
LKI *commentaries* are opinion pieces on international relations.

Revisiting Nuclear Weapon Free Zones in South Asia: Evaluating Policy Options for Smaller States

Malinda Meegoda*

July 2018

***Malinda Meegoda** is a Research Associate at the Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute of International Relations and Strategic Studies (LKI). The opinions expressed in this article are the author's own and not the institutional views of LKI, and do not necessarily reflect the position of any other institution or individual with which the author is affiliated. A version of this article was originally published in the South Asian Voices.

Policy discussion on nuclear issues in South Asia is usually dominated by recommendations relating to nuclear risk reduction and crisis management between India and Pakistan. By contrast, there is inadequate attention to what *non*-nuclear weapon states in the region could accomplish on nuclear disarmament, non-proliferation, and nuclear risk reduction. This article will argue that as the [naval nuclear dynamics in South Asia](#)¹ become increasingly unstable, Sri Lanka should develop a framework to establish a limited NWFZ (Nuclear Weapon Free Zone) based on a combination of political realism, the principle of nonalignment, and participation in regional and global efforts to strengthen international peace and security.

What is a NWFZ?

A NWFZ is a [regional arrangement](#) in which countries at least partially quarantine themselves from the threat of nuclear weapons, usually by prohibiting the development, stockpiling, and stationing of nuclear weapons.² The development of NWFZs has been one of the most significant and successful avenues in global efforts towards nuclear disarmament. The zones are not meant to serve as arms control regimes (like the Non-Proliferation Treaty). Instead, they represent a gradual approach to de-legitimise nuclear weapons at the regional level. Indeed, the first proposal for a NWFZ, known as the '[Rapacki Plan](#)' (after a former Polish Foreign Minister) was back in 1957, before the emergence of the non-proliferation regime.³

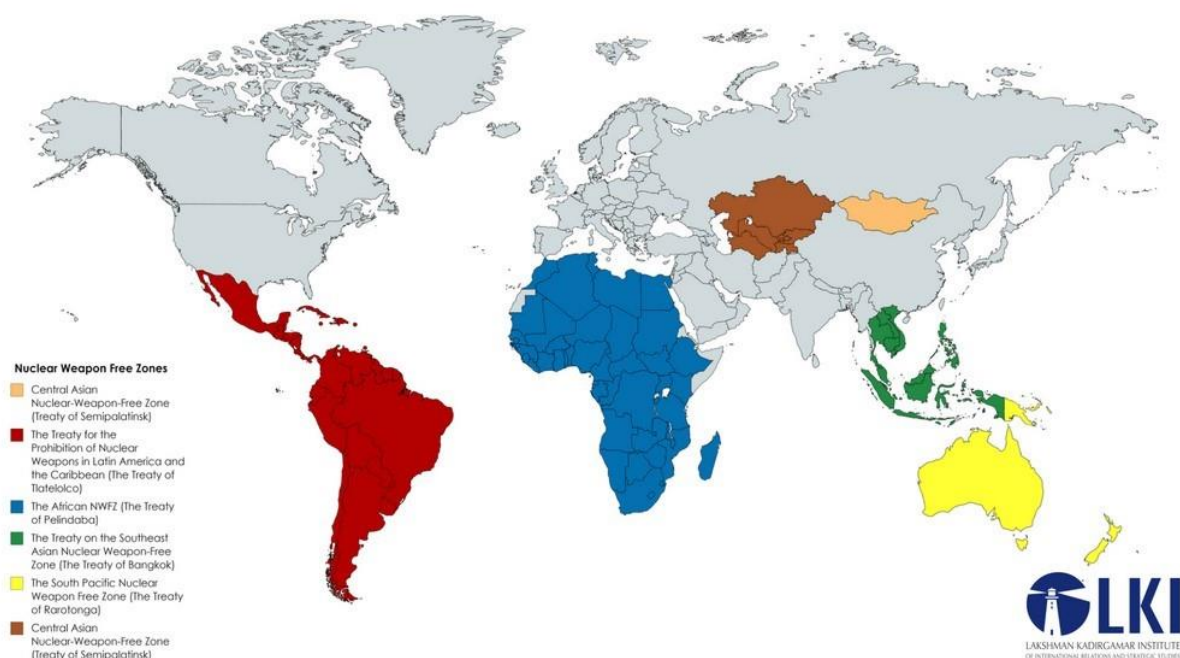
Today, there are 114 countries in the world that belong to [five major regional NWFZs](#), including in Latin America and the Caribbean, the South Pacific, Southeast Asia, Africa, and Central Asia.⁴ A key feature of most NWFZs is that they have been implemented primarily by countries of the Global South. The first regional NWFZ, the [Treaty of Tlatelolco](#), was established in 1969 by states of Latin America and the Caribbean.⁵ Establishment of NWFZs has also been a method of self-preservation by non-nuclear weapons states, which lack the protection of 'nuclear umbrella' arrangements like NATO. Consequently, these states seek [security assurances](#) from nuclear weapon states (NWS) that nuclear weapons will not be used against or near them.⁶

