

Nuclear- Weapon-Free Zones

How they work

Tom Unterrainer



*Excerpt from 'Global
Tinderbox: Time for
Europe's Nuclear-Weapon-
Free Zone' published in
The Spokesman 141
(2019).*

If the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty arose, at least in part, from the campaign for a nuclear weapon-free zone in Europe, then it acted as an important instrument against the threat that Europe could become an actual 'theatre' of nuclear war. Such a function is an essential component of NWFZ proposals. It has been suggested that the INF Treaty, in combination with the START 1 Treaty and 'Presidential Nuclear Initiatives' signed in 1991 and the 1992 Lisbon Protocol, combined – to all intents and purposes – to create a NWFZ in the Baltic States, Belarus, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Moldova, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Ukraine.¹ This combination of states composed the 'core group' of a NWFZ proposed by Belarus in 1990.² The states in the core group have no nuclear weapons deployed within their boundaries. With the unilateral withdrawal of the US from the INF Treaty, this arrangement is under severe threat.

Threats to this arrangement are of some considerable consequence, not only due to the likely disestablishment of a quasi-NWFZ in and of itself but because NWFZ's carry the function of reducing risks of proliferation and escalation. The location of a quasi-NWFZ in the geographical periphery of Russia is of obvious importance and functionality:

"To the extent that the incentive to acquire nuclear weapons may emerge from regional considerations, the establishment of areas free of nuclear weapons is an important asset for the cause of nuclear nonproliferation. Countries confident that their enemies in the region do not possess nuclear weapons may

not be inclined to acquire such weapons themselves.”³

More broadly, the objectives of NWFZs were deliberated in some detail in a 1976 report by the United Nations Committee on Disarmament:

“the purpose of nuclear-weapon-free zones is to provide additional means for averting nuclear-weapon proliferation and halting the nuclear-arms race ... It is thus argued that [NWFZs] provide complementary machinery to other collateral measures of disarmament, non-proliferation of nuclear weapons and the development of peaceful uses of nuclear energy. Most experts felt that [NWFZs] must not be regarded as alternatives to the principle of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons ... but should be entirely consistent with the objectives of the Treaty.”⁴

The complementary nature of NWFZ proposals is important to emphasise. Any proposal for a new initiative for the creation of a European NWFZ should be seen as a specific measure in response to the proposed US withdrawal from the INF Treaty and not as an alternative to existing disarmament measures such as the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.⁵ In fact, encouraging the creation of NWFZs is the responsibility of signatories to the Treaty on Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). In the action plan agreed at the 2010 NPT Review Conference, Action 9 states:

“**Action 9:** The establishment of further nuclear-weapon-free zones, where appropriate, on the basis of arrangements freely arrived at among States of the region concerned, and in accordance with the 1999 Guidelines of the United Nations Disarmament Commission, is encouraged. All concerned States are encouraged to ratify the nuclear-weapon-free zone treaties and their relevant protocols, and to constructively consult and cooperate to bring about the entry into force of the relevant legally binding protocols of all such nuclear-weapon free zones treaties, which include negative security assurances. The concerned States are encouraged to review any related reservations.”⁶

So the basis for the creation of a NWFZ in Europe is established, but what – beyond a response to the destruction of the INF – could be its main objectives? The 2016 Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (PRIF) working paper, *A Nuclear Weapon-Free-Zone in Europe: Concepts-Problems-Chances*,⁷ outlines a number of such objectives: 1. Security objectives in the narrow sense, 2. Political-symbolic objectives and 3. Adapting defence

policies to the political situation in Europe. More detail is given within each of the three objectives, as outlined below:

1. Security objectives in the narrow sense

Confidence-building in the regional neighbourhood: “All states in the region are loyal parties to the NPT, and for many of them, membership goes beyond compliance and involves active promotion of the spirit and letter of that treaty.”⁸ Acting upon Action Point 9 of the 2010 NPT Review Conference would build and reinforce trust amongst regional signatories to the NPT, and would signal to neighbours – Russia in particular – that no threat is posed.

Irreversibility and Stability: The creation of the NWFZ in Europe would be the result of a legally binding, verifiable and therefore “hard to revoke”⁹ arrangement.

Immunizing the region against the consequences of a nuclear confrontation: “one objective of any NWFZ has always been to protect the region concerned against becoming a nuclear battleground”.¹⁰

2. Political-symbolic objectives

Strengthening the non-proliferation regime: Developing a NWFZ in Europe would mean signatories to the NPT acting on the 2010 Review Conference Action Plan. Such an act could only reinforce existing arms control and disarmament regimes.

