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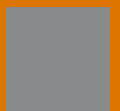
Plans for a Nordic nuclear-weapon free zone

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Introduction

Unto Vesa made seven published contributions in four languages to the debate on a Nordic Nuclear-weapon Free Zone (NNFZ) from the period 1975 to 1982. These were the core years of this proposal which now resembles a fly preserved in the aspic of the Cold War and which never quite managed to get off the ground. Nevertheless, it is worth looking back at these proposals, not least because they reflected some of the Cold War fears and hopes in the Nordic region, but also because they were the concern of Finnish researchers at that time, such as Unto Vesa, who made a contribution to the debate on Finnish foreign policy and Nordic security policy more widely. Indeed, he was a member of the Advisory Board on UN Affairs of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, as well as a member of the Finnish delegation to the 29th, 30th, 32nd and 34th sessions of the General Assembly of the UN. This chapter will revisit the NNFZ proposals and will evaluate their wider significance.

Background to the proposals

The security background to the proposals is fairly well known to those engaged in the study of the Nordic region. After the Second World War, the Nordic states were originally neutral in the emerging rift between the Soviet Union and the leading Western states but by 1948 Sweden, Denmark and Norway felt it best to discuss how they might organize their defences together. After the failure of the talks about a Nordic Defence Union, Norway and Denmark, joined by Iceland, signed the North Atlantic Treaty, Sweden remained outside alliances while Finland had already agreed the Treaty of Friendship Cooperation and Mutual Assistance with the Soviet Union early in 1948.

The three Nordic NATO members became more involved in the military side of the alliance throughout the 1950s, though Norway and Denmark did preclude foreign bases on their metropolitan territory (there were US bases in Greenland and in Iceland). In 1957 both the Danish and Norwegian governments expressed their wish not to have any nuclear weapons on their territory, hoping that this restraint would, in the words of H.C. Hansen, the Danish prime minister, make “a contribution to bring about a favourable atmosphere” that would “attain political détente between East and West”¹. Both the Danish and Norwegian governments resisted Soviet attempts in 1957–1958 to institutionalise the nuclear-free status of the Nordic region. However, this self-denying ordinance had certain limits. It was a unilateral declaration by each government which could be withdrawn and both government limited its validity to peace-time. As Sverre Lodgaard and Nils Petter Gleditsch wrote: nuclear weapons could be used from Norwegian (and

¹ SNU 1982, 73.

Danish) territory in wartime or when war was threatened and they could “be directed from Norwegian territory even in peacetime, e.g. in preparation for a first strike”².

² Lodgaard & Gleditsch 1977, 218.

Despite this, and with the absence of any nuclear weapons in Finland and Sweden, the Nordic region appeared, by the start of the 1960s, to be *de facto*, free of nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, the reliance on nuclear weapons by both alliances in Europe, NATO and the Warsaw Treaty Organization, seemed to be growing and public concern about the stockpiling of nuclear weapons was on the increase with the rise of organizations such as the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in the UK and the *Orientering* group in Norway. In the late 1950s, the Swedish government had discussed whether it should have nuclear weapons but had dismissed the idea. This led the way for the Swedish foreign minister, Östen Undén, to propose the creation of a club of nuclear weapon-free states that had rejected the production or placement on their territory of nuclear weapons. While the idea got some support from the other Nordic states, it did not get very far. However, it formed the background to a geographically more limited proposal advanced by President Kekkonen of Finland in 1963.

The Kekkonen proposals

In the aftermath of the Cuban Missile crisis, President Kekkonen took up the Undén plan and asked that the Nordic states should confirm their position on forming a nuclear-free area:

...the Scandinavian states already in fact form a nuclear-free zone. This, however, depends at present merely on unilateral declarations on their part. The act of confirming the present state of affairs through mutual undertakings in the manner envisaged in the Undén plan would not require a change in the policies adopted by the Scandinavian states nor impair their security.³

³ Kekkonen, as quoted in Vilkkuna 1970, 143.

Kekkonen’s reasoning was that such a zone would remove the Nordic region “unequivocally from the sphere of speculation caused by the development of nuclear strategy and [would] ensure that this area will remain outside international tension”⁴. However, part of the Undén plan was that the nuclear powers should ban nuclear weapons tests, and only limited progress had been made in that area by 1963. The Swedes wished to stress this pre-condition, while the Danish and Norwegian governments wanted to keep the wartime opt-out from any nuclear-free status. They felt that the proposal would have a negative effect on their security to the benefit of the USSR⁵.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Vesa 1979, 13–15.

