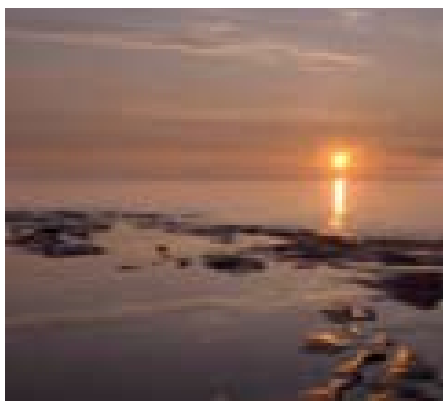


Freeing the Poles of Nuclear Conflicts? Time for an Arctic Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone!

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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 confidence-building measure that could assist in the promotion of peace and security in the region.

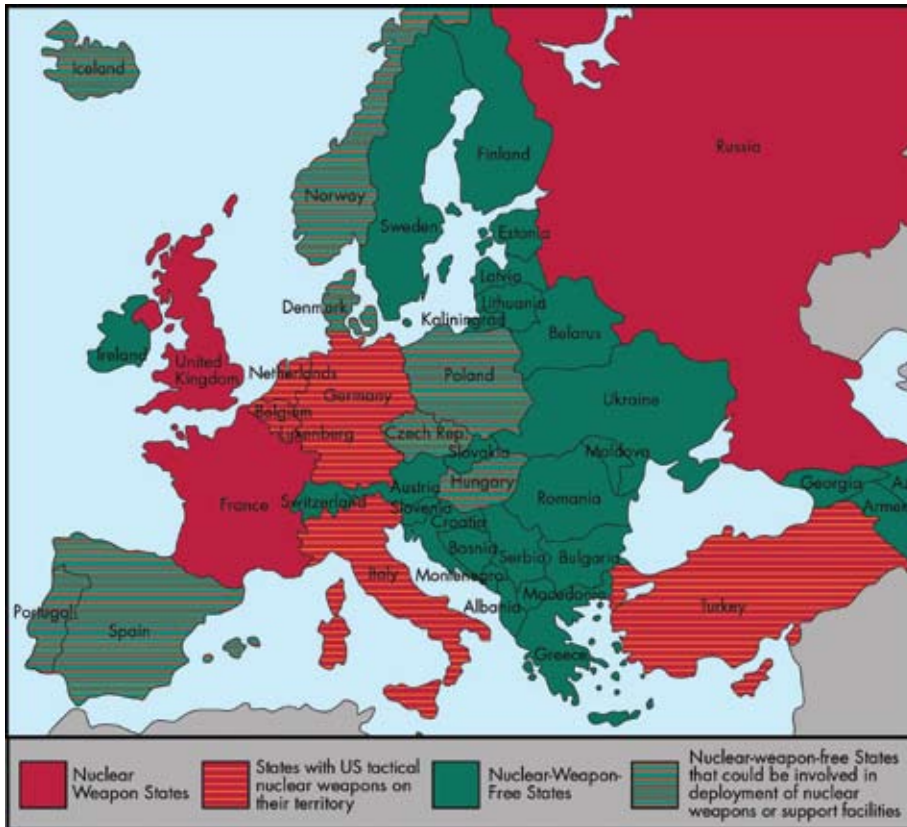
WHAT TYPE OF NWFZ?

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.

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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