



Promoting Mongolia's Nuclear-Weapon-Free Status: Lessons Learned and Relevance for Northeast Asia

Jargalsaikhan Enkhsaikhan

Summary

The role of non-nuclear weapon states in helping to defuse nuclear tensions should not be underestimated. Their geographical location and the role they play in their region can serve as important factors in addressing pressing issues, even nuclear-weapon related ones. Mongolia provides a good example. In the past 25 years since Mongolia declared its territory a nuclear-weapon-free zone (NWFZ), Mongolia's government and civil society have worked hard to realize the goal of seeking formal recognition of its single-state NWFZ status. Mongolia has overcome the challenges both at home and abroad, including when working with the P5 on the issue and acquiring security assurances. If a small non-nuclear weapon state can be effective, surely the umbrella states and other allies of nuclear-weapon states can play a more active role in making this world a safer place for future generations.

Introduction

1. The post-Cold War period raised many hopes that the world would be safer and that states would benefit from the "peace dividend." In the past two-and-a-half decades since the fall of the Berlin Wall not much has been registered to remove nuclear threats. Though the number of nuclear weapons has been reduced, the number of nuclear-armed states has risen to nine, further complicating the situation. The

Conference on Disarmament, the sole multilateral disarmament negotiating body, has for more than twenty years been deadlocked, even unable to agree on its agenda. The stalemates at multilateral non-proliferation and US–Russia nuclear disarmament talks led the majority of the international community to hold a series of conferences on the humanitarian impacts of nuclear weapons. This in turn led to the Humanitarian Pledge, calling for a treaty to prohibit and eliminate nuclear weapons along the lines of measures already undertaken to prohibit chemical and biological weapons.

2. The adoption on 7 July of this year of a 20-article text of the nuclear ban treaty by 122 states, despite the boycott by the nuclear-armed states and their allies, marks a significant step in outlawing and gradually eliminating nuclear weapons. Judging from the positions of nuclear-armed states, it will be a challenging task and a tortuous process to eliminate nuclear weapons. However no effort should be spared to attain that noble goal.

3. The last 25 years have also registered some progress in establishing additional nuclear-weapon-free zones (NWFZs), such as in South-east Asia, Africa and Central Asia, increasing thus the number of such "populated" zones to five involving around 100 states. However the talks regarding establishing such zones in the Middle East and in the Arctic have not gone beyond talks about talks, while the idea of establishing a Northeast Asian NWFZ is being

discussed only at academic level or at non-governmental organization (NGO) forums.

4. Defying the accepted practice, since 1992 Mongolia has been working, with mixed results, to turn its country into a single-state NWFZ. The work is still in progress. This article consists of two parts. The first explains the reasons that led Mongolia to declare its territory a NWFZ and what has been done to so far. The second outlines the challenges that Mongolia encountered, both at home and abroad, including talks it held with the five nuclear-weapon states (NWS) and the experience gained.

Mongolia Declares Itself a Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone

Foreign Policy Imperatives

5. Mongolia's history and foreign policy are closely connected with and a reflection of its geography. Its history over the last two centuries is no exception. It was a history of the Mongolian people's struggle to regain its independence and reassert its sovereignty. During the Cold War, as a satellite of the Soviet Union, it was a victim of double Cold Wars: East-West and Sino-Soviet. The end of the Cold War provided an opportunity to free itself of the overwhelming influence of its Soviet "big brother" and normalize relations with its southern neighbour – China. Hence today its foreign policy goal is to pursue a balanced relationship with the two neighbours, promote its own national interests, develop good-neighbourly relations with all countries and, to the extent possible, make its due contribution to addressing the common goals and challenges.

6. The post-Cold War political environment, however, did not change geopolitical realities or imperatives, though it offers some opportunity for smaller states to pursue their interests in greater freedom in tandem with that of the region concerned. Even in this post-Cold War period Mongolia's policies take due account of the events in neighbouring Russia and China, developments in their relations as well as with other major powers. In its turn, it tries to influence events bearing in mind its own interests. Mongolia's location makes it imperative in this nuclear age to specifically deal with

issues of nuclear security, both of military nature or connected with the peaceful uses of nuclear energy. It could choose either to be passively affected by the perils and challenges of the nuclear age or try to play a somewhat active role by promoting its national interests, contributing to shaping a stable future. Mongolia chose the latter.