Challenges to a Regional NWFZ in South Asia

The concept of a NWFZ in South Asia is not a new idea. Countries have proposed such a zone at various times; most notably, Pakistan in 1974 when it supported [Resolution 3265B](#) at the United Nations General Assembly.⁷ Pakistan's support for a NWFZ was based on its apprehension of a further widening of military capabilities vis-à-vis India, following [India's nuclear testing in 1974](#).⁸

Given that India and Pakistan have now both joined the group of NWS, however, prospects for a regional agreement on a NWFZ have diminished significantly. An additional challenge is that South Asia lacks a strong regional organisation. In Latin America and South East Asia, the push for NWFZs came from such regional multilateral negotiations at fora such as the Organisation for American States ([OAS](#)), and the Association of Southeast Nations ([ASEAN](#)). The subsequent creation of organisations like the Agency for the Prohibition of Nuclear

Weapons in Latin America and the Caribbean ([OPANAL](#)) has further strengthened their regional efforts towards nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament.⁹



Limited and Single-State NWFZ options for Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka was one of the early supporters of NWFZs, arguing as far as back as 1964 that NWFZs should be “[extended to cover not only land masses but oceans as well](#).”¹⁰ However, given the current impasse on a South Asian NWFZ, Sri Lanka could look to formulate a single-state NWFZ. One obvious starting point would be to study the [Mongolian single-state NWFZ](#), including how Mongolia was able to negotiate the relevant treaty with its NWS neighbours, Russia and China.¹¹

Sri Lanka would have to make a number of decisions on the scope of such a treaty—including whether it would cover areas beyond Sri Lanka’s territorial waters—and the list of prohibitions. In addition, Sri Lanka should consider whether to include strict definitions of terms such as ‘nuclear weapon’ and ‘delivery systems’ (the technology and systems used to place a nuclear weapon at the position of detonation, such as ballistic missiles or cruise missiles) or to leave such details open for further negotiation, in view to a potentially broader and more ambitious disarmament agenda.

In order to establish a preliminary, unilateral, and single-state NWFZ that is effective, the terms must be acceptable to China, India and Pakistan, including with respect to their agendas in the Indian Ocean. It is plausible that Delhi would welcome the initiative, albeit with some initial caution, as it would help to alleviate [perceived risks](#)¹² stemming from Sri Lanka’s location on China’s ‘string of pearls’ and its associated [naval nuclear strategy](#) in the region.¹³

Generating International Support

In addition to minimising the risks of a nuclear accident, a single-state NWFZ could revive Sri Lanka's international credibility in upholding its non-aligned and related disarmament principles. It is also an opportunity to strengthen relations with member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) by linking the single-state NWFZ with the [Southeast Asia NWFZ \(Bangkok Treaty\)](#).¹⁴ Such an outcome would depend on negotiating a treaty that is tied to the existing verification regimes of the Bangkok Treaty, and which receives broad international recognition, especially from NWS.

Depending on the progress and type of the single-state NWFZ, Sri Lanka could also seek to expand the zone to a broader 'Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone' that includes chemical, biological, and radiological weapons. The most concrete proposal for a WMD Free Zone remains the [Middle East WMD Free Zone](#),¹⁵ which has enjoyed broad support from a number of [Arab states](#).¹⁶

Finally, it should be noted that efforts towards a single-state NWFZ should be approached with caution, as a single-state initiative could discourage countries from joining regional NWFZs. However, given the absence of any regional framework in the offing, this may be the ideal time for Sri Lanka to step up and lead the conversation on regional nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament, by pursuing a single-state NWFZ.

