

An Arctic Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone: Why is now the time?

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The history of the idea

The idea of an Arctic Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone is not new. A regional limitation of nuclear weapons was proposed by the Soviet Union in 1956, with reference to Central Europe. A year later Polish diplomat Adam Rapacki put forward a plan to keep nuclear weapons out of Poland, Czechoslovakia, and West and East Germany, but it got nowhere – NATO claimed nuclear weapons had to be deployed to counter Warsaw Pact conventional forces.¹ In 1958 Soviet President Nikolai Bulganin proposed an isolated Nordic one to the heads of government of Nordic countries, but, except for Finland, they rejected it as threatening to the strategic balance between eastern and western blocs. Sweden, Finland, Romania, and Bulgaria made proposals too.² The first full-fledged Arctic NWFZ proposal came from a Russian and an American scientist, writing in the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* in 1964. Inuit organizations and councils, peace organizations and researchers, including Hanna Newcombe, became proponents. During the Cold War, however, “Russian and United States nuclear submarines played cat and mouse games in the Arctic waters, under the ice. The airspace above the Arctic was the transit route for the nuclear-armed bombers.”³

1 Michael Hamel-Green, “Existing nuclear weapon free zones: precedents that could inform development of an Arctic Nuclear Weapon Free Zone,” report of the Conference on an Arctic Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone, Copenhagen, 10-11 Aug. 2009, p.53, accessed 20 Oct. 2009 at www.pugwash.org/reports/nw/nw_fz_sept09.pdf

2 “Nuclear-Weapon-Free-Zones (NWFZ) at a glance,” Arms Control Association, accessed 13 Oct. 2009 at <http://www.armscontrol.org/print/2567>

3 Steve Staples, “Steps toward an Arctic Nuclear Weapon

Why is there renewed and growing interest in an Arctic Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone?

The age-old Greenland ice sheet is melting. Formed three million years ago when atmospheric CO₂ levels were predominantly below 300 parts per million, that ice is melting at an accelerating rate as CO₂, currently at 387 ppm, rises about 2 ppm per year.⁴ Arctic sea ice is going – in 2008 the Northwest Passage was ice-free. According to experts, in the not too distant future



the northern polar sea may become open waters in the summer, and eventually permanently. It's thawing so quickly – temperatures in the Arctic

Free Zone,” Copenhagen conference report, p.97
4 Øyvind Paasche, “After glaciers: a new climate world,” accessed 20 Oct. 2009 at <http://www.opendemocracy.net/node/48548/pdf>

have increased at twice the global average⁵ – that navigable Arctic sea lanes are in sight, maybe even within a generation. That would bring huge economic potential for maritime commerce, with the northern route linking Europe, North America, and Asia. Imagine traffic like the Suez or Panama canals have! Now unreachable oil and natural gas reserves matching those of the Middle East could be accessible for exploitation – the continental shelf in the Arctic may have up to 25 per cent of the remaining reserves.⁶ Large scale fishing might develop in new opened areas. A geo-economic shift to the North is in sight. “A race for territory, energy, and protein has begun,” with states bordering the Arctic Sea, the European Union, NATO, and others having declared ambitions and claims.⁷ The Arctic states are seeking to identify their exclusive economic zones (200 nautical miles from the end of the continental shelf, plus 150 nautical miles on the seabed), submitting their claims, backed by scientific evidence, to a UN Convention on the Law of the Sea Commission for delimiting of sea areas and continental shelves for national jurisdiction.

What potential dangers loom?

Clearly the Arctic could become an area of high tension, and of danger, especially since the US and Russia face each other across the polar frontier. Forty percent of Canada is in the Arctic and some 11,000 mostly Inuit people live there. To protect Canada’s sovereignty claims, the Harper government has increased surveillance and military presence there. It has plans for new ice-capable naval patrol vessels, military facilities adjacent to the Northwest Passage sea route,⁸ a military training base, and a deep water port in the