Reminder of Recent Risky Past

7. Throughout most of the past century, as a Soviet client state, Mongolia strictly followed a pro-Soviet line inside the country and a pro-Soviet foreign policy abroad. With respect to the nuclear arms race, it invariably sided with the Soviet Union. Thus though it was against nuclear weapon tests in general, it condemned all tests, except for the Soviet ones which had been conducted not far from its territory.¹ At that time Mongolia thought it was politically incorrect to condemn Soviet tests since, in its view, Soviet nuclear weapons served as a guarantee of world peace and stability.

8. In the 1960s, during the height of Sino-Soviet dispute, Mongolia found itself involuntarily involved in the dispute and by implication, in their military standoff. When China developed nuclear weapons and the Sino-Soviet dispute turned into border clashes in 1969, the Soviets briefly entertained the idea of, or at least made believe they were contemplating, making a preemptive strike against China's nuclear weapons and related facilities. The Soviets communicated their intention to Warsaw Pact allies and even approached the US for its possible reaction. In the meantime the Chinese worked post-haste on their nuclear weapons program and on measures to protect their small nuclear weapons arsenal – the weapons were dispersed, some to the underground tunnel networks which also served as shelters.

9. A Soviet preemptive strike would surely have had a devastating effect on international relations. Mongolia would have been one of the first victims, since the Chinese side was well

¹ Over 500 nuclear weapon tests, or over quarter of all tests, have been conducted by its neighbours in Semipalatsk (USSR) and Lop Nor (PRC), neither very far from Mongolian territory.

aware of the Soviet bases and the dual use weapons placed therein. The Soviet–Mongolian “alliance” was not an alliance of equal partners; there was no joint equal command, nor a mechanism for jointly taking military decisions. Mongolia’s role was that of a pawn to support Soviet forces and their military activities. Hosting Soviet military bases automatically meant that besides possible Chinese military responses to a Soviet preemptive strike, Mongolia was even exposed to US nuclear attack, most probably from assets based on land within the region or in the surrounding seas. The US response to the Soviets was that they would not idly sit by in the event of Sino–Soviet nuclear exchanges – rather, the fact that the US responded by saying that they would consider it as Third World War was perhaps decisive in avoiding a possible catastrophe. That was an important lesson for Mongolia not to blindly side with belligerent powers.

10. With the end of the Cold War, positive international changes were underway. Thus progress was made in negotiating NWFZs in Southeast Asia and Africa. The US decision to withdraw its tactical nuclear weapons from South Korea in 1991, and the 1992 joint statement of the two Koreas to denuclearize the peninsula and to that end establish a joint nuclear control commission were very positive and promising signs.

11. Closer to Mongolia, normalization of Sino–Russian relations and the complete withdrawal of Russian military bases and troops from Mongolia have radically changed the country’s external security environment. Its two neighbours have not only normalized their relations but also declared not to use territories or airspace of their neighbouring third states against each other. That provided a good basis to hope that none would try to establish their military bases in Mongolia.

Mongolia Makes an Initiative

12. Mindful of the lessons of the Cold War period, speaking during the general debate at the United Nations General Assembly in September 1992, Mongolia’s President Punsalmaagiin Ochirbat declared the country a NWFZ and pledged to have that status internationally

guaranteed. The proposal’s aim was to declare clearly to the world that Mongolia did not have nuclear weapons on its territory and that henceforth it would be nuclear-weapon free so that, unlike during the Cold War, no country near or far would be allowed to place such weapons on its territory, and that it would work to acquire security assurances from the five NWS who are also, of course, the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (P5).

13. There was no direct immediate reaction to Mongolia’s initiative at the United Nations. This was not unexpected since frequently heads of state and government, or ministers of foreign affairs float different ideas and proposals at the United Nations. It is estimated that almost 90 per cent of such ideas and proposals remain expressions of ideas and thoughts; few are persistently followed up. The fact that no country, including its two immediate neighbours, raised any objection was in itself a positive sign. The rest depended on Mongolia’s policy, its explanatory work within the international community to broaden its base of support, and sheer persistence.

