Let's Keep the Arctic Free of Nukes

Jayantha Dhanapala
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The region believed to have once been the land bridge across which the earliest human migration took place from Eurasia to the Americas promises today, as a result of climate change, to become a maritime conduit of increased global exchanges.

This has the potential of bringing nations together for peace and development. It also has the potential for disputes and conflict. At this point, we have an opportunity to make a choice.

We are all stakeholders in what happens in the Arctic - environmentally, politically, militarily and in every other way - as the ice cover melts.

Before the modern "gold rush" for oil, gas, diamonds and minerals begins to cause tensions among the eight circumpolar countries - Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden and the United States - a global regime should be established over the Arctic to mitigate the effects of climate change and for the equitable use of its resources.

In terms of military security, a choice can be made between returning to the rivalries of the Cold War or a cooperative arrangement like the 1959 Antarctic Treaty, which has preserved the area around that opposite pole "exclusively for peaceful purposes."

Already the eight countries are bound by the 1971 Seabed Treaty not to place weapons of mass destruction on the seabed beyond 12 miles off their coast.

Seven of the eight countries are also bound by the provisions of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, which can settle disputes over territorial claims in this mineral-rich area (the United States has yet to ratify the convention). Already, too, the eight countries have worked reasonably well for over a decade in the Arctic Council, especially on environmental issues, together with the permanent participants from indigenous peoples' organizations.

Yet as icebreakers begin the explorations and mapping of the Arctic seabed, there are ominous signs of the resumption of military activities with nuclear-armed submarines, aircraft patrols and heightened surveillance. It is timely therefore to raise the proposal of an Antarctic-type treaty for the Arctic.

There have been proposals before. At an early stage, the indigenous peoples themselves proposed a nuclear-weapon-free-zone in the Arctic. In 1958, the Soviet Union proposed a zone in Northern Europe free from "atomic and hydrogen bombs." In October 1987, Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev called in Murmansk for an Arctic "zone of peace," directing his appeal especially to the Nordic countries. A Nordic Nuclear Weapon-free zone has also been discussed, mainly in academic circles, without ever becoming the subject of intergovernmental negotiations.

In August 2007, as a sequel to the flurry of claims and counter-claims in the Arctic, the Canadian group of the Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs, an international organization that seeks to reduce the danger of armed conflicts, issued a paper calling for an Arctic Nuclear Weapon-free zone.

Advocating multilateral confidence-building measures to retard the pace of militarization while awaiting the strengthening of the Arctic legal regime, the group called for a nuclear-free zone in the territory and waters north of the Arctic Circle, beginning with the disputed waters of the Northwest Passage.

The Canadians drew special attention to the Antarctic Treaty of 1959. The paper noted the expiry of the START treaty in 2009 as an opportunity for negotiations to begin on the Arctic between the U.S. and Russia. The NATO alliance, which regards nuclear deterrence as a key part of its military doctrine, was identified as another obstacle - and was probably why the proposal received a cold reception from the Canadian government.

Based on the provisions of the 1968 Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty, existing nuclear-weapon-free-zone treaties cover some 113 countries and leave most of the Southern Hemisphere and Central Asia free of nuclear weapons. Achieving such an agreement in a region that includes two countries that together own 95 percent of the world's 26,000 nuclear weapons, as well as NATO countries, would be very difficult.

But if the non-nuclear countries around the Arctic, together with the indigenous people, join with international civil society, pressure could be exerted on the United States and Russia to agree to a Arctice nuclear-weapon-free zone, primarily as an environmental measure to safeguard the Arctic.

As the Canadians proposed, an agreement could also be placed in the context of the negotiations that must begin now to replace the U.S.-Russian START treaty and the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty, known as the Treaty of Moscow, which expires in 2012.

The model of the Antarctic Treaty, of course, is there. While ensuring the usual prohibitions - such as those against stationing nuclear weapons or dumping nuclear waste in the Arctic area - an agreement could guarantee the right of transit to nuclear-weapon state, as the 1985 Treaty of Rarotonga does in the South Pacific.

Another possibility is to convert the current agreement between the United States and Russia on the prevention of incidents at sea into a multilateral treaty. Like other confidence-building measures, the agreement does not directly affect the size, weaponry, or force structure of the parties. Rather, it serves to reduce the possibility of conflict by accident, miscalculation or the failure of communication and to increase stability in times of both calm and crisis.

In short, the means are many, but the time is now.