The Kekkonen proposal was revived in 1972 after a number of international agreements had been signed in a period of *détente*. These included the Limited Test Ban treaty of 1963, the prohibitions on placing nuclear weapons on the seabed (1971) and outer space (1968), the treaty prohibiting nuclear weapons in Latin America (1967) and the 1968 Non-Proliferation Treaty. With Swedish ratification of the last treaty in 1969, all the Nordic states had declared abstinence from having nuclear weapons in peacetime. From 1972 to 1975, Finnish diplomats, at the behest of President Kekkonen advanced

proposals for a NNFZ. This proposal stressed the need to ban the stationing of foreign nuclear weapons in the region and provided a link between a Nordic zone, wider European security and a guarantee that the two superpowers, the US and the Soviet Union, would respect such a zone.

Again the response in the Nordic region was guarded. The Swedish foreign ministry adviser, Anders Thunborg⁶, pointed to the problematic nature of the presence of Soviet and Western nuclear forces in the seas around the area, in the Kola Peninsula and in Germany, while expressing a willingness to participate in negotiations. Norway, in the middle of sensitive negotiations about the delineation of the Barents Sea with the USSR, was reluctant to give “unilateral Norwegian concessions in the area of security”⁷. As the signing of the Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) in Helsinki drew closer, Finnish diplomats turned their attention to that meeting. Nevertheless, in 1975 the UN General Assembly adopted the proposals of the Conference of the Committee on Disarmament that set out seven “principles that should be respected in the establishment of zones”⁸. There was less agreement on other issues, such as the responsibilities of the nuclear powers.

⁶ Thunborg 1975, 37.

⁷ Holst 1975, 33.

⁸ Vesa 1982, 7.

The third set of Kekkonen proposals came in 1978 at a time when the nuclear temperature was rising in Europe with discussions about the introduction of the so-called Neutron Bomb into Western Europe and the lead-up to NATO's December 1979 decision to follow the ‘Dual Track’ of modernisation of intermediate nuclear forces and arms control negotiations with the Soviet Union. In his speech of 8th May 1978 President Kekkonen mentioned especially developments in military technology such as ‘cruise’ missiles that would “make the use of third-country and neutral air space a routine matter”. He wanted their development frozen and, meanwhile, the Nordic states should start negotiations among themselves and with the great powers about arms control. The aim:

would be a separate treaty arrangement covering the Nordic countries which would isolate them as completely as possible from the effects of nuclear strategy in general and new nuclear weapons technology in particular.⁹

⁹ Kekkonen 1978, 7.

He also recognised that any such arrangement for the Nordic states would “affect the interests of the leading nuclear weapon states” and that these powers would have to participate in talks from an early stage¹⁰. The Soviet Union continued to be broadly sympathetic towards Kekkonen's proposals but the other Nordic states refused to change their position. In particular Sweden was adamant that the Baltic Sea would also have to be included in any negotiations and Norway and Denmark considered that tactical weapons in Soviet areas bordering the Nordic region should be included. The Soviet Union was not prepared to accept such a widening of the zone¹¹.

¹⁰ Ibid., 10.

¹¹ Vesa 1982, 12.

The proposals for a NNFZ from President Kekkonen spread over some fifteen years. They started as a fairly general proposal and ended with a suggestion of a treaty that would also be negotiated with the nuclear powers. They spanned

a period of deep Cold War, détente and the beginnings of the New Cold War. They generally found support in the Soviet Union, but were rejected by Norway and Denmark, with Sweden expressing strong reservations. On the whole, the other NATO states did not comment. The genesis of the proposals has been discussed and reference made to a mixture of international events and domestic considerations¹². From the Finnish perspective, the proposals meant that they were not just onlookers but, in Unto Vesa's words, "small states are not only objects but also subjects"¹³. It might be thought that the proposals were part of a Finnish need to ingratiate their country with the Soviet Union, without much cost. Another perspective was placed on this view by a Finnish diplomat, closely involved in the Kekkonen proposals, who claimed that the proposals had another result: they reminded the Soviet Union that the Nordic region was basically nuclear-free and it allowed the other Nordic states to re-iterate this status not just to the Soviets but, in the case of Denmark and Norway, to their NATO colleagues.