14. A year later at Mongolia’s prodding, the P5 made unilateral statements of support for the initiative, while the Russian Federation in a legally binding form pledged to “respect Mongolia’s policy of not admitting the deployment on and transit through its territory of foreign troops, nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction.”² By 1995 the Non-Aligned Movement welcomed the initiative regarding it as a “commendable contribution to regional stability and confidence-building.”³ However, expressions of in-principle support for the initiative does not automatically translate into support for its realization. Thus the P5 had difficulties in going beyond expression of general support for the initiative, believing that doing so

² See Article 4 of the Treaty on Friendly Relations and Cooperation between Mongolia and the Russian Federation of 20 January 1993, <https://www.ecolex.org/details/treaty/agreement-on-friendly-relations-and-cooperation-between-the-russian-federation-and-mongolia-tre-151323/>

³ See Final document of the XI Cartagena Summit of the Non-Aligned Movement of 1995, available at <http://www.nam.gov.za/xisummit/>.

might set a precedent for others that might have unpredictable geopolitical consequences.

Efforts to Date

15. Like other related issues, it took over two decades to get some meaningful results. To realize its initiative, Mongolia had to work on two levels: national and international.

16. **At the national level**, in 2000 it adopted legislation that defined and regulated nationally its nuclear-weapon-free status and criminalized all acts that would violate that status. The law not only prohibited stationing but also transportation of nuclear weapons as well as parts or components thereof through its territory. To make the prohibition more credible, it envisaged establishing national and international mechanisms of verification of compliance with the law. A separate parliamentary resolution mandated the government to take active measures to implement the law and regularly report its implementation. Since then the parliament's Standing Committee on National Security and Foreign Policy has three times considered implementation of the legislation and instructed the government to take some specific measures. In 2015 the parliament adopted a resolution on raising Mongolia's nuclear-weapon-free status to a new level.

17. Mindful of the importance of the issue for Mongolian society in general, the law specifically underlined that NGOs or even individuals may, within the mandate provided by the legislation, participate in public oversight of the implementation of the legislation and submit proposals thereon to the relevant state body.

18. **At the international level**, once the overall objective of the initiative was made clear to the outside world, the overwhelming majority of the UN membership supported it, seeing it as contributing to confidence-building and the overall goals of nuclear non-proliferation. Therefore working at the international level boiled down mainly to working with the P5. The P5 expressed general political support for the initiative as a constructive gesture. However they were reluctant to recognize Mongolia as a single-state NWFZ, believing that doing so

would set a precedent and detract other states from establishing traditional regional zones.

19. The work with the P5 as a group started in 1996–97. Mongolia tried to reason that the 1975 comprehensive study of the question of a NWFZ in all its aspects⁴ had pointed out that “even individual countries” could establish NWFZs. However, the P5 were reluctant to consider it for the reasons given above. During the talks it was agreed that until the P5 accepted the concept of single-state NWFZ, Mongolia could be considered as a state with a unique nuclear-weapon-free status. Thus instead of the “zone” it was agreed to use the term “status” and that the content of the status could be defined by the states concerned.

20. The P5 also expressed reluctance to agree to the concept of “institutionalizing” Mongolia's status, believing that institutionalization could lead to establishing additional verification and other compliance mechanisms or bodies. Instead, during the talks it was agreed that to make the status credible, Mongolia's security needed to be addressed in a broader context, including its independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity, the inviolability of its borders, its independent foreign policy, its economic security and ecological balance.⁵ This understanding formed the basis of General Assembly Resolution 53/77 D entitled “Mongolia's international security and nuclear-weapon-free status,” adopted in 1998 without a vote.

21. Through this resolution the UN General Assembly also decided to inscribe the issue on its agenda, a procedure commonly adopted for matters deemed to be of sufficient ongoing importance. Hence since 1998 the issue has been considered every second year. This process in itself ensured that Mongolia's external security issues were on the Assembly's agenda.

22. In the spirit of Resolution 53/77 D, in 1999 and 2000 Mongolia tried to discuss security assurances with the P5. Also in response to the adoption by Mongolia of its domestic legisla-

⁴ See document A/10027/Add.1 (8 October 1975).

⁵ UN General Assembly Resolution 53/77 D (4 December 1998).

tion, the P5 felt and Russia proposed, that some form of assurance should be provided to Mongolia. A number of options were discussed, including with Mongolia. Yet in the end they decided to adopt a joint statement providing political assurances. In October 2000 the P5 issued a joint statement in which they declared that the commitments regarding positive and negative security assurances that they had made separately in 1995 and reflected in Security Council Resolution 984 (1995) applied to Mongolia. In other words, under certain conditions, the P5 (except China⁶) said they would not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against Mongolia.

