

Input on UN Resolution 79/241

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Since the 1950s, nuclear-weapon-free zones (NWFZs) have sought to address some of the most pressing dangers of the nuclear arms race, such as proliferation, the threat of nuclear use, and environmental degradation. To be most effective, states understood that NWFZs need to adapt and grow within regions and across the world.

UN Resolution 79/241 - which calls for the first UN comprehensive study of NWFZs in fifty years - is a step in that direction. Like its predecessor, resolution 79/241 finds that NWFZs “could be strengthened” by a new study. To meet its potential, the study must explore key issues across the past, present, and future of NWFZs.

Analyzing the history of NWFZs will be important. The study should seek to elucidate why some proposals for NWFZs succeeded, many failed, and the outstanding issues that remain for each, all with an eye to bolstering the ones that exist and helping seed new ones around the world. This analysis will require an honest assessment - based on the best available evidence - of the factors that have determined the fate of NWFZs.

The study should focus on comprehensive membership for existing NWFZs. Many NWFZs were designed to come into effect with only partial membership so that holdout states would not delay others. But states always recognized that NWFZs are strongest when all adhere. The study should help clarify the factors that prevent eligible states - both regional and nuclear weapons states - from joining existing pacts. Relatedly, it should highlight the enforcement record for NWFZs and where any improvements might be made.

The study should also focus on ways to enhance cooperation between NWFZs. It can highlight previous efforts to reach across regions and identify best practices of NWFZs that could be adopted by others. Since their inception, NWFZs have built upon the ones that came before them and the early ones should not miss out on the latest innovations.

Finally, the study can help NWFZs look over the horizon. Since their inception, NWFZs have helped shape how the global nuclear order deals with emerging technologies and their control regimes. That opportunity persists today. For example, the study might explore the meaning of artificial intelligence (AI) for NWFZs and nuclear nonproliferation efforts more broadly. Overall, the study can help NWFZs become more fit for purpose in the twenty-first century.