

An Arctic Nuclear-Weapon-Free Treaty by Non-Nuclear Weapon States Would Model Cooperation and Press Nuclear Weapon States to New Strategy

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Battle for the North: All Quiet on the Arctic Front?

There is a 'new' Arctic because of meltdown induced by climate change. In this new Mediterranean, new global trading routes and new sources of wealth from resources will shift the geopolitical landscape. These new opportunities are accompanied by threats to human security and the fragile Arctic ecology. 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. Logistics support from the armed forces is needed because there must be orderly enforcement of regulations, so there is a genuine need for increased military and coast guard presence. Each circumpolar nation is committed to buildup of their naval hardware though the current risk of conflict is, by comparison to other global regions, very low.

The global future is potentially turbulent and the presence of nuclear weapons, in the Arctic, on or under the sea, in the air, or in missile bases is a threat to global stability that could be eliminated. The Red Cross and many others have pointed out that use or threat of use of nuclear weapons violates International humanitarian law. 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 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 subject of a nuclear attack. 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). The Non-Nuclear Weapon States (NNWS), possibly motivated by Denmark's initiative in putting the goal of an Arctic NWFZ into their foreign policy, should start now on informal bilateral and multilateral discussions, and seek commitment by all NNWS in the Arctic. A regional NWFZ treaty, without United States and Russia, could follow the example of the South-Central America NWFZ Treaty and remain open for the addition of other sovereign nations. This model of cooperation in the Arctic would produce pressure on the NWS in the region to accept limitations to their nuclear presence in the Arctic, and eventually to accept the full Arctic NWFZ. If/when this occurred, it would be a tipping point that could lead the way to a global legal ban on all nuclear weapons.

¹ See www.pugwashgroup.ca for contact information