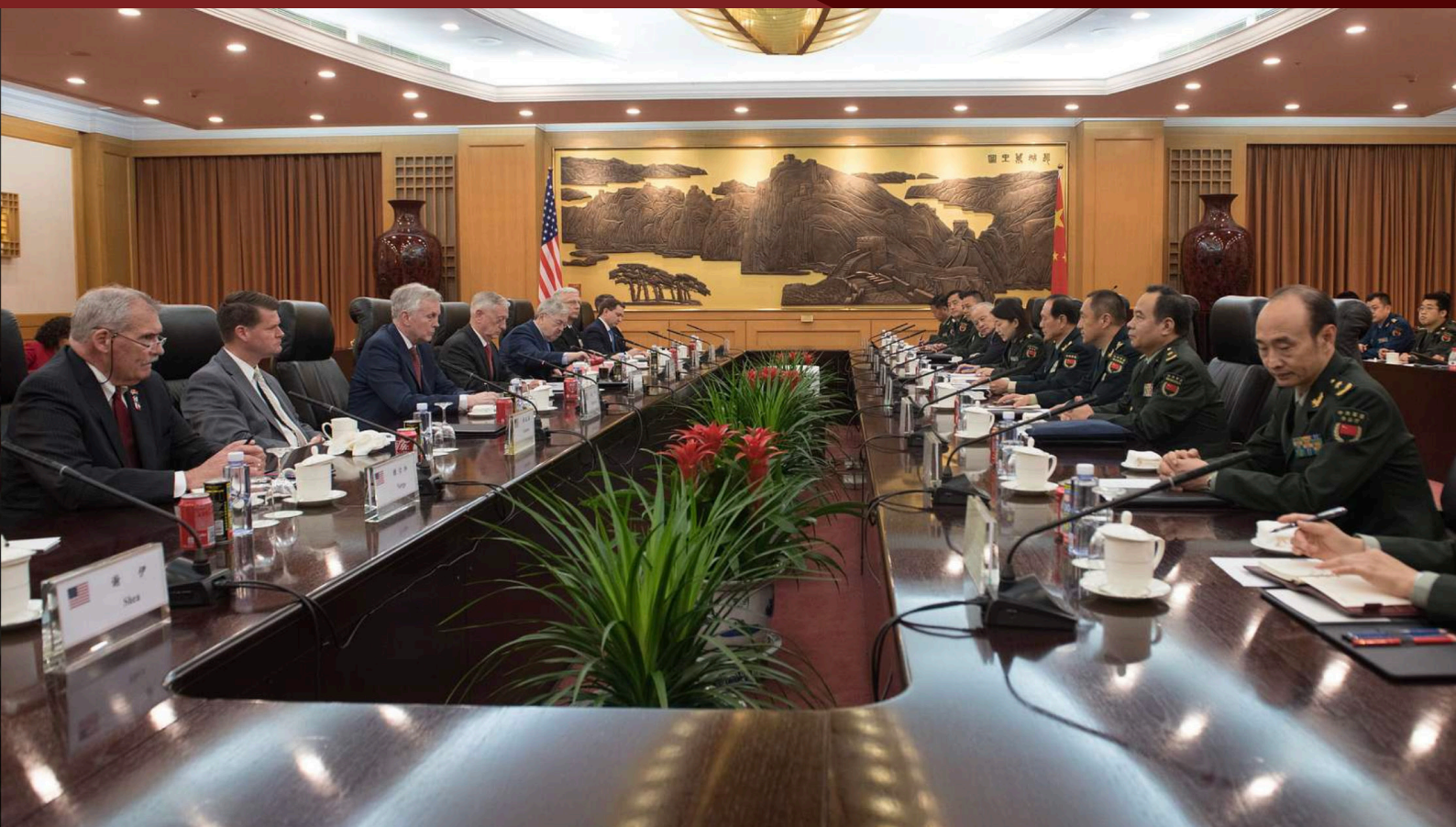


# Track-2 and Track-1.5 US-China Strategic Nuclear Dialogues: Lessons Learned and the Way Forward

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The Asia-Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament (APLN) is a network of political, military, and diplomatic leaders from countries across the Asia-Pacific tackling security and defence challenges with a particular focus on addressing and eliminating nuclear weapon risks.

