

PROSPECTS FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT OF NUCLEAR WEAPON-FREE ZONE IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE*

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Abstract The probability of a new great war in Europe, which was perceived as minimal in the 1990s – 2010s, has seriously increased in 2022. Among numerous reasons for this were the nuclear risks associated with the highly ambiguous statements of the Ukrainian leadership, Poland's desire to acquire American tactical nuclear weapons, and risks of the Russia–U.S. nuclear war that increased with the further collapse of the arms control regime. Against this background, the revival of the long-forgotten idea of a nuclear weapon-free zone in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) could play a positive role in resolving this problem. The article raises terminological issues, discusses a potential territorial framework for such a zone, and provides a brief historical account of the issue. Four scenarios of regional developments in the field of nuclear non-proliferation are offered. Two scenarios provide for the creation of a nuclear free zone, one more involves the freezing the current situation, and the last one focuses on threats to non-proliferation regime in Central and Eastern Europe. In the end, conclusions are offered about the potential significance of such a zone for the settlement of the conflict in Ukraine, especially in connection with conventional arms control measures in Europe.

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Название статьи **Перспективы создания зоны, свободной от ядерного оружия, в Центральной и Восточной Европе**

Аннотация Вероятность новой большой войны в Европе, казавшаяся минимальной в 1990-х – 2010-х годах, значительно выросла в 2022 г. Среди многочисленных причин роста этой угрозы свою роль играют ядерные риски, связанные с двусмысленными заявлениями украинского руководства, желание Польши заполучить американское тактическое ядерное оружие, а также опасения по поводу возможности российско-американской ядерной войны, усилившиеся с дальнейшим разрушением режима контроля над вооружениями. Представляется, что положительную роль в урегулировании данной проблемы могло бы сыграть воскрешение давней идеи о создании в Центральной и Восточной Европе зоны, свободной от ядерного оружия. В статье рассматриваются проблемы терминологии, определяются возможные территориальные рамки для подобной зоны в регионе и дается краткая историческая справка по теме. Предлагаются четыре сценария развития событий в регионе в сфере ядерного нераспространения. Два из четырех сценариев предусматривают создание в том или ином виде безъядерной зоны, один – замораживание текущего положения вещей, а еще один акцентирует внимание на угрозах режиму нераспространения в Центральной и Восточной Европе. В заключении сделаны выводы о потенциальной значимости установления зоны, свободной от ядерного оружия, для урегулирования конфликта на Украине, особенно в увязке с мероприятиями по контролю над обычными вооружениями в Европе.

Ключевые слова зона, свободная от ядерного оружия, безъядерная зона, Центральная и Восточная Европа, план Рапацкого, Договор об обычных вооруженных силах в Европе, Междуморье, ядерное нераспространение, совместное использование ядерного оружия, военная ядерная программа

I. Introduction

In recent months, speculations about the possibility of a nuclear war between Russia and the United States have started to circulate actively among the political elites and the public all over the world, just like almost 80 years ago. Despite numerous statements from both sides that a nuclear war is impossible,¹ some analysts predict an increase in the number of nuclear powers after the military conflict in Ukraine is over.²

The problem concerns Europe, a region that has remained relatively peaceful for several decades. The U.S. and NATO allies have been under the cover of the U.S. military presence and NATO's "nuclear umbrella". Russia's special military operation in Ukraine made European leaders recall long-forgotten practices of the Cold War times. Among such practices that eventually could be brought back to life are launching one's own nuclear program or placing some nuclear state's nuclear weapons on one's own territory. This is especially true for the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, located at the new frontier line between the West and the so-called non-West. According to one survey, more than a third of Latvians and Lithuanians, almost every second Estonian and Romanian, and as many as two thirds of Poles believe that their country needs its own nuclear program.³

Although even in the current circumstances such a development looks unlikely, the situation is changing rapidly. Even in late 2021 – early 2022, it was difficult to imagine that the long-frozen conflict in eastern Ukraine would flare up to such an extent that for many it would look like a kind of prologue to World War III. Thus, it is important to consider those scenarios that involve threats to the nuclear non-proliferation regime. It is not enough just to take such scenarios into account – efforts must be made to ensure that they never come true. To prevent such developments, it makes sense to revive the idea of establishing a nuclear-weapon-free zone in Central and Eastern Europe, which was first introduced in the 1950s.

