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Freezing out the Nukes

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Freezing out the nukes

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National interests are bound to clash in the Arctic unless we act quickly to put in place confidence-building measures that slow the pace of militarization.

It could take years to overhaul international law governing military activities, resource extraction and sovereignty in the Arctic, but countries could take one important step at the 2015 review conference for the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty by initiating discussions to establish a nuclear-weapon-free zone covering the Arctic.

In such a zone, the development, testing, manufacture, production, possession, stockpiling and transportation of nuclear weapons are prohibited. The use or threat of use of nuclear weapons against nations and areas within the zone is also prohibited. And a permanent organization is established to ensure compliance.

There are already many regional nuclear-weapon-free treaties around the world, covering large swaths of Central and Latin America, Southeast Asia, Africa and Central Asia. Each commits the states not to deploy, construct, receive or test nuclear weapons on its territory. Already 113 nations — a majority of UN members — have signed or ratified these treaties, and 50% of the world's land area, including Antarctica, is governed by these treaties.

Two other treaties are relevant to the Arctic case: the Antarctic Treaty of 1959 prohibiting all nuclear activity on that continent and the 1971 Seabed Treaty prohibiting the stationing of nuclear weapons or support facilities on the seabed outside a country's territorial waters. Both treaties seemed out of reach at one time; now they are honoured by all the world's states.

In his presidential address to the 2013 Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs in Istanbul, Jayantha Dhanapala joined prominent members of Canadian Pugwash in calling for the creation of an Arctic zone.

We are asking diplomats at the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty preparatory committee in May to debate the merits and demerits of such a zone. On Monday we are sponsoring a high-level panel at the UN with Randy Rydell, senior political affairs officer for the UN's High Representative for Disarmament Affairs; Alyn Ware, global co-ordinator of Parliamentarians for Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament and an international consultant for the Lawyers Committee on Nuclear Policy; Dennis Bevington, the Canadian MP for Western Arctic and northern development critic in the official Opposition; and Adele Buckley, Pugwash International council member, scientist and past chair of Canadian Pugwash.

As a first step, some suggest the four Nordic countries, potentially followed by Canada, could officially declare their territories free of nuclear weapons, since that is already the case.

However it starts, the vision is that someday the territories, waters and melting ice cap covered by this kind of zone would expand until it covers the total land and waters north of the Arctic Circle.

The main obstacle to an Arctic zone is that the region continues to serve as a key arena in the U.S.-Russian military standoff.

The U.S. and Russia still routinely conduct nuclear-powered submarine patrols there. Both states consider their submarine operations highly classified — the U.S. Navy has a long-standing, inflexible policy of refusing to confirm or deny the presence of nuclear weapons on its warships.

Both nations also have nuclear-capable aircraft that fly over the Arctic. While the number of patrols dropped off at the end of the Cold War, Russian bombers continue to make Arctic overflights close to the coasts of Canada and the U.S.

Russia attaches growing importance to the Arctic for maintaining a nuclear deterrent against the United States. Russia's Northern Fleet, based in the Arctic and equipped with nuclear weapons, is seen by the government as its most important naval asset. Russia is planning a new generation of submarines based at its Arctic ports.

Former U.S. secretary of state Hillary Clinton recently criticized Russia's reopening of old military bases in the Arctic. "It's not only Ukraine and Georgia we're now keeping our eye on," she said. "It does threaten to militarize that pristine region that both Canada and the United States have interests in, to preserve the Arctic and help to develop it in a sensible manner."

Clinton said it is in the best interests of all the Arctic Council members — Russia, the United States, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden — to reach agreements on how to handle resource development in the region.

And we face another obstacle: five Arctic states are members of NATO and by treaty subscribe to its nuclear doctrine. The deterrent provided by NATO's three states with nuclear weapon — the U.S., Britain, and France — is obsolete and counterproductive to co-operative security in the post-Cold War world, but it is unlikely the allies without nuclear weapons will take the initiative to substantially change NATO's doctrine.

A pessimistic appraisal is that only substantial progress in U.S.-Russian arms control talks will create the conditions for a change in NATO doctrine. For diplomats in NATO, Russia's takeover of Crimea could prove to be another obstacle.

But putting in place an effective and enforceable Arctic zone would not need require a sea change in U.S.-Russian relations. We are already seeing a huge change worldwide concerning the credibility and viability of using nuclear weapons.

And as we learn more about the Arctic's fragile environment and the long-lasting impact of a possible nuclear accident, it is not too soon to bring the campaign for an Arctic nuclear-weapon-free zone to the UN, governments and civil society in all Arctic nations, as well as other states and indigenous peoples.

Deploying and possibly using nuclear weapons in the environmentally sensitive Arctic have little credibility and will likely seem morally repugnant to future generations.

In calling for an Arctic nuclear treaty, we are aware of the magnitude of the effort needed to achieve it and the historic compromises required.

— *Roméo Dallaire is a retired Canadian lieutenant-general, a senator and celebrated humanitarian.*

— *Erika Simpson is the past vice-chair of Canadian Pugwash, an associate professor in the department of political science at Western University and author of NATO and the Bomb.*