23. The Mongolian side was not satisfied with the form and content of those assurances and complained that the assurances did not reflect Mongolia's unique location, its interests nor the state of its bilateral relations with each one of them. Hence Mongolia declared that it considered the joint statement as only laying down conditions under which P5 (except China) would not threaten or use nuclear weapons against it and proposed to "right the wrong" perhaps by having UN Security Council adopt a resolution on the issue. From that point it took a decade of hard work on the part of Mongolia to convince the P5 to "right the wrong" and provide assurances tailored to its security needs.

24. The contacts and talks showed that the P5 would not agree to Mongolia-specific legally based assurances. Therefore in 2012 Mongolia decided not to insist on legally-based assurances and agree to a non-treaty assurance in the form of a P5 joint declaration, in which they would pledge to respect Mongolia's status, and not to contribute to any act that would violate it. In return Mongolia expressed readiness to reiterate its pledge to keep the country nuclear-weapon-free. Based on that understanding, in September 2012 Mongolia and the P5 signed parallel declarations. In its declaration Mongolia confirmed that it would not allow stationing of nuclear weapons on its territory, while in

their joint declaration the P5 affirmed their intent to respect that status and not to contribute to any act that would violate it.⁷

Achievements to Date

25. During the course of 25 years Mongolia had over 80 meetings with representatives of the P5, be it on a bilateral or trilateral basis, or with the P5 as a group. These meetings provided the opportunity to have frank and productive exchanges, better understand each other, and agree on some issues while disagree on others. It was a useful example of cooperation between powerful and small states to address issues of common interest, and of finding agreement on issues without compromising the interests and positions of the parties.

26. As to the question of what actually has been achieved, security-wise, unlike during the Cold War, as a state not allied anymore with a NWS, nor hosting military bases of such a state, Mongolia is no longer a nuclear target, nor will it be with its recognized nuclear-free status. By their joint declaration the P5 pledged not only to Mongolia, but in fact to one another, to respect the status. Mongolia interprets the joint declaration as a pledge not to involve it in any future nuclear arms race or in any destabilizing policies such as missile defence/anti-missile systems.

27. Politically, Mongolia's policy enjoys wide international support, including at the United Nations General Assembly. Thus an item entitled "Mongolia's international security and nuclear-weapon-free status" is considered every second year and a resolution with the same title is adopted. That process itself is seen by Mongolia as a form of "soft" assurance. The fact that the title of the resolution embraces the notion "Mongolia's international security" means that the Assembly could, if need be, consider issues pertaining to the external security of Mongolia, including its economic security and ecological balance, and does not have to limit itself to nuclear-weapon related issues only.

⁶ Unlike the other P4, China has committed not to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear-weapon states or nuclear-weapon-free zones at any time or under any circumstances.

⁷ See document A/67/393 - S/2012/721 of 26 September 2012.

28. Looking back it could be said that Mongolia's policy was productive, and that much has been achieved. However the primary goals of establishing a single-state NWFZ and acquiring legally-based assurances from the P5 have been only partially accomplished. Hence still some work needs to be done, including further institutionalization of the status and strengthening the legal basis of the status. This will take time. In that sense it is still work in progress. The initiative is a forward-looking one, in a way a form of preventive diplomacy that would benefit not only Mongolia itself, but also its immediate neighbours and contribute to regional predictability and stability in general. In that sense Mongolia can be optimistic.

Challenges to Declaring and Promoting Mongolia's Initiative

Domestic Challenges

29. Despite the above-mentioned encouraging results, it should be underlined that it was not easy even to commence the process since the following needed to be carefully considered on the domestic front:

- The issue is not high on the country's agenda. High on the agenda have been and still are poverty, unemployment, inflation, rising income inequality, air pollution, etc.
- The prevalent general pessimism in the country in foreign relations based on past policies and awareness of the huge influence of the great powers. Hence a successful initiative demanded a strong will and determination, both nationally and abroad.
- A general lack of awareness of the 1969 risks mentioned earlier in paragraphs 7–11.
- The utility of making such an initiative when Mongolia had no territorial, border or other major political problems with its neighbours and was already developing good-neighbourly relations with them.
- Doubts that the P5 would make an exception and recognize Mongolia as a

single-state NWFZ and provide legally based assurances; or that the P5 would follow up on such promises if or when their own interests would be at stake.