II. The issue of terminology

To begin with, it is worth to define key concepts and terms, such as a “nuclear-weapon-free zone” and “Central and Eastern Europe”. According to the Resolution 3472, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1975, a nuclear-weapon-free zone (NWFZ) is “any zone, recognized as such by the General Assembly of the United Nations, which any group of States, in the free exercises of their sovereignty, has established by virtue of a treaty or convention whereby: a) The statute of total absence of nuclear weapons to which the zone shall be subject, including the procedure for the delimitation of the zone, is defined; b) An international system of verification and control is established to guarantee compliance with the obligations deriving from that statute”.⁴

In 1999, the UN Disarmament Commission issued a set of principles and guidelines for the establishment of new NWFZs. Among these principles was the creation of a NWFZ “on the basis of agreements freely arrived at among the States of the region concerned”, as well as solely by the initiative of these states and to be implemented by all of them.⁵

Let us now turn to the concept of “Central and Eastern Europe”. There are many viewpoints on geographical divisions within Europe. Some of these options are employed by the UN Statistics Division, the Central Intelligence Agency’s (CIA’s) “World Factbook”, and the Committees on Geographical Names of various countries. The authors would normally prefer to follow the UN approach, as the UN is the most authoritative organization concerning this matter. However, the problem is that the UN divides Europe into Northern, Western, Eastern, and Southern,⁶ which leaves no room either for “Central”, or for “Central and Eastern Europe”.

The authors thus have to rely on their own way to divide Europe geographically, based mainly on classifications proposed by the UN Statistical Committee and by the Standing Committee on Geographical Names of Germany.⁷ Taking these classifications into account, the study focuses on four European sub-regions – Central (Germany and Austria), Eastern (Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia, Croatia, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Belarus, Ukraine, and Russia), South Eastern (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Bulgaria, Romania, Moldova, Turkey), and Northern (Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland) Europe. The need to expand the concept of CEE to include the last two sub-regions is mainly substantiated by the historical factor: in the past, states of these sub-regions repeatedly promoted the idea of establishing a nuclear weapon-free zone.

III. Background

The first initiative to create a nuclear-weapon-free zone in Central Europe and the progenitor of all future NWFZs in the world was the so-called Rapacki Plan. A year after the 1956 Soviet disarmament proposal (that insisted on the prohibition of stationing and locating atomic devices in the territory of both parts of Germany and of states adjacent to them), on October 2, 1957, Polish Foreign Minister Adam Rapacki put forward his idea of a

nuclear-weapon-free zone in Central Europe at the 12th session of the UN General Assembly. According to the Polish proposal, if both German states renounce the production and storage of nuclear weapons on their territory, Poland, for its part, would do the same.⁸ Although Rapacki tried to promote his idea of an NWFZ on three separate occasions, these proposals were firmly rejected by the West. In the United States, the Rapacki Plan was named a “major propaganda weapon” aimed at creating additional tension within NATO and especially in Germany.⁹

At the same time, ideas of establishing NWFZs in the Balkans and in the Northern Europe kept circulating. These ideas were born within the corresponding sub-regions and were supported by the Soviet Union. As in the case with the Rapacki Plan, these ideas met a decisive rebuff from the United States, who named them “meaningless”¹⁰ and changing “the existing military balance at the expense of the United States and its Allies”.¹¹

After the end of the Cold War, the next attempt to establish a nuclear weapon-free zone in Central and Eastern Europe was initially put forward by Belarus in 1990¹² and was later supported by Russia. This plan ultimately failed for many reasons – its vagueness, the lack of perseverance in its promotion, and Russia’s excessive diplomatic pliability at the time. However, the main reason for its failure was once again the systemic factor. The United States, as a guarantor of Europe’s security, was not interested in self-restriction of its capabilities in the region. Washington regarded the Belarusian and Russian initiative as an attempt to counteract NATO’s eastward expansion, while the United States considered this expansion as a necessary and inevitable process. Countries of the “New Europe” also prioritized obtaining the status of a NATO member state, which promised them far more political and economic benefits compared to the NWFZ guarantees.

