The Other Threat to Our Species

by Bill Pearce

While we are reminded daily of the challenges humanity faces coming to terms with global warming, we seem to have lost sight of the other existential crisis our planet is facing -- the risk of nuclear conflagration.

At a minimum, steps must be taken to reduce nuclear risks to a manageable level, while we continue to work towards the total elimination of the danger.

In his latest book, “The Doomsday Machine,” Daniel Ellsberg recalls the events of the Cuban Missile Crisis to remind us how miscalculation coupled with poor intelligence can sometimes lead us to the brink of disaster -- even when you have two superpower leaders intent on avoiding military conflict.

Ellsberg was intimately involved in the negotiations that eventually led to a peaceful resolution of the crisis. He also had access to highly classified information including U.S. nuclear war-fighting plans. At that time, the estimate of the number of deaths from a U.S. first strike was 600 million, mostly civilians, and another 100 million from a retaliatory strike from the remnants of Soviet nuclear forces. When Ellsberg asked the Pentagon what would be the count if one included the effects of the firestorms that would be created from the atomic explosions, they doubled the death count, taking the total death count to well over one billion people (or one-third of the global population at the time).

It wasn’t until 22 years after the Cuban Missile Crisis when studies enlightened us about the dangers of a nuclear winter. That is when Ellsberg came to the realization that civilization could have ended with the events that occurred in October 1962.
Ellsberg thinks that the very existence of nuclear weapons in the hands of the superpowers poses “intolerable dangers to the survival of civilization.”

These days U.S. and NATO forces are equipped with a mixture of conventional and nuclear weapons of every description. Increasingly, force postures are making more likely military scenarios of “limited nuclear war.” Although he did not always hold this view, Ellsberg is now firmly of the belief that a limited first use of nuclear weapons could never stay “limited.”

Fortunately, the world now has treaty-based, normative frameworks that allow us to move beyond the nuclear threat. It should be incumbent on all peace-loving nations to ratify the treaty prohibiting the possession and use of nuclear weapons.

Unfortunately most states either possessing nuclear weapons or in alliances under a “security umbrella” of one of the nuclear-armed powers face pressure to conform to nuclear war-fighting doctrines and political orthodoxy.

At present we are in the midst of a renewed and very dangerous arms race, one that is heightening the risks of accidental nuclear war. Driven by these nuclear war-fighting policies of the United States and Russia an unprecedented – and very expensive – nuclear modernization is underway. What has to happen to reduce tensions and decrease nuclear dangers is, at a minimum, to move to a deterrent-only defence posture. Both sides should declare a “no first use” policy, which should in turn bring about a drastic reduction to the number of weapons on each side. (Russia and the United States are each now estimated to possess more than 6000 nuclear devices).

This also would allow each side to take their weapon systems off of the hair-trigger alert. By so doing they would retain survivable second strike forces, a “deterrent,” but one with less likelihood of crossing the tripwire, by accident or miscalculation, to nuclear use and the devastation of human civilization.

Canada should lobby NATO to adopt a no first use policy which would include the removal of U.S. nuclear weapons now stored in Europe back to the United States.

A longer version of this article can be found at wfmcanada.org/2019/12/the-other-threat/