Freeing the Poles of Nuclear Conflicts? Time for an Arctic Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone!

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The arctic at sunset Photo by Ken Tape

The Antarctic (South Pole) was made a Nuclear Weapon Free Zone (NWFZ) in 1959 as part of the Antarctic Treaty. Since then NWFZs have spread to encompass most of the Southern Hemisphere. The trend is also picking up in the Northern Hemisphere with NWFZs established in Central Asia and Mongolia, and other ones proposed for North East Asia, Central Europe, and the Middle East. With climate change opening up the Arctic region - bringing with it the possibility of increased resource competition, territorial disputes and militarization - perhaps now is the time to establish an Arctic NWFZ similar to the one covering Antarctica. This would free both the north and south poles from nuclear weapons and help to build a more cooperative security environment in the North.

THE ARCTIC – A CHANGING ENVIRONMENT

In October 2007 the National Snow and Ice Data Center reported that Arctic sea ice has plummeted to the lowest levels since satellite measurements began in 1979. This could soon allow commercial ship navigation through Arctic waters, and much easier access to seabed resources.

This is leading to a flurry of legal claims and counterclaims regarding transit rights and ownership of valuable seabed resources. There is a growing possibility of serious disputes over these, leading to increased militarization and possibly even triggering armed conflict.

On 2 August 2007, for example, a Russian submarine planted their national flag on the seabed under the North Pole claiming it as part of the north Russian continental shelf. This provoked a stern rebuke from Canadian foreign minister.

Peter MacKay: "This isn't the 15th century. You can't go around the world and just plant flags and say: 'We're claiming this territory'." Canadian Prime Minister Harper followed a few days later by announcing plans to construct two new military facilities in the High Arctic region adjacent to the Northwest Passage sea route.

There are also a range of environmental issues that could create tensions and conflict in the region. These include the threats of environmental contamination from decommissioned Russian nuclear submarines scuttled in the area (with their nuclear reactors onboard), threats to the homes and hunting grounds of indigenous arctic peoples from climate change, and the possibility of oil slicks from shipping accidents if the Northwest Passage opens up.



NUCLEAR TENSIONS AND DEPLOYMENTS

The US and Russia currently deploy nuclear weapons on strategic submarines that transit the Arctic waters. In addition, Russia maintains strategic naval bases in the region. These create some tension between these two nuclear powers. Since the end of the Cold War such tensions have waned, especially with the removal of tactical nuclear weapons by both powers from surface ships and attack submarines. However, tensions could increase again if ice-cap depletion leads to increased submarine deployment, or if the US proceeds with the development of Ballistic Missile Defences including the possible deployment of missiles or support facilities in the territories of Arctic allies such as Canada or Denmark.

NWFZ NEGOTIATIONS AS PART OF BUILDING COOPERATIVE SECURITY

Some of these emerging conflicts could be dealt with in existing forums such as the Law of the Sea Tribunal, the International Court of Justice and the Arctic Forum. However, none of these are designed to address security issues in a cooperative manner. The LOS Tribunal and the ICJ are forums for determining legal rights not for negotiations, while the Arctic Forum deals primarily with environmental and habitat issues. As happened with the Antarctic Treaty, the commencement of negotiations for an Arctic NWFZ could create a forum where wider security issues could also be addressed. At the very least, the establishment of an Arctic NWFZ would be a confidencebuilding measure that could assist in the promotion of peace and security in the region.

WHAT TYPE OF NWFZ?

NWFZs come in many varieties designed and negotiated to suit the specific geo-political conditions of the region involved. The Latin American, South Pacific, South-East Asian, African, and Central Asian NWFZs prohibit the possession of nuclear weapons by States Parties (all non-nuclear weapon States) and the deployment of nuclear weapons on any territories within the zones. They also include protocols for signature by the Nuclear Weapon States (NWS) who agree to respect the zones by not deploying nuclear weapons on the territories of States parties, and to not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against the zones.

The Antarctic Treaty does not prohibit the possession of nuclear weapons by States Parties, some of which are the NWS. However, it prohibits the deployment of nuclear weapons in the Antarctic, and also any measures of a military nature, such as the establishment of military bases and fortifications, the carrying out of military maneuvers, as well as the testing of any type of weapons in the Antarctic.