In the context of nuclear non-proliferation, the current situation in Central and Eastern Europe still looks good. There is only one truly threshold state in the region – Germany – that, however, is not eager to become a new nuclear power. Although some countries with a developed nuclear sector are hypothetically capable of making a dirty bomb or some other radiological weapon, they are unlikely to take such a step soon, because it would certainly make them pariahs in the international community. To implement full-fledged military nuclear programs, they will need a lot of time, resources, and, above all, their own uranium enrichment facilities.

Taking into account current developments in the region, at present, the greatest challenge to nuclear non-proliferation in Central and Eastern Europe is the threat of deployment of nuclear weapons in the region by permanent members of the UN Security Council (P5). Four relevant scenarios are discussed below, two of which provide for the creation of a NWFZ in CEE, one – for freezing the current situation, and one more – for further spread of NATO’s and/or Russia’s nuclear weapons across the territory of CEE.

IV. Russia’s “nuclear weapon-free security belt”

The first, limited version of a nuclear weapon-free zone in Central and Eastern Europe can be created if Russia successfully completes its special military operation (SMO) in Ukraine. This zone may include the territories of Belarus and Ukraine (within its 2013 borders), which will make it a kind of “nuclear weapon-free security belt” for Russia.

This scenario raises the question of the territorial scope of the potential NWFZ. While for Belarus it will be no problem to join the NWFZ treaty, the potential status of Ukrainian territories appears to be more problematic. Will Ukraine join the Russian NWFZ project at all? Should the borders of “pre-Maidan” Ukraine be considered as a reference point? What about the Crimea and republics and regions of the Southeastern Ukraine, especially after they have joined the Russian Federation?

First, Ukraine would only join the nuclear weapon-free zone if Russia's SMO is successful. This can be achieved either in a diplomatic way, as a result of Kyiv's defeat on the battlefield, or after the change of government in Ukraine. In any case, ensuring that Ukraine's territory is free from nuclear weapons has been proclaimed by the Russian leadership as a goal of the SMO,¹³ which is why Ukraine's accession to a NWFZ would look logical under this scenario.

The issue of the "pre-Maidan" borders of Ukraine would become particularly relevant if a diplomatic solution is achieved, i. e. a compromise under which the current government in Kyiv would keep control of a part of the country, perhaps the larger one. In exchange for the consent of Ukraine's president to a non-aligned and non-nuclear status of Ukraine, Russia could offer to include all those territories that belonged to Ukraine prior to the events of spring 2014 in the NWFZ. This could increase Kyiv's compliance and demonstrate the goodwill of Moscow seeking not to create military threats to Europe, but only to ensure its own security.¹⁴

This approach inevitably raises the third and most acute question: what about the Crimea and the other regions of the Southeastern Ukraine, especially after they have joined the Russian Federation? While these regions count on military protection from the federal center, including the nuclear deterrence, it is not necessary to deploy nuclear weapons on their territories, as Russia can retaliate if these territories are invaded.