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**Cover Photo:** US Secretary of Defense James N. Mattis meets with China's Minister of Defense Gen. Wei Fenghe at the People's Liberation Army's Bayi Building in Beijing, China, on June 28, 2018. (DoD photo by Army Sgt. Amber I. Smith)

# Track-2 and Track-1.5 US-China Strategic Nuclear Dialogues: Lessons Learned and the Way Forward

David Santoro

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has led to the breakdown of US-Russia relations. The arms control relationship between the two countries, already in trouble before the invasion, is now on the brink of collapse. Understandably, these developments have received considerable attention.

Much less attention has been given to US-China relations, even though they have been deteriorating significantly since at least the mid-2010s. Particularly worrisome, especially in the context of new evidence suggesting that Beijing is now engaged in a significant nuclear build-up, is that the United States and China do not have – and never have had – an arms control relationship.<sup>1</sup> Worse, they have never had a nuclear relationship: there hasn't been a dedicated dialogue on “strategic nuclear” issues between the two countries, and broader military-to-military contacts have been notoriously unreliable.

Nuclear dialogue between the United States and China, then, has taken place mostly among US and Chinese experts, in processes called “Track-2” or “Track-1.5.”<sup>2</sup> Run by US and Chinese foreign policy think tanks close to US and Chinese policymaking circles, and initiated in the 2000s, these initiatives have sought to fill the gap left at the official level, i.e., reflect on what a US-China strategic nuclear relationship could (and should) look like.<sup>3</sup> The idea behind Track-2 and Track-1.5 initiatives has been to promote better mutual understanding on strategic nuclear issues and build a foundation to jumpstart official (i.e., “Track-1”) dialogue; after dialogue launch, several US and Chinese experts have suggested that these initiatives act as support platforms.

Looking back at these efforts, what are the lessons? What has been the impact of US-China expert discussions on strategic nuclear issues? On that basis, and looking ahead, what is the way forward?

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1 The first batch of publicly released evidence was reported by Joby Warrick in “China is building more than 100 new missile silos in its western desert, analysts say,” *Washington Post*, 30 June 2021.

2 Different people define “Track-2” and “Track-1.5” differently. Generally, however, Track-2 refers to unofficial engagement between academics, policy analysts, and researchers from two or several countries. Track-1.5 refers to a form of engagement that also includes government officials, e.g., diplomats, military officers, or officials from other agencies or bureaucracies.

3 This paper is based primarily on the proceedings of the Track-1.5 “China-US Strategic Nuclear Dynamics Dialogue,” co-run by the Pacific Forum (and initially the Center for Strategic and International Studies) in collaboration with the Naval Postgraduate School and in close partnership with the China Foundation for International and Strategic Studies and the China Arms Control and Disarmament Association, two Chinese think tanks affiliated with the People's Liberation Army and the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, respectively.



How could (and should) these expert discussions adapt in an era of increasingly intense US-China competition, notably in the strategic nuclear domain?

This paper begins with a review of the key “lessons learned” from Track-2 and Track-1.5 US-China dialogues. It then moves on to discuss how these processes should evolve to improve mutual understanding and establish official strategic nuclear dialogue between the two countries.

### **Looking back: Lessons learned from Track-2 and Track-1.5 US-China strategic nuclear dialogues**

Expert discussions in Track-2 and Track-1.5 US-China strategic nuclear dialogues took a long time to emerge. During the first few dialogue rounds, discussions were disorganised and unfocused. They centred on “the news of the moment,” the broader political relationship (instead of the strategic nuclear relationship), and, on the Chinese side, they featured primarily pre-cooked talking points.



US Strategic Command at Offutt Air Force Base in Nebraska (US Army Corps of Engineers).

