

# Indigenous sovereignty and nuclear forces: prospects for a nuclear-free Arctic

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## Impact of the nuclear arms race on indigenous peoples

Indigenous peoples around the world have had their sovereignty infringed, their territories destroyed and their health impacted by the nuclear arms race.

Uranium mining, nuclear weapons testing, missile testing and nuclear waste dumping have all been done on indigenous territories including the Shoshone lands in the United States, Maohi islands in French-occupied Polynesia, Uighur lands in Lop Nor (China), Pitjantjatjara lands in Maralinga (Australia), Marshallese Islands in the Pacific, and the Arctic territories of the Kazakhs, Sami, Vepsians, Karelians, Aluet, Nentses and Komi (See Indigenous Peoples and the Nuclear Age at [www.reachingcriticalwill.org](http://www.reachingcriticalwill.org)).

As such, the **Indigenous World Uranium Summit** hosted by the Navajo Nation in 2006 called for an end to nuclear testing, waste dumping and the deployment of nuclear weapons. The 2008 **Nibutani Declaration of the Indigenous Peoples Summit in Ainu Mosir** (Japan) echoes these calls and encourages the 2010 Indigenous Peoples Summit in Canada to take further action.

The testing of nuclear weapons on indigenous territory has mostly stopped, but has left a legacy of environmental contamination and trans-generational health effects from the radiation released in the



Three polar bears approach a U.S. nuclear submarine that has surfaced near the North Pole

[U.S. Navy photo by Chief Yeoman Alphonso Briggs]

nuclear activities. Meanwhile, the deployment of nuclear weapons on submarines, and the testing of nuclear weapons-carrying missiles, continues.

## The Arctic – a changing environment

In the Arctic, conflict and confrontation between the nuclear-armed States is increasing – partly as a result of the receding ice-cap resulting in new resource and territorial claims. In this new area of tension, indigenous sovereignty could suffer further.

In October 2007 the National Snow and Ice Data Center reported that Arctic sea ice has plummeted to the lowest levels since satellite measurements began in 1979. This could soon allow commercial ship navigation through Arctic waters, and much easier access to seabed resources.

This is leading to a flurry of legal claims and counterclaims regarding transit rights and ownership of valuable seabed resources. There is a growing possibility of serious disputes over these, leading to increased

militarization and possibly even triggering armed conflict.

On 2 August last year a Russian submarine planted their national flag on the seabed under the North Pole claiming it as part of the north Russian continental shelf. This provoked a stern rebuke from Canadian defense minister, Peter MacKay: "This isn't the 15th century. You can't go around the world and just plant flags and say: 'We're claiming this territory.'" Canadian Prime Minister Harper followed a few days later by announcing plans to construct two new military facilities in the High Arctic region adjacent to the Northwest Passage sea route.

There are also a range of environmental issues that could create tensions and conflict in the region. These include the threats of environmental contamination from decommissioned Russian nuclear submarines scuttled in the area (with their nuclear reactors onboard), threats to the homes and hunting grounds of indigenous arctic peoples from climate change, and the possibility of oil slicks from shipping accidents if the Northwest Passage opens up.



Dr Hans Blix speaking in the Danish Parliament at a conference where the Arctic Nuclear Weapon Free Zone was proposed.



*The Arctic and the receding ice-cap.  
Map by C. Grabhorn, used courtesy of SGI Quarterly*

## Nuclear tensions and deployments

The US and Russia currently deploy nuclear weapons on strategic submarines that transit the Arctic waters. In addition, Russia maintains strategic naval bases in the region. These create some tension between these two nuclear powers. Since the end of the Cold War such tensions have waned, especially with the removal of tactical nuclear weapons by both powers from surface ships and attack submarines. However, tensions could increase again if ice-cap depletion leads to increased submarine deployment, or if the US proceeds with the development of Ballistic Missile Defences including the possible deployment of missiles or support facilities in the territories of Arctic allies such as Canada or Denmark.

## Nuclear-Weapon-Free-Zones: a growing trend

The Antarctic (South Pole) was made a Nuclear Weapon Free Zone (NWFZ) in 1959 as part of the Antarctic Treaty. Since then NWFZs have spread to encompass most of the Southern Hemisphere. The trend is also picking up in the Northern Hemisphere with NWFZs established in Central Asia and Mongolia, and other ones proposed for North East Asia, Central Europe, and the Middle East.

With climate change opening up the Arctic region - bringing with it the possibility of increased resource competition, territorial disputes and militarization - perhaps now is the time to establish an Arctic NWFZ similar to the one covering Antarctica, thus freeing both the north and south poles from nuclear weapons and helping to build a more cooperative security environment in the North.

## Arctic NWFZ: building cooperative security

Some of the emerging Arctic conflicts could be dealt with in existing forums such as the Law of the Sea Tribunal, the International Court of Justice and the Arctic Forum. However, none of these are designed to address security issues in a cooperative manner. The LOS Tribunal and the ICJ are forums for determining legal rights not for negotiations, while the Arctic Forum deals primarily with environmental and habitat issues. As happened with the Antarctic Treaty, the commencement of negotiations for an Arctic Nuclear Weapon Free Zone (NWFZ) could create a forum where wider security issues could also be addressed. At the very least, the establishment of an Arctic NWFZ would be a confidence-building measure that could assist in the promotion of peace and security in the region.

## Indigenous involvement

Indigenous peoples have campaigned for the establishment of NWFZs and have benefited from them. However, to date, indigenous peoples have not been included in the negotiations on NWFZs, which have been conducted primarily by governments with the help of UN agencies. In the Arctic, it would be appropriate to include indigenous peoples in the NWFZ treaty negotiations.

## Towards a nuclear-weapons-free world

In 2005 Mexico hosted the inaugural Conference of States Parties to NWFZs - then numbering 108 countries. Civil society and indigenous peoples were invited to hold a parallel forum the final declaration of which was included with inter-governmental declaration which was submitted to the States Parties to the Non-Proliferation Treaty in order to encourage them to support the establishment of new NWFZs and to implement their obligation to achieve a nuclear-weapons-free world. In 2010 a second Conference of States Parties to NWFZs and a parallel Civil Society Forum will be held to further these aims.



*Indigenous Marshallese Senator Abacca Anjain Madisson, Nagasaki Mayor Icoh Itoh and author Alyn Ware at the 2005 Conference of States Parties to NWFZs.*

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*For further information see:*

- *The Arctic and Its Future*, Soka Gakkai International Quarterly Magazine, [www.sgiquarterly.org](http://www.sgiquarterly.org)
- *PNNND Notes*, [www.pnnd.org](http://www.pnnd.org)

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