

Nuclear- weapon-free zones

Ending the balance of terror

*The Independent
Commission on
Disarmament and
Security Issues*

*First published in 1985,
these selections from
Common Security: A
Blueprint for Survival
illustrate the important
role played by the
concepts and practice of
developing nuclear-
weapon-free zones in
ending what Olof Palme
described as the nuclear
'balance of terror'.*

*From Olof Palme's introduction to Common
Security: A Blueprint for Survival*

Our report expresses our deep concern at the worsening international situation, and at the drift towards war that so many perceive today. We are totally agreed that there is no such thing as a nuclear war that can be won. An all-out nuclear war would mean unprecedented destruction, maybe the extinction of the human species. A so-called limited nuclear war would almost inevitably develop into total nuclear conflagration ...

On the basis of this strategy of common security, we discussed practical proposals to achieve arms limitation and disarmament. The long-term goal in the promotion of peace must be general and complete disarmament. But the Commission sees its task as being to consider a gradual process in that direction, to curb and reverse the arms race. We do not propose unilateral action by any country. We clearly see the need for balanced and negotiated reduction in arms.

Our aim has been to promote a downward spiral in armaments. We have elaborated a broad programme for reducing the nuclear threat, including major reductions in all types of strategic nuclear system[s]. We propose the establishment of a battlefield-nuclear-weapon-free zone starting in Central Europe. We also propose a chemical-weapon-free zone in Europe. Even the process of beginning to negotiate such limitations, we consider, would reduce political tension in Europe ...

We also emphasize the importance of regional approaches to security. We propose

to strengthen regional security by creating zones of peace, nuclear-weapon-free zones, and by establishing regional conferences on security and cooperation similar to the one set up in Helsinki for Europe. We believe that regional discussions – including negotiations leading to chemical-weapon and battlefield-nuclear-weapon-free zones in Europe – can play an important role in achieving common security in all parts of the world.

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Reducing the nuclear threat in Europe

The nuclear arsenals in Europe are awesome. Furthermore, the Commission is deeply concerned about those nuclear postures and doctrines which dangerously and erroneously suggest that it may be possible to fight and ‘win’ a limited nuclear war. In the event of a crisis their effect could be to drive the contending forces across the threshold of a nuclear war. The Commission is convinced that there must be substantial reductions in the nuclear stockpile leading to denuclearisation in Europe and eventually to a world free of nuclear weapons. A necessary precondition is a negotiated agreement on substantial mutual force reductions establishing and guaranteeing an approximate parity of conventional forces between the two major alliances.

Therefore, the Commission supports a negotiated agreement for approximate parity in conventional forces between the two alliances. Such an agreement would facilitate reductions in nuclear weapons and a reordering of the priority now accorded to nuclear arms in military contingency planning.

The Commission has devoted much time and effort to examining various alternative ways for bringing these changes about. Among the alternatives studied was nuclear-weapon-free zones, which are dealt with in Section 5.3 concerning regional security arrangements. It should be remembered in this connection that some countries in Europe do not belong to any of the military alliances and have renounced the acquisition of nuclear arms.

Here we propose a functional approach concentrating on specific weapons and classes of weapon. *Our proposal for the gradual removal of the nuclear threat posed to Europe includes establishment of a battlefield-nuclear-weapon-free zone and measures to strengthen the nuclear threshold and reduce pressure for the early use of nuclear weapons, and substantial reductions in all categories of intermediate-(medium-) and shorter-range nuclear weapons which threaten Europe.*

(a) *A battlefield-nuclear-weapon-free zone in Europe.* We call special attention to the dangers posed by those nuclear weapons whose delivery systems are deployed in considerable numbers to forward positions in Europe. These are known as ‘battlefield’ nuclear weapons. A large portion of NATO’s and the Warsaw Pact’s nuclear munitions in Europe are of this type. The weapons are designed and deployed to provide support to ground forces in direct contact with forces of the opponent. Their delivery systems have ranges up to 150 kilometres, and are primarily short-range rockets, mines, and artillery. Most of the delivery systems are dual-capable, i.e. they can fire either conventional munitions or nuclear munitions.

Because of their deployment in forward areas battlefield nuclear weapons run the risk of being overrun early in an armed conflict. Maintaining command and control over such weapons in ‘the fog of war’ would be difficult. Pressures for delegation of authority to use nuclear weapons to local commanders and for their early use would be strong. The danger of crossing the nuclear threshold and of further escalation could become acute. It should be remembered in this connection that the areas close to the East-West border in Central Europe are densely populated and contain large industrial concentrations.

The Commission recommends the establishment of a battle-field-nuclear-weapon-free zone, starting with Central Europe and extending ultimately from the northern to the southern flanks of the two alliances. This scheme would be implemented in the context of an agreement on parity and mutual force reductions in Central Europe. No nuclear munitions would be permitted in the zone.

Storage sites for nuclear munitions also would be prohibited. Manoeuvres simulating nuclear operations would not be allowed in the zone. Preparations for the emplacement of atomic demolition munitions and storage of such weapons would be prohibited.

There also would be rules governing the presence in the zone of artillery and short-range missiles that could be adapted for both nuclear and conventional use. The geographic definition of the zone should be determined through negotiations, taking into account the relevant circumstances in the areas involved, but for illustrative purposes, a width of 150 kilometres on both sides may be suggested. Provisions for verifying compliance with these prohibitions would be negotiated. They would have to include a limited number of on-site inspections in the zone on a challenge basis.

The Commission recognizes that nuclear munitions may be brought back to the forward areas in wartime, and that nuclear weapons may be delivered by aircraft and other longer range systems. However, we

consider the establishment of the proposed zone an important confidence-building measure which would raise the nuclear threshold and reduce some of the pressures for early use of nuclear weapons. It is consistent with our rejection of limited nuclear war as a matter of deliberate policy.

The agreement for withdrawal of 'battlefield' nuclear weapons from the forward zone should be followed by substantial reductions in the number of nuclear munitions in Europe with adequate measures of verification.

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Nuclear-weapon-free zones

The Commission believes that the establishment of nuclear-weapons-free zones on the basis of arrangements freely arrived at among the states of the region or sub-region concerned, constitutes an important step towards non-proliferation, common security and disarmament. They could provide mutual reassurance to states preferring not to acquire or allow deployment of nuclear weapons as long as neighbouring states exercise similar restraint. This would improve the chances for the region not to become enveloped in the competition of the nuclear-weapon states. The nuclear-weapon states would have to undertake a binding commitment to respect the status of the zone, and not to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against the states of the zone.

The Treaty of Tlatelolco, prohibiting nuclear weapons in Latin America, is a path-breaking regional agreement in this field. A party to it is not bound, though, until all the signatories have completed ratification, unless it waives this condition. Brazil and Chile have not done so. At present the treaty is in force for twenty-two Latin American states. Argentina has signed but not ratified the treaty. Cuba has neither signed nor ratified. The Commission strongly urges all states concerned to adopt all relevant measures to ensure the full application of the treaty.

Proposals for creating a nuclear-weapons-free zone in Africa, the South Pacific, South Asia and the Middle East have been put forward in the United Nations and have received support in the General Assembly. The process of establishing nuclear-weapon-free zones in different parts of the world should be encouraged with the ultimate objective of achieving a world entirely free of nuclear weapons.

Should it prove impossible to agree on legally defined nuclear-weapon-free zones, states could, as an interim measure, pledge themselves not to become the first to introduce nuclear weapons in the region. The nuclear-weapon states would have to guarantee the countries concerned that they would not be threatened or attacked with such weapons.