Still, during that time, patterns formed. Some of the key points advanced by the Chinese side, for instance, included complaints that the United States is a hegemonic power that seeks “absolute security,” notably because it pursues ballistic missile defence and advanced conventional weapons capabilities, sells arms to Taiwan, and props up its regional allies by strengthening extended deterrence. Chinese experts further advanced that the United States wants to contain China, even possibly change its regime, and criticised what they saw as US “double standards” on non-proliferation because the United States holds some countries (e.g., North Korea) to a different standard than others (e.g., India).

Chinese experts, meanwhile, resisted US calls for official dialogue and transparency, arguing that from China's perspective, opacity is key to deterrence given the small size of its arsenal, which Beijing is committed to keeping at a minimum level. Chinese experts added that China has a retaliatory-only strategy (i.e., a no-first-use policy) and is building its forces only to ensure that this strategy works in the face of US military developments and deployments. They also stressed that China is not ready for arms control, and that the United States and Russia should lead in this area because they possess the vast majority of nuclear weapons in the world.

As these discussions were taking place, however, it quickly became clear that US and Chinese experts were talking past each other at least in part because they were using different words and concepts. Chinese experts, for instance, were reluctant to use the word "deterrence" because, to them, it suggests "blackmail" and "compellence," i.e., the use of force or the threat of force to get someone to do something they do not want to do. So, Chinese experts refused to say that the goal of China's nuclear modernisation is to "strengthen deterrence" of the United States.

This realisation shifted the focus of the dialogues. Rather than discussing "the issues," US and Chinese experts spent time going back to basics and defining key terms and concepts, creating common lexicons. The idea was that discussing the issues was pointless without a common, foundational strategic nuclear language.<sup>4</sup>

These efforts helped improve the discussions considerably, albeit with important limits. First, because experts on each side continued to disagree on the meaning of some key terms and concepts. Second, because some terms and concepts were never defined. Case in point: 'strategic stability', a concept that has been widely used but never defined in official documents, including in the United States. Still, several dialogue rounds helped highlight that while US experts generally understand strategic stability narrowly, i.e., in a way that prevents nuclear crises and arms races, Chinese experts define it much more broadly, to include all foreign policy.<sup>5</sup>

As a result, it took several years to build trust or, rather, "rules of engagement" between US and Chinese experts and get to more substantive discussions, i.e., to a point where both sides could engage on the issues and workshop ideas about them. Getting there proved so successful that increasingly senior and

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4 For years, the Committee on International Security and Arms Control of the American National Academies of Science met with Chinese counterparts for that purpose. They produced the English-Chinese Chinese-English Nuclear Security Glossary (Washington, DC: National Academies Press, and Beijing: Atomic Energy Press, 2008). Other Track-2 and Track-1.5 processes also discussed strategic nuclear terms and concepts at length. Under Chinese leadership, the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council conducted a similar effort, leading to the P5 Glossary of Key Nuclear Terms, accessible at <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3956428>

5 For a discussion on this point, see David Santoro and Robert Gromoll, "On the Value of Nuclear Dialogue with China – A Review and Assessment of the Track-1.5 'China-US Strategic Nuclear Dynamics Dialogue,'" *Issues & Insights*, vol. 20, no. 1, Nov. 2020, pp. 10-14.

more diverse individuals on each side, including military officers of the People's Liberation Army dealing with Chinese nuclear weapons, ended up participating in Track-2 and Track-1.5 strategic nuclear dialogues.

Still, for a long time, both sides centred the discussions mostly on explicating the US and Chinese positions on issues, much less so, if at all, on what should be done to reduce or eliminate the daylight between their respective positions. In other words, there was not much of a problem-solving mindset at the dialogues, except occasionally at tabletop exercises.

