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CINEMATIC CATALYSTS: CAN 'OPPENHEIMER' SHAPE NUCLEAR POLICY?

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The widely acclaimed film "Oppenheimer," released worldwide at the end of July, has surpassed \$700 million in global box office sales and was placed fourth on the revenue chart just one month after its release. This achievement stands as a testament to the immense audience interest that the film has generated across the globe. It is anticipated that this story of the dawn of the Atomic Age will stay alive in the collective consciousness for an extended period, across different platforms — both big and small.

However, can this film truly make a difference to today's nuclear policy, arms control or the rather dismal disarmament landscape? Regrettably, the answer is no, at least not in the immediate future. The opaque nuclear weapon policies of the nine states that possess this apocalyptic capability have been shaped by considerable internal deliberations, and it is very unlikely that a single film, however compelling and well-made, will lead to significant policy changes.

Arms control agreements with rigorous checks and verification protocols are even more of a maze to navigate, and meaningful disarmament commitments by the nuclear nine remain the elusive Holy Grail for a weary and jaded world. The war in Ukraine and the periodic nuclear saber-rattling by Moscow have only added to the latent anxiety about the use of this horrific destructive capability.

A dark cloud looms over the world concerning the weapons of mass destruction (WMD) domain, but there is a faint silver lining that "Oppenheimer" brings to this bleak scenario. For the younger generation that has a blurred recall or limited awareness of nuclear weapons and the radioactive inferno that Hiroshima and Nagasaki were subjected to in August 1945, this portrayal of the scientist Robert Oppenheimer and his role in "creating" this apocalyptic weapon has triggered a heightened awareness about

this often shrouded subject.

Seventy-eight years is a long time, and barring the professionals who work in the WMD domain, the larger global demography often regards nuclear weapons and Hiroshima-Nagasaki as distant historical events that are difficult to comprehend.

But thanks to "Oppenheimer," there have been a spate of op-ed articles, editorials and discussions globally about the path to acquiring the first nuclear weapon; the techno-strategic compulsions of deterrence; and the urgent need to acknowledge the magnitude of the nuclear sword of Damocles that hangs over humanity. In India, for example, as many as ten major language newspapers carried either a review, editorial comment or news coverage about the film.

Consequently, one may (perhaps optimistically) suggest that by a slow process of osmosis, "Oppenheimer" will hopefully sensitize concerned citizen groups to ponder over the issue of nuclear weapons, and urge their legislators to review the nuclear threats that the world faces and ensure that this matter is not relegated to the back-burner.

Has there been a precedent where a film has influenced nuclear policies? The answer is an encouraging yes: the 1983 film "The Day After" — a made-for-TV movie that left a mark on U.S. nuclear policies. The film is a frightening depiction of what a nuclear war between the United States and the former USSR would be like for hapless citizens in the American Midwest (Kansas) and the long, lifeless nuclear winter that follows.

Despite criticisms of its quality, it was reported at the time that then U.S. President Ronald Reagan watched the film and was deeply affected by the scale of the destruction and desolate aftermath graphically depicted in the film. Americans who saw the film also found themselves deeply influenced, with many making urgent calls to the White House imploring the president and other lawmakers to prevent such a catastrophe and to swiftly formulate necessary policies.

It is understood that President Reagan considered this film to be very effective in delivering its message and that it left him "greatly depressed." He further shared that watching "The Day After" prompted him to review U.S. policies towards the former USSR and its leader, Mikhail Gorbachev. Experts opine that this film had a tangible role in enabling the thaw between the United States and the USSR and their subsequent conclusion that a nuclear war was not an option between the two superpowers, ultimately paving the way for substantive arms control agreements and related nuclear restraint.

Will "Oppenheimer" have a similar impact? Conceivably, yes, if civil society across the

world is motivated to act and gets its head out of the sand. Hiroshima marked the first use of the atomic bomb, and the film's central protagonist agonizes over the enormity of the moral dilemma that his groundbreaking work has unleashed. Nagasaki became the unfortunate second target; a dirge-leavened haiku captures the tragedy in a pithy manner:

Blossoms turn to ash,
Whispering spirits of souls,
Nagasaki weeps.

The film "Oppenheimer" may yet prove to be the catalyst that ensures Nagasaki does not weep in vain.

The opinions articulated above represent the views of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network or any of its members.

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ABOUT APLN

The **Asia-Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament (APLN)** is a Seoul-based organisation and network of political, military, 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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