An Arctic NWFZ could theoretically follow the Antarctic Treaty model. In this case, all the States in the region would be parties to the treaty – including Russia, USA, Canada, Norway, Denmark, Iceland, Sweden and Finland – and nuclear weapons would be prohibited from all territories within the Arctic Circle.

However, it is most unlikely that Russia or the USA would agree to such a treaty as that would require Russia closing its naval nuclear bases in the region, open the US to intrusive inspection of planned Ballistic Missile deployments in Alaska, and require both USA and Russia to forgo the option of deployment of nuclear weapons on part of their own territory. Even if neither country has any intention of deploying land-based nuclear weapons in the Arctic Circle, they would not welcome this precedent seeing it as an intrusion on their sovereignty.

A more feasible approach is one based on the other five regional NWFZs. This would entail a treaty negotiated by the non-NWSs in the region – Denmark, Canada, Finland, Norway and Iceland – prohibiting nuclear weapons on their territories. The treaty would include protocols whereby the NWS agree not to deploy nuclear weapons on those territories – something they are not doing anyway – and not to threaten or use nuclear weapons against States Parties to the treaty.

The advantage of this model is that it could be established even without the agreement of Russia, the US or the other NWS. This has happened with many of the other regional NWFZs. It has often taken some time after the zones have been established to persuade the NWS to sign the protocols.



The treaty could also include a protocol requiring NWS not to deploy, threaten or use nuclear weapons in the entire Arctic Zone. While the NWS would be even less likely to sign such a protocol in the short term, it would provide a political and legal aspiration for a comprehensive NWFZ in the Arctic which would generate pressure for nuclear disarmament.

A third possible model, proposed by Pugwash Canada, is a limited NWFZ prohibiting passage of nuclear weapons through the North West Passage. According to Pugwash navigation of the North West Passage by strategic submarines will continue to be unfeasible - even with further melting of the ice cap - and this might make it possible for the NWS to agree to such a prohibition. On the other hand, it is unlikely that the NWS would bind themselves to such a precedent as it could be used by other regional NWFZs to prohibit passage of nuclear vessels through their territorial waters or EEZs. The US, France and UK, for example, refuse to sign the protocols of the South East Asian NWFZ for this reason.

PARLIAMENTARY ACTION

Unlike proposals for NWFZs in the Middle East, North East Asia and Central Europe, the proposal for an Arctic NWFZ is very new and has not been explored in much detail by governments, academics or NGOs. Thus, a first step for parliamentarians would be to encourage or initiate studies or inquiries into the proposal. Given the challenging and changing geo-political conditions of the Arctic, it would be useful to include a wide range of expertise in such studies and inquiries. This could include drawing from the experience gained in the establishment of NWFZs in other regions, all of which had to overcome political hurdles to come to fruition.

Parliamentarians and a Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone in Central Europe (Authors listed at end of article)

The establishment of nuclear weapon-free zones provides a significant measure to prevent nuclear proliferation, decrease the likelihood of nuclear weapons being used and build confidence to achieve a nuclear weapon-free world. Establishing a Nuclear Weapon Free Zone in Central Europe (NWFZ-CE) would not only increase European security, it would also provide Europe with a solid basis to help encourage and facilitate the establishment of a Middle East NWFZ, increase the societal norm against nuclear weapons and restrict their freedom of movement and deployment.

During the Cold War a number of proposals for a European NWFZ were made by a range of governments and non-governmental organizations. These were unable to be implemented due to Cold War tensions.

However, there now exists a unique chance to institutionalize a NWFZ in the

heart of Europe, due to the changed political environment and a large area of de facto nuclear weapon free nations. These include the Scandinavian states - Finland, Sweden, Norway and Denmark; the Baltic States - Belarus, Ukraine, Slovakia, Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, Albania, Romania and Bulgaria; and other Central and Southern European countries including Switzerland, Austria, Luxembourg, Liechtenstein, San Marino, Andorra, Portugal, Spain and Greece.