On the positive side, at the five-to-ten-year mark in the dialogues, expert discussions were largely immune from US-China problems at the official level. Occasionally, in particular during the time of US arms sales to Taiwan, the atmosphere was more tense, but it never impeded substantive work. Conversely, good developments at the official level often helped lightened the mood. After the 2013 Sunnylands Summit between US President Barack Obama and Chinese President Xi Jinping, for instance, Chinese experts indicated that Beijing might soon be ready to move to Track-1 strategic nuclear dialogue, and several even stressed that they would make such a recommendation to Chinese officials.<sup>6</sup>

The lesson, then, is that Track-2 and Track-1.5 dialogues have been beneficial in that they have created habits of engagement between US and Chinese experts and enabled better mutual understanding of where the United States and China stand on key issues. This positive effect, in turn, has helped identify areas of convergence and divergence between the two sides, opening the door to ideas about potential solutions or, at least, mitigation measures, even though, again, few of the latter were advanced.

Yet without an agreement to move to Track-1 (and, therefore, without the achievement of a US-China nuclear *modus vivendi*), it is difficult to assess the “real” impact of these dialogues. Have they helped make baby steps towards official strategic nuclear dialogue? Or have they operated merely as ‘talk shops’ leading nowhere, with participants perhaps connected to decisionmakers but unable to shape (let alone change) their thinking? These questions are unanswered and most certainly unanswerable.

An additional problem is that the dialogues have not enjoyed constant progress. Both sides voiced grievances at the beginning, then moved to a more positive place in later years (with, for instance, some prominent Chinese experts talking about the need to develop a “constructive nuclear relationship” as late as 2017),

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<sup>6</sup> Ralph A. Cosssa, Brad Glosserman, and David Santoro, “US-China Strategic Nuclear Relations: Time to Move to Track-1 Dialogue,” *Issues & Insights*, vol. 15, no. 7, Feb. 2015.

before reverting to a darker tone as US-China competition intensified, including in the strategic nuclear domain.<sup>7</sup> So, over the years, both sides remained committed to unofficial dialogue and engagement, but the changing political backdrop and overall balance of power (which at the regional level began to shift to China's favour) came to colour the discussions, and Beijing continued to refuse Track-1 interactions on these issues.

By 2019, there was hardly anything positive to report or discuss other than desperate attempts by some (on both sides) to highlight the need to insulate the strategic nuclear dimension from raging competitive dynamics. Beginning in 2018, the seniority and quality of participants on the Chinese side had declined sharply. The result was that much of the funding for the dialogues dried up. A few interactions took place (virtually) during the COVID-19 pandemic, but they were rare, and it was during that time that evidence surfaced suggesting that China was engaged in a crash nuclear build-up, creating brand new problems for the bilateral relationship.

### **Looking ahead: How to reinvigorate Track-2 and Track-1.5 US-China strategic nuclear dialogues**

In view of these lessons, what is the way forward for Track-2 and Track-1.5 US-China strategic nuclear dialogues? How should they adapt to the new era of strategic competition and play (again) a positive role to help manage the US-China strategic nuclear relationship?

Change should happen on two levels: process and substance.

From a process perspective, there should be efforts to set the record straight about Track-2 and Track-1.5 dialogues. On that basis, actions should then be taken to make these dialogues more relevant and to ensure that they are bridges to get to Track-1.

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<sup>7</sup> Ralph Cossa, Brad Glosserman, and David Santoro, "A Realistic Way Forward for the US-China Strategic Nuclear Relationship," *Issues & Insights*, vol. 18, CR1, Jan. 2018, p. 6.





Zhongnanhai in Beijing, home of Chinese President Xi Jinping (Ming Xia, Flickr).

### Setting the record straight about Track-2 and Track-1.5 dialogues

The oft-asked question is whether these dialogues are “really useful.” There is no yes-or-no answer to this question, as mentioned earlier. Typically, the next question is whether these dialogues benefit one side over the other. That question can be answered.

