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SHORING UP THE NUCLEAR NONPROLIFERATION AND DISARMAMENT REGIME IS IMPERATIVE

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While the goal of merely shoring up the existing non-proliferation and disarmament regime may seem to lack ambition, the current international situation is, regrettably, the least conducive to pursuing radical nuclear disarmament initiatives since the end of the Cold War. Certainly, the danger of a nuclear holocaust, whether intentional, inadvertent or accidental, continues to pose an existential threat to humanity and the planet, now joined by global warming, that should be tackled urgently. Yet various fissures in the bedrock of international peace and security, not least the Russian invasion of Ukraine (including veiled nuclear threats by Russia and Belarus), the continuing nuclear aspirations of Iran and North Korea, the relentless qualitative and quantitative advances in the nuclear weapon arsenals of virtually all possessor states, and the faltering U.S.-Russian nuclear arms limitation regime, bode badly for achieving a nuclear-weapon-free world anytime soon.

Those of us who lived through the Cold War recall, however, that even in its bleakest moments — indeed because of those bleak moments — the two superpowers were able to see mutual advantage in constraint, beginning with confidence-building and threat reduction measures before moving on to verifiable quantitative and qualitative reductions in the SALT and START processes. Multilaterally, the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, today the key bulwark against nuclear weapon acquisition by non-nuclear weapon states, was negotiated at the height of the Vietnam War.

Today, the strategic situation is increasingly trilateral due to the rise of China, both as a global power and as an advancing nuclear-weapon state. China's nuclear capabilities are expanding quantitatively, qualitatively and geographically. China, therefore, holds one of the keys to re-energizing the non-proliferation and disarmament regime, both globally and regionally. By acceding to the NPT in 1992 and signing the CTBT in 1996, China clearly recognizes the value of multilateral disarmament treaties, but to date, it

has not engaged in the type of bilateral arrangements that the United States and the Soviet Union did during the Cold War. Today a trilateral China-Russia-U.S. agreement would seem most logical. But China claims it sees no benefit in doing so while its nuclear forces remain numerically limited relative to those of the United States and Russia.

Yet sheer numbers are irrelevant to the danger of an accidental or inadvertent nuclear episode, exacerbated today by cyber and artificial intelligence complications that may lead to escalation, mutual misapprehensions, pre-emptive action and ultimately a nuclear holocaust. Surely, at the very least, such possibilities support the case for nuclear threat reduction initiatives and confidence-building measures, such as enhanced hotlines between militaries and leaders, transparency initiatives, de-escalation protocols and rules-of-the-road in space, in the air and at sea. In the Asia-Pacific region, with its numerous island, archipelagic, and sea-lane-dependent states, maritime rules of engagement are particularly urgent. As NATO and the Warsaw Pact discovered during their decades-long strategic dance throughout the Cold War, confidence-building measures, through mechanisms such as the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, were an essential starting point.

The United Nations has an important role to play in advocating for these measures. U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, in his July 2023 New Agenda for Peace, was characteristically blunt in setting out what is immediately needed. He urged states possessing nuclear weapons, pending their eventual elimination of such weapons, to commit to never using them. In addition, they should take steps to avoid mistakes or miscalculation; develop transparency and confidence-building measures; accelerate implementation of existing nuclear disarmament commitments; and reduce the role of nuclear weapons in national security strategies. Finally, he urged the nuclear weapon states to engage in a dialogue on strategic stability and elaborate next steps for further reductions of nuclear arsenals.

These are all eminently sensible proposals, yet they cannot be achieved by expecting states to suddenly discover a sense of morality, ethics or altruism, or magically locate their “political will,” a lazy expression that begs a multitude of questions about how such a phenomenon is to be generated. Rather, states must be convinced that avoiding nuclear war is aligned with their own national security interests. As Gareth Evans and Yoriko Kawaguchi, co-chairs of the 2009 Australia-Japan International Commission on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament, sagely noted, “The will to do something difficult, sensitive or expensive will rarely be a given in international or domestic politics. It usually has to be painfully and laboriously constructed, case by case, context by context.” This is indeed how all elements of the current non-proliferation and disarmament regime were constructed.

Evans and Kawaguchi identified four main elements needed to foster “political will.” The first was leadership: China, Russia and the United States — this means you. The second was knowledge: the U.N. plays a notable role here, especially its Department of Disarmament Affairs and the U.N. Institute for Disarmament Research. Japan’s recent initiative to fund disarmament professorships worldwide is most welcome. The third was strategy. There are already multiple disarmament action plans, including those of

the 1996 Canberra Commission, the 2006 Blix Commission, and the 2004 U.N. High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change. There is no need to reinvent these, but to revisit and begin implementing them. Finally, there is process, bilateral, trilateral and multilateral, including at the U.N. General Assembly, the U.N. Security Council, the benighted Conference on Disarmament (in urgent need of reform), and at the International Atomic Energy Agency, the guardian of nuclear safeguards that is deserving of greater support. There is much to do and no time to spare.

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

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