Arctic. According to Steve Staples, “American and Russian nuclear-armed submarines are patrolling in the Arctic,” and “the Arctic is becoming a zone of increased military competition.” The British and French also rely on subs to deploy their arsenals and could operate missile subs in the Arctic.⁹ The Russians most important naval base for their nuclear armed subs (*Zapadnaya Litsa*), is north of the Arctic Circle, on the Kola Peninsula. Increased Russian aircraft operations have taken place in and outside Russian airspace in the past year and a special military force to defend its Arctic claims has been announced by President Dmitri Medvedev. As well, Denmark’s new defence paper proposed an Arctic military contingent of army, navy, and air force assets. Norway recently bought fighter jets suitable for Arctic patrols and held a large military practice last March (7,000 soldiers from 13 countries), as did Sweden (with 12,000 troops) in June. The deepest concern is that the US and Russia “converge on the Arctic” with competing claims.¹⁰ The eight states having territory to the north of the polar circle – Denmark (Greenland), Finland, Iceland, Norway, the Russian Federation, Sweden, the US (Alaska), and Canada, established the Arctic Council in 1996 to address cooperatively issues of sustainable development and environmental protection. Numerous bilateral discussions on cooperative security in the Arctic are being engaged in by Canada (with Denmark, Russia, the US, Norway).¹¹

How could an Arctic Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone help?

To avert nuclear confrontation is, however, clearly the most urgent issue. The call for an Arctic Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (NWFZ) issued by the

5 “The Evidence: Our world, 4 degrees warmer: Models test what may happen if we don’t get a climate change agreement,” *Globe and Mail*, 23 Oct. 2009, p.A3

6 Paul Abelsky, “The meltdown,” (citing a US Geological Survey 2000), accessed 20 Oct. 2009 at <http://www.nps.edu/News/Read/News.aspx?id=3395&role=pao&area=News>

7 Jan Prawitz, “A nuclear-weapon-free Arctic: arms control ‘on the rocks,’” Copenhagen conference report, p.17

8 Alyn Ware, “Indigenous sovereignty and nuclear forces: prospects for a nuclear-free Arctic,” Copenhagen conference report, p.109

9 Steve Staples, *op.cit.*, p.98

10 *Ibid.*, p.99

11 Adele Buckley, “Problems of Arctic security in the 21st century,” 2 June 2008, a paper about a dialogue 11-12 April co-convened by the Simons Foundation and the School for International Studies, Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, p.14

Canadian Pugwash Group in 2007 was therefore timely. Such a zone is a “specified region in which countries commit themselves not to manufacture, acquire, test, or possess nuclear weapons.”¹² The existing NWFZs are not exact copies of each other. Their general objective is to “relieve a zonal area from the threat of being involved in mass destruction war.”¹³ There is a growing NWFZ success story. By the Treaty of Antarctica, 1959, that continent was declared a demilitarized and thus nuclear weapon-free zone. Its pacific status was reinforced by the 1991 Madrid Protocol, which proclaimed it a natural reserve with only activities for peaceful purposes, scientific research, and environmental protection allowed (mining exploration being prohibited). The haven of peace at the South Pole makes the vision of a peaceful North Pole powerful. Some of the same motivations that prompted the Antarctic Treaty are in play in the North: concerns about both potential territorial disputes and military rivalry between the US and Russia.

By a series of treaties, eight major NWFZs have been established that “cover more than half of the world’s landmass (74% of all land outside of nuclear-weapon state territory), including 99% of the Southern Hemisphere land areas, while excluding most sea areas. They encompass 119 states (out of some 195) and 18 other territories. Some 1.9 billion people live in the zones.”¹⁴ They include:

- Latin America and the Caribbean (by the Treaty of Tlatelolco, opened for signature in 1967 but entered into force in 2002 – 35 years and 8 months later), with a protocol of negative security assurances ratified by the big five Nuclear Weapon States (NWS) (China, France, the UK, US, and Russia);
- The South Pacific, 13 island states including Australia and New Zealand (by the Treaty of Rarotonga, opened 1985, entered into force

1986, 16 months later, with negative security assurances and a ban on nuclear testing ratified by the big four, but not the US);

- Southeast Asia, including Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam (by the Treaty of Bangkok, opened 1995, and entered into force five and half months later in 1997, no NWS protocols);
- Africa (by the Treaty of Pelindaba, opened 1996, entered into force July 2009, but the protocols are not yet ratified by the US and Russia);
- Mongolia (by a declaration in 1995); and
- Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan -- separated from Mongolia by a 40 kilometre wide corridor where China and Russia meet) (opened 2006, entered into force two and a half years later in March 2009, but with no protocol ratification by NWS).

India and Pakistan, which identified themselves from May 1998 as nuclear weapon states are not recognized as such in the NPT, and their inclusion as guarantor states to these NWFZ treaties is raised from time to time.¹⁵

The former German Democratic Republic – East Germany – was denuclearized by the 1990 reunification instrument, the Treaty on the Final Settlement with Respect to Germany, which was signed by both German republics, France, the UK, US, and USSR. Establishment of NWFZs is now the main trend in promoting the non-proliferation regime!