Some argue that Beijing benefits the most because the United States shares much “nuclear information,” and China does not, or certainly not as much. While this is true, the United States also publishes much of that information in its key strategic reviews, notably the Nuclear Posture Review, which the Chinese side can access readily. The dialogues, then, provide the United States with opportunities to explicate these reviews, which the Chinese (and many others) sometimes, and for some often, misinterpret. What’s more, because China does not publish much nuclear information (and because there is no official strategic nuclear dialogue), the United States benefits greatly from engaging Chinese in Track-2 and Track-1.5 dialogues, even though they typically share much less than Americans, in part because they have a smaller arsenal and a policy based on strategic ambiguity.<sup>8</sup>

The bottom line is that Track-2 and Track-1.5 dialogues do not seem to benefit one side over the other. They are – and have been – a “win-win” proposition, despite the uncertainties about their “real impact” on the US-China strategic nuclear relationship. That the dialogues are mutually beneficial is an essential point because if they are to be reinvigorated in the current competitive environment, US and Chinese sponsors need to know that neither Washington nor Beijing gets more than the other.

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<sup>8</sup> To be sure, in recent years, China has published more “nuclear information,” including more regular white papers on these topics.

## **Make Track-2 and Track-1.5 dialogues more relevant**

Making Track-2 and Track-1.5 dialogues more relevant means putting in considerable work to design meeting agendas that properly address the strategic nuclear issues of significance for the bilateral relationship. (What issues to pick will be discussed later.) From a process perspective, it means ensuring that the dialogue co-chairs are in tight control of the discussions and that they promote a problem-solving mindset, which, as mentioned, has been lacking in the dialogues.

One way to encourage the transition is to sponsor research to that effect, which would feed into dialogue discussions. Conducting studies authored or co-authored by US and Chinese experts could help the two sides to find common ground to address problems, as opposed to detailing what these problems are.<sup>9</sup>

## **Ensure that Track-2 and Track-1.5 dialogues are bridges to Track-1**

Track-2 and Track-1.5 dialogues should be neither sideshows to, nor substitutes for, Track-1 engagement. Rather, they should be processes working resolutely towards the establishment of a Track-1 strategic nuclear dialogue and, once such dialogue is established, they should act as support platforms. To be sure, in theory, establishing unofficial dialogues and networks to develop epistemic communities across countries can be, in and of itself, a net benefit because these communities can help limit the damage in the event of a diplomatic breakdown. In practice, however, the potential of epistemic communities is limited.

The US and Russian epistemic communities have neither prevented nor limited the collapse of US-Russia relations, for instance. Unofficial dialogues on these issues are thus most useful if they work to build momentum for official discussions and negotiations to begin.

Reinvigorating Track-2 and Track-1.5 strategic nuclear dialogues, then, should involve making clear that Track-1 engagement is the goal and, given competitive pressures, that this goal should be reached sooner rather than later. It would be almost pointless to reinvigorate Track-2 and Track-1.5 dialogues without clarity about this goal and a sense of urgency on both sides that reaching it is paramount.

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<sup>9</sup> For an example of such a study, see Lewis A. Dunn (ed.), *Building Toward a Stable and Cooperative Long-Term US-China Strategic Relationship* (Honolulu, HI; Washington, DC; Beijing: Pacific Forum, SAIC, and CACDA, 2012).

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*The next stage for Track-2 and Track-1.5 dialogues, ... should be to systematically advance solutions or mitigation measures to problems. If these processes are to be reinvigorated, they can no longer be platforms where talking points are exchanged and grievances voiced. They should complete their transition from problem-diagnosis to problem-solving.*

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Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Mark A. Welsh III meets with People's Liberation Army Air Force Deputy Chief of Staff Maj. Gen. Li Chunchao after arriving in Beijing, China, 24 Sep 2013 (US Air Force Photo/Scott M. Ash)

From a substantive perspective, reinvigorating Track-2 and Track-1.5 US-China strategic nuclear dialogues involves focusing on the big, elephant-in-the-room issues, while also paying attention to the potential of “external issues.”

### **Focus on the big, elephant-in-the-room issues**

If they are to remain relevant, Track-2 and Track-1.5 dialogues should stand ready to address the ‘big,’ longstanding, and difficult strategic nuclear issues of significance to US-China relations.