Fostering nuclear disarmament: “Sub-strategic nuclear weapons are today one of the most nagging issues for nuclear disarmament ... A NWFZ in Europe would intend to, eventually, cover an area in which NATO’s sub-strategic nuclear weapons are presently sited and to stimulate adequate reciprocal concessions by Russia concerning her capabilities in the same weapons category”.¹¹

Helping delegitimize nuclear weapons/provoking debate: As the PRIF study points out, the legitimacy of nuclear weapons as an issue of debate has never been “dormant”. There have, however, been identifiable periods when debate and discussion adopted a much higher pitch than usual. Destruction of the INF should be an opportunity for the debate to gain traction and the proposal for a NWFZ in Europe can only boost

such debates.

3. Adapting defence policies to the political situation in Europe

“One of the most frequently heard observations by non-Europeans is the disconnect between the nuclear constellation and the political situation in Europe. The relation between the West and Russia is not without disputes and occasional tensions ... but the idea of a war against each other sounds still far-fetched.”¹²

Developments since the PRIF study was published now make it much easier to imagine war, even nuclear war, breaking out between “the West and Russia”. Further, the general political situation in Europe has deteriorated markedly in the three years since the PRIF study, much ‘adaptation’ of defence policies is already underway.¹³ The development of plans for the NWFZ in Europe would add something definitively more positive to the current debate and could unleash an all-too-necessary political counter-dynamic to the current direction of travel.

An important aspect of any proposal for a NWFZ in Europe is that it would, in fact, benefit from being part of an international system of such zones. In his indispensable study, *Security without Nuclear Deterrence*, Commander Robert Green notes:

“Every year since 1996 the UN General Assembly has adopted a resolution introduced by Brazil calling upon the states parties and signatories to the regional NWFZ treaties ‘to promote the nuclear weapon free status of the Southern Hemisphere and adjacent areas’, and to explore and promote further cooperation among themselves.”¹⁴

The first conference of states already participating in NWFZs took place in Mexico in April 2005. The declaration adopted by the conference reaffirmed a commitment to the “consolidation, strengthening and expansion of NWFZs, the prevention of nuclear proliferation and the achievement of a nuclear weapons free world.”¹⁵ So not only do signatories to the NPT share a commitment to establish NWFZs, but existing such zones are committed to their expansion.

This leaves the rather important question of ‘who’, or ‘what’, will have the capacity to drive forward the call for the NWFZ in Europe.

Notes

1. Finaud, Mark (2014) *The Experience of Nuclear Weapon-Free Zones*, BASIC. Source: <http://www.basicint.org/publications/marc-finaud/2014/experience-nuclear-weapon-free-zones>
2. Non-core states included Albania, Austria, Finland, Sweden and the states of the former Yugoslavia, with Norway, Denmark and Germany proposed as additional members. Source: www.basicint.org/publications/marc-finaud/2014/experience-nuclear-weapon-free-zones. See also fas.org/programs/ssp/nukes/ArmsControl_NEW/nonproliferation/NFZ/NP-NFZ-CE.html for more on the Belarus proposals of 1990.
3. Goldblat, Joseph (1997) 'Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones: A History and Assessment', *The Nonproliferation Review*, Spring-Summer 1997
4. *Comprehensive Study of the Question of Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones in all its Aspects*, Special Report of the Conference of the Committee on Disarmament, United Nations, New York, 1976
5. See www.icanw.org/why-a-ban/positions/ for the most recent information on the status of the TPNW
6. Text accessed at <https://dfat.gov.au/international-relations/security/non-proliferation-disarmament-arms-control/policies-agreements-treaties/treaty-on-the-non-proliferation-of-nuclear-weapons/Pages/2010-npt-review-conference-64-point-action-plan.aspx>
7. Müller, Harald et al (2016) *A Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone in Europe: Concepts-Problems-Chances*, PRIF Working Paper No. 27, January 2016
8. Ibid
9. Ibid
10. Ibid
11. Ibid
12. Ibid
13. See Lösing, Sabine (2018) 'Militarising Europe Again', *Europe for the Many*, The Spokesman, issue 140, Spokesman, Nottingham
14. Green, Robert (2018) *Security without Nuclear Deterrence*, Spokesman, Nottingham
15. Ibid