

# Nonviolent Defence

- Frequently Asked Questions -

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Canadian Coalition for  
Nonviolent Defence

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Coalition canadienne pour  
la défense non violente

## **1 – What is nonviolent defence?**

Nonviolent defence is a policy of using nonviolent action both to defend a country from military invasion and to deter such invasions. By “policy,” we mean a society’s deliberate choice to adopt a strategy of nonviolent action in advance of a possible invasion—not a last-minute, ad hoc, or spontaneous response. To be most effective, such a policy would require planning, training, and investment on a scale comparable to current military defence policies.

## **2 – What are nonviolent actions?**

Nonviolent actions are a broad set of methods or tactics used to pursue political goals without employing lethal violence—or the threat of it. These methods include protest, social pressure, economic pressure (such as strikes and boycotts), and various forms of noncooperation.

## **3 – Are nonviolent actions effective?**

Nonviolent actions—by themselves—are not effective. Nonviolent strategies—carefully chosen and sequenced nonviolent actions—are effective.

Nonviolent strategies are intentional nonviolent actions calculated to achieve political goals based on considerations such as available resources and the relative strength of adversaries. Like violent strategies, nonviolent strategies are not guaranteed to succeed. But historically, nonviolent strategies have worked more often.

In their landmark study *Why Civil Resistance Works* (2011), Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan examined more than 300 attempts at regime change between 1900 and 2006, comparing nonviolent resistance with violent uprisings. They found that while just over half of nonviolent campaigns succeeded (53%), they were still about twice as effective as violent campaigns (26%). Strategic nonviolence is not magic, but it is a proven and powerful tool for those seeking to make the world a better place.

#### **4 – What is the theory of change behind nonviolent strategies?**

The core theory behind nonviolent strategies is that all power relies on consent.

Every ruler depends on the obedience of the ruled. This holds true for parents and teachers as much as for factory owners and dictators. If power rests on consent, then withdrawing that consent can erode a ruler's authority. In other words, rulers need us—they are dependent.

Because power depends on consent, it is always limited. Parents, teachers, factory owners, and dictators may be powerful, but none are all-powerful. Their authority is bound by how much obedience they can command. They can draw on different sources to secure obedience—such as legitimacy (the perceived right to rule), access to resources, loyal supporters, and fear—but these sources are never infinite.

#### **5 – I understand how noncooperation (i.e., refusing to obey orders, strikes) can frustrate an occupying force. But what about soldiers? How is it effective to meet armed soldiers with nonviolence?**

Remember, the power of “rulers” is limited because obedience is limited—including the obedience of police and soldiers. While rulers may threaten violent force, they still rely on individual soldiers and officers to carry out those threats. If police or soldiers refuse to follow orders, a ruler's power amounts to little more than empty words.

How does nonviolence affect this dynamic? Many soldiers and officers are motivated by the belief that their use of force serves a noble purpose—protecting society, safeguarding the innocent, or upholding order. When they are commanded to use violence against a nonviolent movement, those beliefs are often shaken. Some may hesitate, refuse to carry out orders, or even defect (switch sides). Throughout history, the loss of morale and the defection of security forces have been crucial factors in the success of nonviolent movements.

## **6 – What about highly repressive regimes?**

Another way to ask this is: wouldn't dictators just crush nonviolent defence brutally? It's fascinating to note the many nonviolent movements that have been successful against repressive regimes—in Chile, in Serbia, in the Philippines, and in Communist Eastern Europe in the 1980s. Nonviolent movements—paradoxically—can be more powerful with repression, as they are able to use the opponent's repression against them. Theorists have called this effect “moral jiu-jitsu,” where movements use violent repression to decrease the legitimacy of the regime and encourage security defections.

## **7 – Have nonviolent strategies ever been applied to the problems of national defence?**

In short, no—not yet. Nonviolent defence would be a new application of a time-tested method. It would be something new, but we have good reasons to think it would work. The deliberate use of nonviolent action to achieve political goals without lethal violence has been an explicit strategy for only about a century. Nonviolent strategies have been used to topple dictators and win major policy changes—such as in the U.S. civil rights movement—but they have not yet been systematically applied to national defence.

Scholars argue that the proven success of nonviolence in other contexts gives good reason to believe it could also defend a country from military invasion. They note that vast resources are already invested in military defence—funding, research and development, strategic planning, training, and personnel. With comparable investment, nonviolent defence could not only succeed but, in many cases, outperform traditional military alternatives.

## **8 – What would the relationship be between nonviolent defence and the military?**

Nonviolent defence and military defence rely on different logics of effectiveness. Combining them tends to weaken the impact of nonviolent strategies—especially their ability to generate defections within security forces.

In the past, some countries have used ad hoc (last-minute and unprepared) nonviolent strategies to resist invasion. In these cases, governments often ordered their armies to stay put, stand down, or disengage, recognizing that this was the best way to apply nonviolent resistance under the circumstances.

## **9 – What is the long-term vision of nonviolent defence at the national level?**

At the national level, proponents of nonviolent defence argue for a longer-term process known as *transarmament*.

Transarmament refers to the gradual replacement of armed forces with the infrastructure needed to support nonviolent defence. It is not the same as disarmament, in which a country abandons its defence capacity altogether. Instead, transarmament means exchanging one defence system (the military) for another (nonviolent defence). It rejects the idea of reserving nonviolent defence for certain situations while maintaining an army for others. A society's goals with *transarmament* include:

1. The ability to deter and defend against invasions.
2. Reduced long-term hostilities with neighbouring countries, which no longer fear military aggression.
3. Increased societal capacity to defend democracy against internal threats, such as authoritarian coups.
4. Significantly lower resource demands compared to maintaining a military, freeing up societal resources for other priorities.

## **10 – What is the long-term vision of nonviolent defence at the global level?**

At the global level, proponents of nonviolent defence call for a longer-term process of transarmament among nations.

They argue that societies will always seek security. As neighbouring societies transarm, two dynamics are encouraged. First, states feel more secure because they no longer have reason to fear invasion. Second, they are inspired to consider adopting nonviolent defence themselves.

This creates the potential for an upward spiral: the more societies adopt nonviolent defence, the more others are encouraged to follow. Proponents envision this as a kind of inverted arms race—perhaps even mutually assured nonviolence.

Realistically, such a transformation would take time. Yet proponents contend that the contribution of transarmament to human security is so profound that the long-term effort is worth pursuing.