How can an Arctic NWFZ be achieved?

The Antarctic Treaty stands as a beacon: it’s kept Earth’s southernmost continent free of military and nuclear threats for half a century and enabled scientific cooperation benefiting the planet, especially in climate and atmospheric research. By the 1920 Spitzbergen Treaty, establishment of naval bases and fortifications is prohibited in this Norwegian Arctic archipelago, “which may nev-

12 “Nuclear weapon-free zones (NWFZ) at a glance,” Arms Control Association, accessed 13 Oct. 2009 at <http://www.armscontrol.org/print/2567>

13 Prawitz, *op.cit.*, p.25

14 Prawitz, *op.cit.*, p.23-24

15 *Ibid*, p.28

er be used for warlike purposes,¹⁶ – terms now taken as implying that the territory and territorial waters of Spitzbergen constitute a demilitarized and nuclear weapon-free zone. Finland’s Aaland Islands archipelago is also demilitarized. Also of relevance to the Arctic, the 1971 Sea-Bed Treaty, at its third review conference in 1989, was agreed to extend from shore to shore the prohibition of nuclear weapons on the sea-bed, ocean floor, and subsoil thereof.

Article VII of the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty encourages establishment of NWFZs, as did the 1995 and 2000 NPT Review Conferences, as a matter of priority. National studies on a Nordic NWFZ zone have been done and an official authoritative report in 1991 was internationally endorsed. The eight states with territory north of the polar circle – Canada, Denmark (Greenland), Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the US – are the core for an Arctic NWFZ.

For starters, why doesn’t Canada denuclearize its Northwest Passage? The six non-nuclear weapon states – all but Russia and the US – could work on a regional treaty to assure no stationing of nuclear weapons in their territories. The commitment to non-possession of nuclear weapons is in Article II of the NPT, so remaining an NPT party would be a requirement. Canada, Denmark, Iceland, and Norway, as members of NATO, would have to make the NWFZ obligations take precedence over alliance commitments to receive control over nuclear weapons or accept them in their territories. But, as a case in point, Australia and New Zealand were partnered with the US in the ANZUS Treaty (Australia, New Zealand, United States Security Treaty) at the time the South Pacific NWFZ was achieved, with the two countries as members. But, the Treaty of Rarotonga

establishing it does not prohibit nuclear weapon transit, US communications bases in Australia, or the NWSs right to fire nuclear weapons from the zone. With the Southeast Asia NWFZ, the US refused to sign the security guarantees to non-use of nuclear weapons against or in the zone, as conflicting with rights of passage under the Law of the Sea.

In the Arctic case, “a side-negotiation with NATO for exceptions from alliance obligations regarding nuclear weapons” would be needed, according to Swedish expert Jan Prawitz.¹⁷ He suggests that realistically, since Russia has much of



its strategic nuclear weapons on submarines homeported on the Kola Peninsula, “with few reasonable alternatives,” absence of sub-strategic nuclear weapons north of the polar circle, but presence and transit of strategic ones in the zonal area and at sea might be obligations as-

sumed by Russia and the US. All nuclear weapons states would have to commit themselves to non-use and no-threat-of use obligations with respect to this Arctic zone, just as the other zones require. But, the US in the past has declared that “such zones should not interfere with existing security arrangements.”¹⁸ It has, however, legally bound itself to restrict its use of nuclear weapons by ratifying some other NWFZ treaties’ protocols.

Public opinion will have to be mobilized, peace groups and environmental organizations inspired, and grassroots energized – the key to achieving the South Pacific NWFZ. Such zones help stop both horizontal and vertical proliferation. A natural force for such disarmament is the indigenous population of the Arctic: their collaboration must be sought and integrated into the efforts. The South Pacific NWFZ was achieved through indigenous people and non-government

16 Cited by Prawitz, *op.cit.*, p.22

17 *Ibid.*, p.33

18 *Ibid.*

organizations!

With the election of President Barack Obama, the rising chorus of world leaders recognizing the need for nuclear weapons abolition found a champion. Obama has made a U-turn from Bush nuclearism and has set a world free of nuclear weapons as the goal. Reduction of nuclear arsenals by the US and Russia, agreed to in July, is essential and should encourage disarmament momentum. To the goal of an Arctic NWFZ, another step forward in rolling back the nuclear threat, let's say "Yes, we can!" – and start working on it.

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