



## **An Arctic Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone – Needed Now**

**Adele Buckley**, Physicist, Engineer and Environmental Scientist;  
Member of Pugwash Council

Climate change and nuclear weapons, the two great security threats of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, are uniquely influential in the Arctic. Although the current risk of conflict is low, the global future is potentially turbulent. There is a ‘new’ Arctic because of meltdown induced by climate change. Some see great economic opportunities; others see ecological and human security threats. Governance requires new national and multinational agreements; *now is the time* to gain acceptance for a future nuclear-weapon-free Arctic.

Virtually all circumpolar governments have stated an Arctic policy of cooperation and diplomacy; one example is the 2011 Search and Rescue Agreement where there will be coordinated multilateral management. Nevertheless, each nation is making significant additions to their military presence and has already built or plans to build new naval hardware. Logistics support from the armed forces is needed because there must be orderly enforcement of regulations, so military strategy in the Arctic is not the sole purpose of this build up. However, the presence of nuclear weapons on or under the sea, in the air, or in missile bases just does not fit this picture. The opportunity exists now to start negotiations for the Arctic to be a Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone (NWFZ). There are already seven NWFZ treaties under the United Nations, covering the southern hemisphere—Antarctica was the first—and some north of the equator such as the Central Asian NWFZ. These treaties are flexible to accommodate the needs of each region, but all require non-possession, non-deployment, non-manufacture, non-use, and these commitments must be verifiable and of unlimited duration. After ratification, these treaties must go through the legislative machinery of the nuclear weapon states for recognition and assurance that the region will not be the target of a nuclear attack.

There is a growing pressure to rid the world of nuclear weapons, not only from the majority of global citizens, but from influential elder statesmen, and civil society organizations. A Nuclear Weapons Convention, or the equivalent, a series of universal multilateral treaties is called for by the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon.<sup>1</sup> An NWFZ is regional Nuclear Weapons Convention, and is a significant confidence building measure contributing to nuclear disarmament and enforces a global non-proliferation regime. This NWFZ would be the first of its kind, encompassing only northern territories of sovereign nations, rather than the entire country. The challenges on the path to an Arctic NWFZ are formidable, as both the United States (Alaska) and Russia are nuclear weapon states (NWS). Russia’s main submarine bases, and a significant part of other nuclear forces, are in the Arctic. However, the military emphasis is shifting to the East, as both Russia and the U.S. find it necessary to increase their presence in Asia to counter the growing Chinese submarine fleet, some of which will be equipped with nuclear weapons. NWFZs are able to be flexible to fit the needs of the region. At least in early stages of an NWFZ, it is possible that the United Nations’ *right of innocent passage* could apply to Russia and/or American submarines that may transit the Arctic, but commit not to patrol there. Other potential flexibility exists for the propo-

sed Arctic NWFZ since the agreed region could be surface waters only, the land north of the Arctic Circle, or entire land and sea territory, or only airspace, or, all territorial waters, surface and sub-surface. A possible overlap with some of the already-negotiated boundaries of the 2011 Search and Rescue Agreement\* could be useful. It seems likely that the regional Arctic NWFZ would, initially, include only sovereign territory of NNWS (Non-Nuclear Weapon States).

Several circumpolar nations are in NATO, a nuclear alliance. The challenge posed by NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] is evident, as many NATO members participated in *Cold Response*, Naval Games in the Arctic Ocean in March 2012, but it was not under the auspices of NATO. This hurdle is political, as NATO members have the right to be part of an NWFZ, without violating their membership agreement. NATO's presence in the Arctic would be a potential barrier to negotiations for an NWFZ. Russia does not want NATO to establish a presence in the Arctic, and NATO Secretary-General Rasmussen has assured Moscow that it does not intend to establish in the Arctic.<sup>2</sup> Canada, in NATO fora, continues to refuse discussions of the Arctic. It is of note that some NWFZ member-nations are also under a nuclear 'umbrella', e.g. Australia, and several former Soviet republics.

The Arctic NWFZ has been proposed in earlier years, by scientists on both sides of the Cold War, by civil society groups, within the Nordic Council, and by important indigenous groups, particularly the Inuit Circumpolar Conference in 1983, and even by Mikhail Gorbachev in 1987 (Arctic Zone of Peace). In late 2011, Denmark made that an explicit goal of its Arctic foreign policy, and, so far it is the only circumpolar state to do so. Several individual members of parliament in Canada have made the proposed Arctic NWFZ visible through motions in both upper and lower house and with a Private Member's Bill. The ten-country ministerial meetings of the Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Initiative (NPDI) have strongly endorsed NWFZs. It is to be hoped that Denmark's initiative, and the informal bilateral and multilateral discussions that flow from this will lead to a united commitment to an NWFZ by all the non-nuclear weapon states (NNWS) in the Arctic. With a united front, these countries have an opportunity for a positive outcome when they approach the NWS, United States and Russia. A resolution of the United Nations General Assembly is another useful tactic, provided that broad support is behind it. Historically, states outside an NWFZ have responded to global and regional pressure, over time, and become part of it.

The need for starting negotiations exists today. As noted in the Kingdom of Denmark Strategy for the Arctic 2011-2010, "The basis for the future of the Arctic is being created now..." As urged by Canadian Senator Dallaire, "...Now is the time to launch this initiative, while the Arctic is being shaped, because this opportunity will not last for long." To realize a northern vision of peace, all of us must continually press governments to uphold and progress with this proposal until such time as these governments are actively engaged in negotiating the Arctic NWFZ.

*Author Contact Information*

*Email: [adele-buckley@rogers.com](mailto:adele-buckley@rogers.com)*

## **Notes**

1. SG/SM/11881 DC/3135, "'Contagious' Doctrine of Deterrence has made Non-Proliferation more difficult, raised New Risks, Secretary-General says In address to East-West Institute" *United Nations Dept. of Public Information* <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2008/sgsm11881.doc.htm>
2. Ronald O'Rourke, *Changes in the Arctic: Background and Issues for Congress* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2010).

---

\* Agreement on Cooperation on Aeronautical and Maritime Search and Rescue in the Arctic, 12 May 2011 <http://library.arcticportal.org/1474/>