

Say no to nukes in the Arctic

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“The Arctic is the barometer of the globe’s environmental health. You can take the pulse of the world in the Arctic. Inuit, the people who live farther north than anyone else, are the canary in the global coal mine.”

These words are from an indigenous representative speaking at the United Nations, where she stressed that the peoples of the Arctic have known for decades from firsthand experience and traditional knowledge what scientists now confirm: Our world is warming at an alarming rate, bringing the prospect of new changes and threats to humanity.

Last year, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) issued their Fourth Assessment Report, according to which the amount of carbon dioxide released into the atmosphere has risen dramatically in recent years. If present trends continue, by the end of the 21st century average global temperatures could rise by as much as 6.4 degrees C. Among other changes, the report warns of the possibility of a melting of the polar icecaps and an increased frequency of extreme weather.

The threat of rising ocean levels caused by the melting of the polar icecaps is well known. But the prospect of the Arctic seas becoming ice free in summer is significant for other reasons.

The thick polar ice sheet has long made both commercial navigation and exploitation of the resources of the Arctic seabed impossible. If the polar icecap recedes or even disappears during the summer months, this could open the way to an international scramble for resources. There is the potential for heightened political tensions as well as disastrous impacts on the unique and fragile ecosystem of the region.

During the Cold War, the Arctic Ocean was an important route for the nuclear-powered submarines of the Eastern and Western blocs, which traveled under the icecap carrying their ominous loads of ballistic missiles. If a new phase of military competition were sparked in the region, this would greatly

compound the tragic impact of global warming. We must act now to avoid this at all costs.

The first step must be the denuclearization of the Arctic region. The Canadian Pugwash Group last summer called for the establishment of an Arctic Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone (NWFZ) to prohibit the deployment, testing or use of nuclear weapons in the territories and waters north of the Arctic Circle. The members of the Soka Gakkai International (SGI) have worked consistently for the realization of a world free of the threat of nuclear weapons. The proposal made by the Canadian Pugwash Group resonates deeply with these commitments, and I would like to add our voice to those supporting this important proposal.

The 1959 Antarctic Treaty prohibited the military use of the southern polar region and banned all nuclear explosions and the disposal of radioactive materials south of 60 degrees south latitude, making the Antarctic the world's first NWFZ. This was followed by the creation of similar zones in Latin America and the Caribbean, the South Pacific, Southeast Asia, Africa and Central Asia, as well as Mongolia.

Most of the landmass of the Southern Hemisphere is now covered by NWFZ agreements, which have also established footholds in Asia. NWFZs act as a brake against moves toward nuclear proliferation. At the same time, they help strengthen momentum toward the outlawing of nuclear weapons. Through their participation in NWFZs, a total of well over 100 countries, more than half of the governments on Earth, have expressed their view that nuclear weapons are or should be illegal under international law.

The process of deliberating and establishing NWFZs in the Arctic and elsewhere can contribute momentum toward establishing the illegality of nuclear weapons as the common norm and consensus of humanity. Eventually, this should take the form of an international treaty for the comprehensive prohibition of nuclear weapons.

In the Antarctic, the NWFZ has not only demilitarized that region, but has helped foster international cooperation in the field of scientific exploration. I would hope that an Arctic NWFZ would be a vital step in a process by which the

unique natural, ecological and cultural treasures of the region and its peoples will be recognized as the common heritage of humankind, and afforded the protection and respect they deserve. The United Nations should serve as a focal point for efforts to realize an Arctic NWFZ treaty.

Having experienced the horrors of nuclear war, and with its commitment not to develop, possess, or allow nuclear weapons onto its territory, Japan has a special role to play in protecting the world from the dangers of nuclear proliferation. Japan should take the initiative in working with other countries and with the full range of civil society organizations that desire a nuclear-weapon-free world in order to create an Arctic NWFZ.

Similarly, in dealing with the nuclear proliferation challenges in East Asia I think it is important to have a larger goal in sight. All efforts should continue through the six-party talks toward the complete dismantling of North Korea's nuclear weapons program.

At the same time, Japan should reaffirm its uncompromising commitment to its own nonnuclear policies, and should deploy its full diplomatic efforts toward the more encompassing goal of establishing an NWFZ covering the whole of East Asia.