Toward a world without nuclear weapons
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The future of humanity is as threatened now as it was at the end of the Second World War, four Canadian leaders warn

Jean Chrétien, Joe Clark, Ed Broadbent and Lloyd Axworthy

At the end of the Second World War, Canada was one of the few countries that possessed the technology and raw materials needed to produce nuclear weapons. In the wake of the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Canadian leaders of the day, shocked at the terrifying power of the bomb, renounced that option and turned their attention to achieving an international agreement to control the spread of nuclear weapons and to free humanity from the risk of annihilation.

Lester Pearson was under no illusions that the genie could be put back into the bottle. In his memoirs, he recorded his feelings of despair as he contemplated the postwar nuclear security environment: “Peace may have little to do with victory.”

Regrettably, Canada's future Nobel Peace Prize winner was right, and the world endured 45 years of East-West confrontation with each side threatening to unleash its nuclear weapons on the other in the case of war. People of goodwill thus rejoiced when the Cold War ended. And in the mood of euphoria that prevailed, many expected that a way would surely be found to deal once and for all with the threat nuclear weapons posed to the security of the world.

Unfortunately, that hope proved to be illusory.

New nuclear weapons states have emerged. Others are on the point of becoming nuclear capable. And these states cannot be counted on to adhere to the doctrine of “mutually assured destruction” that ironically helped keep the peace between NATO and the Warsaw Pact throughout the Cold War.

We also live in an era of international terrorism, a period when individuals are prepared to kill themselves for the sake of what they consider to be a higher cause. It is not to be excluded that suicide bombers will one day obtain nuclear weapons or nuclear materials.

It is thus a welcome development that more and more statesmen have been sounding a wake-up call to governments and peoples to deal urgently with the nuclear crisis. President Barack Obama has launched a debate in the United States. He has been joined by others in Germany,
the United Kingdom, Italy and Australia. A number of specific proposals have been made to further the goal of eventually abolishing nuclear weapons in their entirety.

We believe that the future of humanity is as threatened now as it was at the end of the Second World War from proliferation of nuclear weapons. There are many good ideas already on the table to begin to tackle the issues, but unless action is taken now, the situation could become catastrophic.

We therefore support the goals of our colleagues in the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy and Australia and call on governments and ordinary people everywhere to push for action now before it is too late.

Jean Chrétien and Joe Clark are former prime ministers of Canada. Ed Broadbent is a former leader of the federal New Democratic Party, and Lloyd Axworthy is a former foreign affairs minister.