- Lingering misperception, based on lack of sufficient information, that Mongolia's initiative would prohibit making use of its vast uranium deposits or building nuclear power plants in the future.
- Uncertainty whether the positive tendency in the post-Cold War environment would be a long-term trend or just a short-term detente among the great powers.
- Uncertainty of the position of the non-nuclear-weapon states that favoured negotiating an "effective international arrangement" with the P5 on negative security assurances.⁸

30. The above-mentioned issues alone show that much work needed to be done internally to maintain public understanding and support of the policy, in which the role of civil society was important.

Role of Civil Society

31. In today's globalized world the role of civil society is increasing. In Mongolia, with a population of just over 3 million, there are almost 10,000 officially registered as well as many non-registered NGOs that are playing an important role in addressing many traditional and emerging societal problems. The more active and vocal ones are perceived as representing the voice of the people, or of a certain section of the society. That does not mean that the government of the day would agree with their activities, views or recommendations, or vice versa. In fact on most issues the views of the government and the NGOs differ, at times even diametrically.

⁸ In early 1990s Mongolia joined the Non-Aligned Movement and was not interested in bringing a possible divisive issue that would affect its standing in the movement.

32. However, on the issues of national security and foreign policy there is a broad common understanding between the government and civil society. In the case of Mongolia's nuclear-weapon-free status, the law mentioned above encourages NGOs and even individuals to exercise public oversight of the implementation of the legislation and submit proposals thereon to the relevant state authority.⁹ This bottom-up oversight process of public participation is important in analysing the government's policies, the bottlenecks, difficulties and mistakes. It also provides an opportunity to support the government, when deemed important, or to constructively criticize it, as well as provide advocacy and lobbying support when needed.

33. Blue Banner NGO was established in 2005 based on the 2000 legislation, with the aim of playing such a role. At present Blue Banner is working closely mostly with young people to involve them in developing and promoting sound state nuclear policies. Thus in May of this year Blue Banner, together with the School of International Relations and Public Administration of the Mongolian State University, organized a scientific and practical conference on further promoting the status both nationally and internationally. The conference considered more than a dozen reports and papers, mostly by young scholars and experts, on how the status could be further promoted and institutionalized.

Challenges of Working with Others

34. Of no less importance than passing and applying national legislation is promoting the issue at the regional and international levels. Doing so has enormous advantages and specific challenges as well. The challenges include the need to explain clearly and firmly to neighbours and other states the goal of the initiative, how it would affect them and their interests, as well as its implications for regional security and stability. Due to its geographical location, special effort needed to be made to explain that the issue did not concern Mongolia and its neighbours only, but was of broader importance for regional security and stability.

35. Being a pioneering case of single-state NWFZ, Mongolia had to deal directly with the somewhat reluctant P5. The understanding and support of others was helpful in this. Some of the concrete challenges in dealing with the P5 were:

- First and foremost, the utter imbalance in Mongolia's negotiating power and a lack of credible incentives or leverage for the P5 to negotiate with Mongolia and provide it with the needed assurances.
- The reluctance of the P5 to discuss the issue openly at international fora since that might evoke sympathy and support for Mongolia, or be seen as setting a precedent for others to follow.
- The reluctance of being seen as negotiating with a nuclear-weapon-free Mongolia. In that sense it was quite the opposite of the DPRK's case.
- The reluctance of addressing the issue and using at the beginning of the talks the so-called "football" principle (that is, sending the issues raised to other members of the P5 for their prior support and approval, knowing well that the others would most probably not agree).
- At times pressuring and making joint or separate demarches to express their reluctance, etc.

36. Addressing these and other challenges demanded patience, creative thinking and persistence. The experience underlined the need to be patient and try to address the issues mindful of the legitimate interests of others, through mutual understanding and accommodation. In many cases personal relations, the human factor, proved to be important as well. In Mongolia's case "strategic patience" paid off.