Based on these considerations and on the experiences of past NWFZ treaties, the following solutions can be proposed in line with the discussed scenario:

- Belarus, as a country located in the region, initiates the creation of a NWFZ;
- The territories of Belarus and Ukraine are proclaimed the initial NWFZ zone, but this zone is declared open for all countries of Central and Eastern Europe to join;
- As a pattern for those individual member states that would like to join the NWFZ treaty, Article 28 of the Treaty of Tlatelolco could be used. According to this article, the states that have ratified the treaty may "bring it into effect for themselves with the help of a special declaration";
- To reconcile obligations under the future NWFZ treaty with obligations under other agreements (for example, with the obligations of Belarus under the Collective Security Treaty Organization), one can adopt as a pattern the provision of the Article 12 of the Semipalatinsk Treaty. According to this provision, the treaty does not affect the rights and obligations of the parties under other international treaties concluded before;
- In the event that territories under Russia's sovereignty fall into the discussed NWFZ, a separate protocol could be signed and ratified. According to this protocol, Russia would agree to comply with the treaty's provisions in relation to these territories;
- Similarly to the case of the Semipalatinsk Treaty, the protocol can be ratified by Russia with reservations that it does not consider itself bound by its provisions if it is attacked (or its allies are attacked) by a non-nuclear state with the support of a nuclear power.

The main problem with the treaty is that it is highly unlikely that the protocol to it would be signed by the "Western nuclear trio" – the United States, the United Kingdom, and France. These countries had some claims concerning the latest NWFZ treaty, namely the Semipalatinsk Treaty. These claims had delayed the signing of the protocol by the members of P5 for eight years, until May 2014. In the case of Eastern Europe, one can expect even more stubborn resistance from the West, which may go as far as open non-recognition of the NWFZ treaty and attempts to put pressure on the International Atomic Energy Agency.

Other countries of the region would also be hesitant about joining the treaty against the backdrop of a similar reaction from the Western trio and in view of their extreme mistrust for initiatives advanced by Russia and Belarus. This, in turn, will jeopardize the recognition of the NWFZ by the international community, since the previously cited UN

principles contain clauses that agreements on the establishment of NWFZs are concluded voluntarily between states of the corresponding region.

It is hard to guess what fate may await this project in the medium term and even more so in the long term. Much depends on further developments not only in the region, but also at the world stage. Nevertheless, if the intensity of confrontation in the region decreases and if the center of geopolitical struggle shifts to Asia, this regional initiative will have a chance to advance, uniting all of Central and Eastern Europe on a non-nuclear basis.

V. The two-fold approach

The project to create a nuclear weapon-free zone in CEE is not just a “thing in itself”, but an integral part of a more ambitious plan to de-escalate the overall security situation and to restore stability in the region.

A major obstacle to relevant proposals made by socialist countries during the Cold War was the colossal advantage of the Soviet bloc in conventional weapons. The United States, as the leader of NATO, could not afford to lose the key counterbalancing tool – the U.S. tactical nuclear weapons stationed in West Germany. In turn, Germany did not want to lose American tactical nuclear weapons that gave it a sense of security. A similar situation applied for those countries of Northern Europe that were a part of NATO – Norway and Denmark. Even though in 1957 they adopted unilateral declarations on the non-deployment of nuclear weapons on their territory in peacetime, they did not want to deprive themselves of this option completely.

Regarding the Belarusian proposals of the 1990s, one should consider the positions of those countries that were directly invited to join the NWFZ. The new governments of Central and Eastern European countries (especially Poland and the Czech Republic) were much more interested in the integration with Western European and Euro-Atlantic institutions – the European Economic Community/European Union (EEC/EU) and NATO. The guarantees that they would gain via the NATO membership, coupled with the higher status in the international arena, looked much more solid in comparison with those vague guarantees that could be obtained by joining a NWFZ. In Western Europe, as in the United States, the Belarusian (later Belarusian–Russian) proposals were viewed as symbolic attempts by the side who lost the superpower confrontation to remind the world about itself. Therefore, little attention was paid to those proposals.

One can see that both of the above-mentioned NWFZ proposals for Central and Eastern Europe were made under unfavorable external circumstances. In the first case, there was an evident imbalance in conventional weapons between the two Cold War parties, and the creation of an NWFZ would only enhance this imbalance. In the second case, another kind of political, economic, and military disparity provoked the victorious euphoria in the West, preventing it from considering the Belarus–Russia proposal seriously.