The list is long but, at the broadest level, simple. One issue of central importance is figuring out the requirements to maintain US-China strategic stability, which, in all likelihood, involves in-depth focus on the mutual vulnerability question, i.e., whether or not (and how) the foundation for stability resides in the United States and China being mutually vulnerable.<sup>10</sup>

Another essential issue involves an expert discussion on escalation dynamics and crisis avoidance/management, especially in the context of a fast-changing technological environment (with the rising role of new offensive and defensive weapons as well as new domains of strategic significance) and an increasingly nuclear multipolar world.

Finally, US and Chinese experts should unpack the realm of the possible when it comes to arms control and, more specifically, ways to limit or reduce specific weapon systems or manage domains of engagement.<sup>11</sup>

10 For a study on this topic, see David Santoro (ed.), “US-China Mutual Vulnerability: Perspectives on the Debate,” *Issues & Insights*, vol. 22, SR2, May 2022.

11 There is a rich emerging literature on how to adapt arms control to 21st century requirements. See, for instance, Ulrich Kuhn (ed.), *Trilateral Arms Control? Perspectives from Washington, Moscow, and Beijing* (Hamburg, Germany: Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy, March 2020) or Heather Williams, “Asymmetric Arms Control and Strategic Stability: Scenarios for Limiting Hypersonic Glide Vehicles,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 42, no. 6, Aug. 2019, pp. 789-813.



Finding solutions to problems in these three areas – strategic stability; escalation and crisis avoidance/management; and arms control – would help improve the current state of affairs in the US-China strategic nuclear relationship. It will be difficult, however, if only because the United States and China have fundamentally different approaches. For instance, while the United States favours a bottom-up approach to crisis management, where agreements can be found at the working level to prevent escalation, China prefers a top-down approach, which requires solving the “core issues” at the high, political level, allowing for crisis arrangements to emerge.

### **Do not dismiss “external issues”**

There is potential for US-China cooperation on “external issues,” i.e., issues that do not directly involve Washington and Beijing, such as notably non-proliferation and nuclear security, where a considerable amount of work is needed. Of note: the prospects for cooperation on nuclear security, which is by nature less political than non-proliferation, appear more promising; for instance, US-China joint work remains active in China’s State Nuclear Security Technology Center, even as strategic competition intensifies.<sup>12</sup>

Accordingly, putting extra weight on such “external issues” in future Track-2 and Track-1.5 dialogues would be wise. To be sure, and as mentioned in the previous section, priority should be given to the hard bilateral problems. Addressing external problems is also important, however, if only to help build habits of cooperation between the two countries.

Two such problems should be in focus right now: dealing with North Korea and its development of an increasingly sophisticated nuclear arsenal and preventing the use of a nuclear weapon in the context of the conflict in Ukraine.

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<sup>12</sup> For more information about the Center, visit [http://snstc.org/home\\_en](http://snstc.org/home_en)

## The APLN China-US-Asia Dialogue

The relationship between China and the United States has deteriorated significantly with the potential to worsen still. The security dilemma that this generates is fuelling fear, mistrust, and arms racing, impacting countries across the Asia-Pacific and globally. Potential repercussions include military confrontation and the possibility of nuclear escalation while undermining attempts at global cooperation on a range of 21st-century challenges.

Through a series of scholarly exchanges and publications, APLN's project China-US-Asia Dialogue evaluates what steps are necessary to improve understanding, reduce misperceptions, de-escalate risks and tensions, and build trust. The project is aimed at devising pragmatic policy recommendations for decision-makers and policy communities across the Asia-Pacific, and Washington and Beijing in particular.

The Asia-Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament (APLN) is a Seoul-based organisation and network of political, military, and diplomatic leaders and experts from across the Asia-Pacific region working to address global security challenges, with a particular focus on reducing and eliminating nuclear weapons risks.

The mission of APLN is to inform and stimulate debate, influence action, and propose policy recommendations designed to address regional security threats, with an emphasis on nuclear and other WMD (weapon of mass destruction) threats, and to do everything possible to achieve a world in which nuclear weapons and other WMDs are contained, diminished, and eventually eliminated.



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