Later proposals

More proposals were advanced for a NNFZ early in the 1980s, but this time by the Norwegians and Swedes. The background to these ideas was the descent into a New Cold War that affected Europe, not least the Nordic region: the Dual Track decision by NATO, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the publicising of Presidential Directive 59 in the United States that some interpreted as US plans for war-fighting and winning in Europe¹⁴. There was a feeling in Norway that the facilities used by Norway to support its command, control and communications could be used to help conduct a nuclear war¹⁵. The former Labour minister Jens Evensen picked up on some of these concerns when he made a renewed call for a NNFZ in October 1980, a move that seemed to be supported by the Norwegian prime minister, Oddvar Nordli, in his New Year's speech of January 1981. Ambassador Evensen's plan was for a zone based on a treaty and four main elements: the NNFZ states would undertake to remain free of nuclear weapons in wartime as in peacetime; the nuclear powers would guarantee not to use or threaten the use of such weapons against the states in the zone; a control apparatus would oversee the observation of the treaty; and the creation of the zone would help to lower tension and thus preserve peace¹⁶. The zone states (and others) would not be able to test, produce or acquire nuclear weapons in the area. The receipt or storage by these countries, or on behalf of others, of nuclear weapons, participation in the production of such weapons and the transport or transit of these weapons and equipment would also be forbidden. The territory covered would include the territorial sea and airspace and any vessels or craft under the flags of the zone states¹⁷. The treaty would have forbidden states from sending cruise missiles through Nordic airspace¹⁸. The negative guarantees by nuclear states would have to be negotiated between them and the Nordic states and could be supplemented by a 'thinning out' of deployment in the areas and seas near the Nordic region¹⁹. The Evensen proposal was followed up by other proposals from within the Nordic area. The most important of these were the ideas put forward by the

¹² Archer 1984, 26.

¹³ Vesa 1982, 10.

¹⁴ Evensen 1983, 414–435.

¹⁵ SNU 1982, 126.

¹⁶ Evensen 1983, 39.

¹⁷ Evensen 1982, 417–420.

¹⁸ Evensen 1983, 42–44.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 51–52.

Norwegian Labour Party from April 1981 to June 1982, by President Koivisto of Finland in 1982 and Olof Palme, the then Swedish prime minister, in 1983. These tended to stress the existing nuclear-free nature of the Nordic region, wanted reciprocal arrangements for the areas around the Nordic region, made more reference to the wider security context of the Nordic countries and, unlike the Evensen plan, did not advance specific treaties²⁰.

²⁰ Archer 1984, 32–47, 63.

A number of events seemed to dull the prospects for a NNFZ agreement. The US came out with a negative response once the Reagan administration had taken office. The result of the September 1981 election in Norway saw the dismissal of the Labour government and a Conservative government coming to power that was sceptical about the NNFZ. Finally, the October 1981 ‘Whisky on the rocks’ incident in Karlskrona, Sweden, when a Soviet submarine, almost certainly with nuclear weapons on board, surfaced and ran aground in Swedish territorial waters. As Unto Vesa wrote:

This precluded at least in the short run, the possibility of fruitful negotiations on the zone. Furthermore, the incident pointed out in practice the difficulties related to the verification of a potential zone, especially if the Baltic were to be included in some way – i.a. because no one had previously thought that this type of out-dated submarine might be carrying nuclear explosives.²¹

²¹ Vesa 1982, 15–16.

By 1985, proposals for a NNFZ had been well and truly integrated into the Nordic security discourse. A report of Norwegian officials in 1985 from the ‘Zone Committee’²² chaired by Ambassador Kjell Colding, placed the NNFZ proposals in the context of wider alliance considerations and the coming to power in the Soviet Union of Mikael Gorbachev opened up a much broader panoply of arms control and disarmament proposals. In 1987 the Nordic foreign ministers established a group of officials to report on the proposals which they did at a leisurely pace. Their report managed to come out some months before the collapse of the Soviet Union and effectively buried the NNFZ idea, relegating it to a previous age²³.