The current situation in Europe, at first glance, is even more complicated. The intensity of anti-Russian rhetoric in the West and of anti-Western rhetoric in Russia has come close to that of the times of the Cold War, if has not already surpassed them. On the one hand, this certainly makes it difficult to achieve a compromise. On the other hand, one can observe formation of certain parity between rivals at three main points – conventional weapons, nuclear weapons, and political and economic influence. Of course, this parity is very conditional, but the current balance of forces is much closer to it than it was previously.

How can the existing parity be utilized? The most balanced solution would be to conclude two treaties. The first one could be between the countries of Central and

Eastern Europe on the creation of a NWFZ, designed mainly to satisfy Russian aspirations. The second one could be the new Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe, intended to appease NATO. Both treaties should be concluded simultaneously as a part of a package deal, as negotiations on just one of these two track would not take into account concerns of the other side of the conflict.

The weak link in this proposal would be radical and uncompromising stances of the countries of the New Europe that would not be easily persuaded to join negotiations with Russia. Poland, the Czech Republic, Romania, and the Baltic states are the least likely to join the NWFZ, due to the prevalence of anti-Russian views among the political elites and often among the wider public. Most likely, Ukraine's political elites would also be reluctant to deprive itself completely of the opportunity to acquire nuclear weapons in the future.

Without the participation of these countries, it would be almost impossible to implement the project of a NWFZ, even if such a project takes into account interests and concerns of all sides. Even Belarus may refuse to join a NWFZ because of the persistent threat from Poland and the Baltic states. For the same reason, Russia will not be interested in the denuclearization of the Kaliningrad region. Some progress can be made in Southeast or Northern Europe where anti-nuclear sentiments are strong, but without other states that have been mentioned the NWFZ treaty would be just a waste of time and paper.

VI. Freezing the situation

The third option is to maintain the current *status quo* in Central and Eastern Europe, while refraining from moving the U.S. nuclear weapons to the east and, accordingly, the Russian ones to the west. In fact, this option involves continuing compliance with one of the most important points of the Russia–NATO Founding Act – non-deployment of the Alliance's nuclear weapons on the territory of new NATO member countries – despite numerous statements about its actual termination.

The generally responsible behavior of both Moscow and Washington in the sphere of nuclear deterrence speaks in favor of this scenario. Although the Russia–U.S. tensions have sharply escalated following the start of the special military operation in Ukraine, none of the two parties has (so far) made any careless steps or statements that could imply potential violation of the nuclear nonproliferation regime. Instead, such statements have been made by several other countries of the region, especially by Poland, even as its consent to the deployment of American tactical nuclear weapons on its territory does not mean much in itself. The United States preferred not to comment on such Polish statements.

The idea about possible deployment of Russian nuclear weapons in Belarus is also almost forgotten today. It was relevant mainly in December 2021 – February 2022 when it was used by Russia as a possible response to the rejection of its ultimatum on security guarantees.¹⁵ However, after the start of the SMO, Minsk has abandoned this rhetoric to avoid escalation and has also softened its “pro-nuclear” stance, declaring that Belarus is content with the capabilities of the Russian “nuclear umbrella.”

Furthermore, there are some signs of gradual return to the Russia–U.S. dialogue on strategic stability. In his June 2022 interview, U.S. Ambassador to Russia John Sullivan called an early resumption of dialogue unlikely but emphasized the importance of this issue for both countries. In response, Russian presidential press secretary Dmitri Peskov indirectly agreed with the ambassador on both points, even as some later official statements sounded more pessimistic.¹⁶

Thus, the situation with nuclear weapons in Central and Eastern Europe will continue to be in limbo. The United States and Russia have no desire to further

aggravate the situation and to deploy their nuclear weapons to the region. In turn, the countries of this region do not want to completely deprive themselves of the nuclear option, fearing for their security.

VII. Threat to nuclear non-proliferation

In the context of maintaining the “European nuclear balance” in the Russia–U.S. relations, the stance of the United Kingdom poses a greater danger for nonproliferation in CEE. NATO’s second nuclear power has recently started to pursue more active foreign policy and intends to expand its nuclear arsenal.

