support a nuclear weapons convention, which would be a global treaty to prohibit and eliminate nuclear weapons in a way similar to the Chemical Weapons Convention and the Biological and Toxic Weapons Convention.

In Canada, more than 800 members of the Order of Canada, including most recently former prime minister Jean Chretien, have endorsed the idea of a nuclear weapons convention and a motion was unanimously passed both

the Senate and House of Commons in 2010 under the Harper government.

We should also support the further building of a worldwide network called Parliamentarians for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament (led by co-president Paul Dewar, a former NDP MP) to support the newly-formed Open-Ended Working Group on Nuclear Disarmament at the UN.

The working group held its first formal meetings in Geneva on Feb. 22-26 at the long-stalled UN Conference for Disarmament.

The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty review conference ostensibly failed last May because of a dispute over holding a conference on the Middle East, but there is hope the fledgling working group will make painstaking progress.

With assistance from the International Campaign to Ban Nuclear Weapons, many of these groups and their representatives are working on constructing a treaty banning nuclear weapons, even though such a ban would not be legally binding on the nuclear states. Developing a legal ban, even without the participation of the nuclear weapon states, would strengthen the global norm against nuclear weapons.

Stigmatizing nuclear weapons states might incite more countries to sign the Humanitarian Pledge, which commits countries to work toward a ban on nuclear weapons. Already 123 nations — but not NATO allies — have signed it and it could lead to more active negotiations for a nuclear weapons convention.

Agreeing on a nuclear ban seems a lofty goal, far into the next century, but lofty goals like ending slavery, colonialism, and apartheid once seemed unobtainable, too.

In the last century, it seemed impossible that independence would come to India in 1948 through the rise of a non-violence movement led by Mahatma Gandhi. Martin Luther King spearheaded the civil rights movement but never saw civil rights legislation passed in the U.S. in 1964. The Cold War generation failed to predict the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the subsequent collapse of the bipolar system. Nelson Mandela never expected, after 27 years of imprisonment that he would see apartheid in South Africa give way in 1993.

In this century, we must push toward a global ban of all nuclear weapons.

Associate Prof. Erika Simpson of the department of political science at Western University, is vice-president of the Canadian Peace Research Association and a director of the Canadian Pugwash Group, the national affiliate of the Pugwash Conferences of Science and Global Affairs. Recently she was awarded the Shirley Farlinger Award for Peace Writings by Canadian Voice of Women, an NGO with consultative status at the UN. These views are her own and not the views of these organizations.