²² Det Kgl. Utenriksdepartementet 1985

²³ Utrikesdepartementet 1991, 70.

An evaluation

Were the NNFZ proposals of any use? An agreement was not reached on such a zone. Were they a distraction from more worthwhile negotiations such as the Stockholm Conference on Disarmament in Europe (CDE) and the wider CSCE forum²⁴? Or was it something that was “possible and [...] in the best interests of all the Nordic peoples”²⁵?

²⁴ Archer 1984, 61.

²⁵ Vesa 1982, 18.

The proposals can be evaluated not so much as concrete ideas to reduce the threat from nuclear weapons, but as political manoeuvres. The Kekkonen proposals, as has been suggested above, can be seen both as a way to cement relations with the Soviet Union at the same time as reminding the Soviets of the actual nuclear-free status of the Nordic region. By obliging the Danish and Norwegian governments to re-iterate their statements about nuclear weapons, this entrenched that status and led both these governments to attempt to tighten up on questions such as the visit to their ports of allied vessels with nuclear weapons on board.

Secondly, the proposals, especially those in the 1980s, led to security issues being discussed within and between the Nordic countries. On the whole defence debates within the Nordic states had been muted and it had not been the case that defence and security issues were discussed between the states, with the exception of cooperation on UN peacekeeping. The NNFZ idea changed that and started a lively debate, especially within Norway and Denmark in the first half of the 1980s. It also led to the Nordic foreign ministers issuing joint statements on the subject and establishing an official committee to study the subject.

These moves, together with others such as the Finnish involvement in CSCE, the Swedish engagement with the CDE talks and Danish and Norwegian activity in NATO at the end of the 1980s, meant that the Nordic states were becoming more the subjects of international security rather than just the objects. This trend can increasingly be seen in the 1990s, when some of the alternative strands of thinking about security surfaced in the post-Cold War era²⁶.

²⁶ Archer 2005.

Finally, the ideas reflected the public concern within the Nordic states – and Europe more widely – about the nuclearization of security in the region. Some of these concerns were expressed in movements and political parties, others were voiced more privately. By bringing to the fore proposals for declaring a region in Europe nuclear free, President Kekkonen and, later, the Norwegian government, connected to those concerns and did not demean what were real fears. At a time when many were blasé about nuclear weapons, the proposals reminded people of their potential and their problematic nature. The plans thus allowed a public discourse – and not one that was necessarily won by the proponents of the zone – in the Nordic states that was often stifled in other Western countries such as France and the United Kingdom.

Finally, did the zone proposals contribute to the de-nuclearization of the Nordic region? They may have done to a small extent by making the NATO Nordic states more fastidious about keeping to their self-proclaimed nuclear-free status, but on the whole the de-nuclearization of Europe more generally was achieved by negotiations between the European states, for example within CSCE, and between the two blocs. In some way the NNFZ proposals can be seen as a distraction from the main effort towards mutual disarmament in the 1980s.

Relevance today?

The NNFZ proposals can be seen as a part of history of little relevance to *Norden* today. But perhaps there are some wider lessons to be learnt.

The first is that, while it is easier for small states to swim with the international tide, sometimes it is necessary to go against the conventional wisdom. There were plenty of voices in that poured scorn on Kekkonen's ideas and even more that expressed scepticism towards the Evensen plan and Norwegian follow-ups. However, these ideas did provide an impetus to the security debate in the north of Europe that otherwise may well have been lacking.

Secondly the proposals showed that the Nordic states *did* have something to say collectively about security. Of course, that they were initiated by Finland – traditionally the stumbling block for any security discussions between the Nordic states – allowed a debate to commence. The magic word was whispered and from then onwards the Nordic states were able to discuss security issues over and above questions concerning UN peacekeeping.

Third, the issue brought questions of security to a wider public and they have stayed there ever since. Security questions have anyhow changed in nature and now touch on a wider range of questions ranging from the environment to disease. What Unto Vesa spotted was that the NNFZ proposals were not just the concern of politicians but that it was “first and foremost the responsibility and right of the people to struggle for this goal [of the elimination of nuclear weapons]”²⁷. At a time when security concerns were too often seen as elite concerns he reminded us that, in the end, how a state organizes its security and with what means should be the concern of the citizen. That message resonates through the decades.

²⁷ Vesa 1982, 20.

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