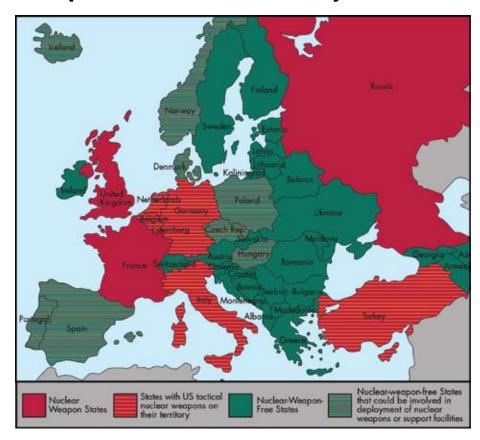
The majority of the people in these nations have no desire to see nuclear weapons spread to their countries or to their neighbours. Rather, they wish nothing more than to stabilize and codify the nuclear weapon free situation so that it will not be reversed, and in order to gain guarantees from the Nuclear Weapon States that nuclear weapons will not be used against them. A NWFZ-CE, according to the general

requirements for NWFZs would fulfill these aspirations adequately.

In addition, it would enhance efforts to prevent nuclear proliferation and terrorism, especially if it addressed transit of nuclear weapons and proliferation-sensitive aspects of the nuclear fuel cycle.

The fact that some of these countries are members of NATO, a nuclear alliance, has led some people to believe that such a NWFZ would not be possible. However, experience from other NWFZs indicates that such military alliances are no longer barriers to the establishment of NWFZs, as long as the countries concerned pledge not to station nuclear weapons on their territories. The South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone, for example, includes Australia, a military ally of the United States. The Central Asian NWFZ includes three countries that have military relationships with Russia under the Tashkent Treaty.

European States that could join a NWFZ



Nuclear weapon free nations in Europe (green) could join together in a NWFZ without changing existing policies. Countries which are nuclear weapon-free but members of NATO (green and red stripes) could join a NWFZ but would need to clarify whether or not they would allow nuclear weapons deployment or defense by nuclear weapons in time of war. Countries in which nuclear weapons are deployed (red and orange stripes) would need to discontinue such deployment to join the NWFZ.

Map by Sarah Schloemer

In fact, the establishment of a Central European NWFZ could generate political momentum to remove the remaining US nuclear weapons deployed in Europe and ensure that such weapons are not deployed in new NATO states such as Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary.

As such, there will be opposition by the United States to a NWFZ-CE. However, as Europe develops a foreign policy more independent of the US, the possibility for such a zone increases. The proposal for a NWFZ-CE has been endorsed, for example, by the Belgium Senate and House of Deputies and by the Belarus government. Parliamentarians in Switzerland, Sweden and Austria are also actively promoting the proposal.

A NWFZ-CE would also help Europe in furthering its positive relations with other regions. Whereas current policies of the Nuclear Weapon States, and in particular the United States, have created a loss of goodwill and an inability to influence potential proliferators such as Iran, the more balanced and multi-lateralist policies of the European States have increased Europe's influence. A NWFZ-CE, propagated by a self-confident

Europe, would further enhance this influence and assist in the establishment of current and potential NWFZs and the prevention of proliferation globally.

The ultimate aim of NWFZs is to pave the way to a nuclear-weapons-free world. They demonstrate that nuclear weapons are not required for security and thus stimulate the NWS to reduce and ultimately abandon their adherence to nuclear deterrence. Knowledge about NWFZs will stimulate the populations of NWS to question the need for nuclear arms. As most of the world's populations obviously reject nuclear weapons, why do the Governments of NWS still stick to them, with all the associated expense and security risks?

European Parliamentarians supporting the concept of a NWFZ-CE find considerable political support from their electorates, and satisfaction in working on a positive campaign to build a more secure and peaceful Europe. However, more action is required to make the vision of a NWFZ-CE a reality. Parliamentarians must take a lead in this in order to help transform public support into political and diplomatic momentum.

This should include placing the proposal for a NWFZ-CE firmly on the agenda of the UN and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe. Parliamentarians from small and middle European powers working collectively on this issue would give the concept of NWFZ-CE more weight.

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