Possible Role in a Northeast Asian NWFZ

37. In 2013 Mongolia's president, when addressing the High Level meeting of the General Assembly of the United Nations, expressed the country's readiness to promote informal meet-

⁹ See Article 6.4 of the law. UNGA document A/55/56 of 29 February 2000.

ings on the topic of a Northeast Asian NWFZ. He underlined that:

as a country with first-hand experience in ensuring security primarily by political and diplomatic means, Mongolia is prepared, on an informal basis, to work with the countries of Northeast Asia to see if and how a nuclear-weapon-free zone could be established in the region. Though we know well that that would not be easy and would require courage, political will and perseverance, it is doable, if not right away.

38. As a state maintaining good relations with North Korea, Mongolia can, if need be, provide its good office services or serve as a neutral, unbiased partner at multilateral regional negotiations. It can also provide its experienced inspectors for verification tasks.

Conclusion

39. Mongolia's policy of promoting its nuclear-weapon-free status clearly demonstrates that the role of non-NWS should not be underestimated. They themselves should not underestimate their potential role. There is a wealth of untapped reserve that these states, including small states, can make use of, and contribute to, the common goal of making this world free of nuclear-weapon threats.

40. The adoption in July this year of a treaty to ban nuclear weapons highlights the areas of common stance of most non-NWS on this issue. This broad base of shared commitment will be useful in addressing the issue with the nuclear-armed states.

41. If non-NWS can be effective, surely the umbrella states and other allies of nuclear-weapon states also can play a positive role not by siding but working with the nuclear-armed states to take steps to reduce the role of these weapons in their security policies. Living in the post-Cold War era with Cold War era attitudes and mentality would only do harm. Nuclear-armed states, instead of boycotting the multilateral efforts to ban nuclear weapons, need to review their policies based on nuclear deterrence and adopt security policies based on collective and common security in which their security concerns would be duly reflected.

42. Mongolia's experience shows that in today's world competition, cooperation and compromise are imperatives. Though a small non-NWS, Mongolia is trying to play its due role as a responsible member of the international society. The aim of this article was to explain Mongolia's policy so that it may serve as an example, if not an inspiration, for other states that due to their geopolitical location or for some political reason cannot be part of the emerging network of NWFZs. As the proverb goes, if there is a will, there's a way.

43. Mongolia values the 2012 P5 joint declaration as a basis of its nuclear security policy. It interprets the P5 declaration as a pledge not to involve Mongolia in future nuclear arms race or various destabilizing policies such as missile defence or anti-missile systems. In broader terms, it believes that with the technological revolution underway, including in military affairs, it might be useful for the concept of NWFZs to prohibit placing of nuclear weapon tracking, homing, intercepting or other devices that would enable using of nuclear weapons in the zone.

The Author

Dr. JARGALSAIKHAN ENKHSAIKHAN is an international lawyer and diplomat who represented Mongolian in Austria and at the UN. He also served as the foreign policy and legal advisor to P. Ochirbat, Mongolia's first democratically elected president. As the country's Permanent Representative to the United Nations, he served as the focal point in promoting Mongolia's nuclear-weapon-free status. He is currently chairman of Blue Banner, an NGO active in promoting nuclear non-proliferation and Mongolia's nuclear-weapon-free status.

APLN/CNND Policy Briefs

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APLN and CNND

The **Centre for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament (CNND)** contributes to worldwide efforts to minimize the risk of nuclear-weapons use, stop their spread and ultimately achieve their complete elimination. The director of the Centre is Professor Ramesh Thakur. See further <http://cnnd.anu.edu.au>.

The **Asia Pacific Leadership Network (APLN)** comprises around ninety former senior political, diplomatic, military and other opinion leaders from fifteen countries around the region, including nuclear-weapons possessing states China, India and Pakistan. The objective of the group, founded by former Australian Foreign Minister and President Emeritus of the International Crisis Group Gareth Evans, is to inform and energize public opinion, and especially high level policy-makers, to take seriously the very real threats posed by nuclear weapons, and do everything possible to achieve a world in which they are contained, diminished and ultimately eliminated. The co-Convenors are Professors Chung-in Moon and Ramesh Thakur. The Secretariat is located at the East Asia Foundation in Seoul, Republic of Korea. See further www.a-pln.org.

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Contact Us

APLN, East Asia Foundation
4F, 116 Pirundae-ro
Jongno-gu, Seoul 03535
Republic of Korea
Email: apl@keaf.org
Tel: +82 2 325 2604-6