
Nuclear Weapons Free Zones: Concept And History

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Introduction

Nuclear weapon free zone (NWFZ) refers to a zone completely without nuclear weapons. These free zones are a central concept in the disarmament and a regional conflict reduction effort, which signifies a specified region in which countries commit themselves not to manufacture, acquire, test, or possess nuclear weapons. United Nations (UN) Disarmament Commission Report in 1999 pointed out that, the strategy of establishing regional NWFZs is seen as both a non-proliferation and security-enhancing measure for the regions themselves, and as a partial step towards eventual global elimination of nuclear weapons.¹

There exist five NWFZs in today's world — Latin America and Caribbean, South Pacific, Southeast Asia, Africa, and the Central Asia.

Each zone is legitimized by specific treaties. Along with these zones, Mongolia's self-declared nuclear-weapon-free status has been recognized by UN through a General Assembly resolution². Also, certain uninhabited areas of the globe have been formally denuclearized. They include Antarctica under the 1959 Antarctic Treaty, outer space, the moon, and other celestial bodies under the 1967 Outer Space Treaty and the 1979 Moon Agreement; the seabed, the ocean floor, and the subsoil thereof under the 1971 Seabed Treaty. Today, 74% of all of the territories not encompassed by nuclear weapon powers (these territories include Antarctica) are situated within NWFZs, including 99% of all the land in the southern hemisphere. Negotiations are going on in West Asia, South Asia, Central and Eastern Europe and the Korean peninsula over the issue of establishing of a treaty in this respect.

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Guidelines for establishing NWFZs

The principles and guidelines for establishing NWFZs are articulated in the UN Disarmament Commission report of 30 April 1999.³ These non-binding guidelines specify the nuclear weapon states' obligations towards NWFZ, including "negative security assurances." However, if a Nuclear Weapon State (NWS) does not agree with specific provisions of a given NWFZ treaty, it may refuse to sign or ratify the relevant protocols; this issue can impact the implementation of a NWFZ treaty.

NWFZs and NPT

NWFZs complement the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) since both arrangements promote non-proliferation and disarmament while allowing the peaceful use of nuclear energy. The role NWFZs play in strengthening the security of participating Non Nuclear Weapon states (NNWS) was recognized by the drafters of the NPT. Article VII of the NPT was therefore created to assure the right of states to establish specified zones free of nuclear weapons. According to Article VII:⁴

"Nothing in this Treaty affects the right of any group of States to conclude regional treaties in order to assure the total absence of nuclear

weapons in their respective territories."

The Origin of NWFZs

The idea of NWFZ originated in the mid 1950s, when it became obvious that the goal of complete and universal spread of nuclear weapons from the military arsenal was unattainable, and that there existed the danger of the spread of these weapons to more and more states. The first idea of prohibiting nuclear weapons in a densely populated geographical region originated in Europe. In 1958, Poland's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Adam Rampacki, proposed the denuclearization of Central Europe. During the 1960s, there were several attempts to establish a NWFZ in Central Europe. For instance, Romania proposed the denuclearization of the Balkans, Soviet Union appealed for the creation of a NWFZ in the Mediterranean and Finnish President Kekkonen proposed a free zone which covered Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden but its fate was determined by the cold war politics.

Existing NWFZs

In the case of NWFZs, although certain theoretical solutions were proposed in Europe, practical application of the same found place

in other continents. However, due to dissimilar geographical circumstances and different political, economic and strategic considerations, no uniform pattern of denuclearized zones could be formulated so far. The existing five NWFZs are:

Latin America and Caribbean NWFZ

It is the first Zone which covers a densely populated area. By most historical accounts, it originated in the heart of the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, as Latin American and Caribbean nations found themselves as helpless pawns and potential targets in a super power nuclear contest. The UN General Assembly approved a resolution on denuclearization of Latin America submitted by 11 Latin American states on 27 November 1963⁵. After four years of negotiations to work out the details, the Treaty of Tlatelolco was opened for signature on 14 February 1967.

South Pacific Nuclear-Free Zone (SPNFZ)

SPNFZ was established by the Treaty of Rarotonga and was adopted by the South Pacific Forum (SPF)⁶ on 6 August 1985 which came into force on 11 December 1986. It consisted of 13 full members including Australia, Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru,

New Zealand, Niue, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu. The treaty in fact defines the zone as *nuclear free* instead of *nuclear weapon free* as it prohibits dumping of radioactive waste and other radioactive materials in the area.

Southeast Asia NWFZ (SEANWFZ)

The Southeast Asian Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone Treaty, or Bangkok Treaty, is a nuclear weapons moratorium treaty among 10 Asian member-states under the auspices of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). After a decade of negotiating and drafting efforts by the ASEAN Working Group on a “Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality” (ZOP-FAN), the SEANWFZ Treaty was signed by the heads of states of all 10 regional states in Bangkok on 15 December 1995.

Africa NWFZ (ANWFZ)

The awareness of African states about the threat of nuclear weapons to their peace and security was made evident in their opposition to Charles DeGaulle’s effort to use the Sahara as the testing ground for French nuclear devices during the late 1950s and early 1960s. The text of an African Nuclear weapon free Zone Treaty (Treaty of Pelindaba) was

completed by June 1995, and opened for signature on 11 April 1996. The treaty has not yet come into force, as it did not receive the required 28 ratifications. 53 African countries have signed and 18 have ratified the treaty.

Central Asia NWFZ (CANWFZ)

Throughout the Cold War, Central Asia had been the epicenter of the Soviet nuclear testing program. The idea of a CANWFZ can be traced back to the 1992 initiative by Mongolia declaring itself a NWFZ. CANWFZ Treaty was signed on 8 September 2006 at Semipalatinsk, the former Soviet nuclear test site in Kazakhstan. The zone encompasses Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

Conclusion

In the international system NWFZs

fulfill a number of important functions. Since nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament are enormously complex tasks, it is impossible to achieve the ultimate goal of complete disarmament by approaching this issue globally from the very foundation. NWFZs are very helpful in checking the rise of new nuclear-weapon states. In the regional context, they serve as an extremely efficient confidence and security building measure (CSBM) that promotes mutual trust and understanding between both the parties to such an arrangement and between them and their neighbours. The NWFZs ensure that the designated zones are free from Big Power hegemonic rivalries and foreign military presence in all forms. Critics and supporters alike concur that, for reasons of international security, NWFZs contribute to the marginalization of nuclear weapons as tools of national security. ■

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1. For more details see, Report of the Disarmament Commission, 54th General Assembly, UN A/54/42, 6 May 1999, paragraph 33.
2. U.N. General Assembly Resolution 53/77, 1998.
3. Report of the Disarmament Commission 1999, General Assembly Official Records, Fifty-fourth sessions; Supplement No. 42 (A/54/42).
4. For details see, Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, 1968 Article VII, Accessed from <http://www.fas.org/nuke/control/npt/text/npt2.htm>.
5. UN Document A/c.1/L.312/Rev.2 and A/RES/1911 (xviii)
6. The SPF is a rather loose regional organization which started in 1971. The members are Australia, the Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, New Zealand, Niue, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, and Western Samoa.