Against the background of the Russian special military operation in Ukraine, London has tried to expand its sphere of influence in the proximity to Russia’s western borders. Some analysts attribute this activity to the UK’s efforts to revive the project of the so-called *Intermarium* – a military-political union of states spreading from the Baltics to the Black Sea (or even *Trimorye/Trimarium* with access to the Adriatic Sea), designed to restrain Russia’s regional aspirations.¹⁷

Even though the word “Intermarium” cannot be found in official speeches, the idea promoted by former UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson looked very similar to this concept. In May 2022, the Italian newspaper “Corriere della Sera” reported on Johnson’s idea to create a military, political and economic union in Eastern Europe, designed to become an alternative to the European Union. According to the publication, the proposed association could include the UK itself, the Baltic countries, Poland, Ukraine, and, in the future, Turkey.¹⁸

During his visit to Sweden in May 2022, Boris Johnson announced London’s readiness to defend Stockholm and Helsinki from a potential “Russian threat”. When asked at a press conference whether Britain would go so far as to provide military assistance to these countries, including support with nuclear weapons, Johnson answered evasively, but he did not completely deny this possibility. According to him, “it’s up to either party to make a request, and we [the UK] take it very seriously”.¹⁹

Thus, it can be assumed that London at least considers replacing Washington as a nuclear power which provides nuclear weapons to the countries of NATO’s eastern flank as part of a nuclear sharing program. For the fairness’ sake, it is worth noting that the British free-fall bombs “WE 177”, similar to the American “B61”, were dismantled by 1998, and at the moment the only component of the British strategic nuclear forces is the “Trident” SSBN (ballistic missile submarine) group, consisting of four “Vanguard”-class submarines.²⁰ However, resuming the production of nuclear bombs should not be difficult, while potential carriers for them – the American “F-16C” and “F-16D” fighters – are already available, for example, in the Polish Air Force.

Now it is hard to say what will be the future of Johnson’s project. His brief successor, Liz Truss, did not pay much attention to this project, and one can assume that her successor Rishi Sunak will not do that either. One should remember though that not everything in the UK depends on a Prime Minister’s figure, so this is an issue to watch out for.

VIII. Conclusions

The problem of establishing a nuclear weapon-free zone in Europe has remained unresolved for more than 70 years. With the start of the Russia’s special military operation in Ukraine, it makes sense to revive this long-forgotten idea. It looks quite reasonable, given the fact that one of the official reasons for the SMO was provided by the Ukrainian leadership’s rather ambiguous statements about its nuclear ambitions, and

against the background of the revival of discussions about the deployment of Western nuclear weapons in Poland and of the Russian ones in Belarus, i. e. in CEE.

The idea of a nuclear weapon-free zone should not come to the fore during the negotiation process on Ukraine, nor be presented as the only “silver bullet” solution that can pacify CEE once and forever. Such an approach looks counterproductive due to the extreme radicalization of the foreign policy rhetoric of Eastern European countries that currently do not even want to hear anything about any negotiations with “Putin’s Russia”. This mostly applies to Poland, the Czech Republic, Romania, and the Baltic countries, as without their participation the implementation of the NWFZ project in CEE does not make much sense.

Despite all of the above, following the cessation of hostilities, the resolution of the Ukrainian issue, and the general decline in the level of “military alert” in Europe, a nuclear weapon-free zone in CEE can become one of the constituent elements, if not one of the pillars, of the new European security architecture in the medium term. The initiative to denuclearize the region has especially high chance of success if it is linked to the initiative to limit conventional arms in CEE based on some sort of the upgraded Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE 2.0). This will require huge efforts on the part of both Russian and Western (especially European) diplomats, military figures and experts, but it can serve as a starting point for reducing mutual alarmism towards each other and building at least neutral bilateral and multilateral relations in a businesslike, pragmatic manner.

ENDNOTES

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