Notes

¹ Hundley, T. (2018). *India and Pakistan are building nuclear-armed submarines*. Vox. <https://www.vox.com/2018/4/2/17096566/pakistan-india-nuclear-war-submarine-enemies>.

² United Nations for Disarmament Affairs. (n.d.). *Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones – UNODA*. <https://www.un.org/disarmament/wmd/nuclear/nwzf/>.

³ Maruzsa, Z. (2008). *Denuclearization in Central Europe? The Rapacki Plan during the Cold War*. Cold War Research Centre. http://www.atomwaffena-z.info/fileadmin/user_upload/pdf/RapackiPlan_Maruzsa.pdf

⁴ United Nations for Disarmament Affairs. (n.d.). *Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones – UNODA*. <https://www.un.org/disarmament/wmd/nuclear/nwzf>

⁵ United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs. (n.d.). *Disarmament Treaties Database: Treaty of Tlatelolco*. <http://disarmament.un.org/treaties/t/tlatelolco>.

⁶ Arms Control Association. (2018). *U.S. Negative Security Assurances at a Glance*. <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/negsec>.

⁷ General Assembly resolution 3265. *1974 Declaration And Establishment Of Nuclear-free Zone In South Asia*. [http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/3265\(XXIX\)](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/3265(XXIX))

⁸ India Today (2018). *Pokhran I: India's first nuclear bomb test was carried out underground and code named 'Smiling Buddha'*. <https://www.indiatoday.in/education-today/gk-current-affairs/story/pokhran-i-first-nuclear-atomic-bomb-test-of-india-324141-2016-05-18>

⁹ The Nuclear Threat Initiative. (2018). *Agency for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons in Latin America and the Caribbean (OPANAL)*. <http://www.nti.org/learn/treaties-and-regimes/agency-prohibition-nuclear-weapons-latin-america-and-caribbean-opanal/>.

¹⁰ “Our view was that this concept (Nuclear-Free Zones) should be extended to cover not only land masses but oceans as well, for the limits of territorial waters were determined in pre-nuclear times according to the limited range of conventional maritime weapons” - Sri Lanka Delegate on Nuclear Free Zones- General Policy Statement in the United Nations (1964). reprinted in Jayawardene, A. ed., 2018. Documents on Sri Lanka's Foreign Policy 1947 -1965. Regional Centre for Strategic Studies.

¹¹ Nuclear Threat Initiative. (2018). *Nuclear-Weapon-Free Status of Mongolia*. <http://www.nti.org/learn/treaties-and-regimes/nuclear-weapon-free-status-mongolia/>.

¹² South China Morning Post. (2017). *Sri Lanka refuses port call for Chinese submarine after Modi visit*. <http://www.scmp.com/news/asia/diplomacy/article/2094093/sri-lanka-refuses-port-call-chinese-submarine-after-indian>

¹³ China Power Project. (2018). *Does China have an effective sea-based nuclear deterrent?* <https://chinapower.csis.org/ssbn/>.

¹⁴ Nuclear Threat Initiative. (2018). *Southeast Asian Nuclear-Weapon-Free-Zone (SEANWFZ) Treaty (Bangkok Treaty)*. <http://www.nti.org/learn/treaties-and-regimes/southeast-asian-nuclear-weapon-free-zone-seanwzf-treaty-bangkok-treaty/>

¹⁵ Davenport, K. 2017. *WMD-Free Middle East Proposal at a Glance*. Arms Control Association. <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/mewmdfz>

¹⁶ Bino, T. (2017). *The Pursuit of a WMD-Free Zone in the Middle East A New Approach*. Chatham House. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2017-07-27-WMDFZME.pdf#page=3>

Copyright and Terms of Use

© 2018 Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute of International Relations and Strategic Studies (LKI). LKI is not responsible for errors or any consequences arising from the use of information contained herein. The views expressed are not the institutional views of LKI.