



ASIA-PACIFIC LEADERSHIP NETWORK

FOR NUCLEAR NON-PROLIFERATION AND DISARMAMENT

INDO-PACIFIC NUCLEAR DIPLOMACY: A CALL TO REVIVE AUSTRALIAN LEADERSHIP

John Tilemann, former diplomat and international civil servant

09 Nov 2023

As Australia seeks to redefine its diplomatic and security ambitions in the Indo-Pacific, a group of prominent Australians in the fields of public policy and nuclear security is urging Australia to act to stem the rising tide of global nuclear threats – threats mostly generated today in the Indo-Pacific.

The seriousness of these threats has been acknowledged by regional leaders, [including Australia's Prime Minister Anthony Albanese](#). But they have yet to receive the high-level political attention they demand.

The open letter to Prime Minister Albanese is [available here](#). Signatories to this letter include present and former politicians from across the Australian political spectrum, senior foreign policy officials, academics, and nuclear specialists.

Their simple message emphasizes the need for Australia to once again assume a leadership role in nuclear diplomacy, working with regional neighbours to reduce nuclear threats in the Indo-Pacific through confidence building and preventive diplomacy measures.

It calls for a level of diplomatic outreach commensurate with Australia's high-profile commitments to regional military security.

As the letter notes, eight of the world's nine nuclear-armed states have strategic stakes in the region. Tensions amongst these nuclear players continue to rise, and the price of nuclear mistakes or, more alarmingly, intentional use of nuclear weapons, could be existential.

Indo-Pacific Nuclear Arsenals

The numbers illustrate the dangers.

[According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute](#), the United States and Russia still possess between them a nuclear inventory of some 11,000 weapons.

While the bulk of these weapons are linked to US-Russia nuclear deterrence, they cast a long shadow over the Indo-Pacific region.

China has over 400 nuclear weapons with the number continuing to grow. Moreover, China is growing its strategic missile arsenal at an even faster rate.

India and Pakistan, which both declared their nuclear status 25 years ago, currently maintain 150 weapons each and are gradually increasing their stockpiles.

North Korea joined the ranks of nuclear-armed states in 2006 and is estimated to now have around 30 nuclear weapons. It has also been developing missile delivery systems which threaten not only its neighbours but now also mainland North America.

In addition to these regional nuclear actors, we now have to consider European countries participating in NATO's "look east" policy.

France remains a nuclear-armed state with territories in the Pacific and global strategic reach.

And the United Kingdom has reasserted its interests in the Indo-Pacific by recently announcing its decision to maintain a "persistent" naval presence in region, including the deployment of nuclear-powered submarines.

Strategic Nuclear Complexity

But it is not only the sheer quantity of nuclear weapons that poses a threat. More concerning is the increasing strategic complexity stemming from the number of players, as well as the expanding range, intensity, and persistence of their conflicting interests.

As the letter argues, the Indo-Pacific is characterized by an arc of nuclear flashpoints stretching from Northeast Asia through the East China Sea and Southeast Asia, on to the Indian Ocean. Reports of alarming encounters in the region involving the military and para-military forces of nuclear-armed states are becoming a regular occurrence, with undoubtedly many more such incidents going unreported.

Long gone are the days of the relative simplicity of a bipolar world, with two opposing blocs maintaining a degree of stability arising from the doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction. The multipolar nuclear landscape of the Indo-Pacific is an even more dangerous place.

Additionally, nuclear complexity is compounded by the expectations of states that benefit from the "ironclad treaty alliances" extended by the US extends to Australia, Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and Thailand. Both South Korea and Japan have expressed concerns about the credibility of US strategic assurances, and both have the capacity to build nuclear weapons quickly should they take that decision. Australia's nuclear diplomacy must also address these proliferation pressures.

Global and Regional Guardrails

In his June Shangri-La Dialogue address, Prime Minister Albanese discussed the concept of “guardrails” aimed at reducing nuclear threats.

There is now a 70-year legacy, as chequered as it is, of nuclear arms control, disarmament, and threat management arrangements. Some of the mechanisms are global in scope while many others are specific to the bipolar nuclear landscape of the Cold War. With the deterioration in relations between Washington and Moscow many of the bilateral arrangements have been discarded, and others are on life support. There is nevertheless much to be learned from this history.

That said we need be aware that the legacy is very much skewed to the Western Hemisphere.

Global instruments designed to stop the spread of nuclear weapons and cap nuclear weapons testing have been highly successful – but there are big gaps in these regimes in the Indo-Pacific region. Notably, three of the four countries to have rejected the [Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty](#), designed to prevent the further spread of nuclear weapons, are in this region: India, Pakistan, and North Korea.

The formal entry into force of the global ban on nuclear weapons testing is [blocked by eight countries](#) situated in two areas of regional tension – the Middle East and the Indo-Pacific. Widely supported proposals for a global ban on the production of materials used to make nuclear weapons – highly enriched uranium and plutonium – also encounter opposition from those in our region still growing their nuclear arsenals.

While remaining hugely important, global mechanisms must be supplemented by regional mechanisms.

Learning from the near existential catastrophe of the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, Washington and Moscow, alongside their allies, slowly established institutions for dialogue and a range of confidence-building and transparency measures to help reduce nuclear threats. Later, they agreed to limitations on the number of nuclear weapons deployed, and by the 1990s, Washington and Moscow agreed on massive reductions in nuclear warhead numbers.

In part due to design, in part due the region’s complexity, the Indo-Pacific region did not experience that history of institution building for managing strategic nuclear issues. To this day, even basic tools for crisis management such as hotlines are either unevenly maintained or non-existent.

The [ASEAN Regional Forum](#) brings together all key Indo-Pacific strategic nuclear players but has had limited success in moving beyond information exchange to confidence-building measures, and preventive diplomacy remains a distant ambition.

The [East Asia Summit](#) also engages all key strategic nuclear parties in the Indo-Pacific, but it has yet to become a mechanism for addressing security challenges, let alone reducing nuclear threats.

Nevertheless, Australia has a strong record of institution building from its involvement in the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) to its strong engagement with the ASEAN-led arrangements, which have done much to establish the habits of regional dialogue. The ambition now must be directed to strengthening the regional architecture to enable it to address nuclear threats. This will need a big vision and many small steps.

A New Nuclear Diplomacy

In the past, Australia had a deserved reputation for support of practical international measures aimed at curbing nuclear proliferation and promoting arms control. The call for Australia to return to an active nuclear diplomacy is a call for a return to a commitment to “good international citizenship” as a core aspect of enlightened national self-interest.

Nuclear arms control must be on Australia’s agenda with nuclear-armed states, most immediately in exchanges with the United States and China.

But other stakeholders must also be engaged. Australia has frequently collaborated with Japan on global arms control agendas, including through [the 2010 International Commission on Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament](#), co-chaired by former Foreign Ministers Gareth Evans (a signatory of the open letter) and Yoriko Kawaguchi. Indonesia, as a hugely respected regional player and longtime coordinator for the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) on nuclear disarmament, would be another key partner.

Today, what is left of Australia’s long neglected nuclear diplomacy is preoccupied with defending the [AUKUS nuclear-powered submarine project](#).

Time now for a revival of Australia’s nuclear diplomacy with an ambition to reduce and eliminate nuclear threats in the Indo-Pacific.

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.

This commentary is also published on the [APLN website](#).

ABOUT APLN

The **Asia-Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament (APLN)** is a Seoul-based organization 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.



@APLNofficial



@APLNofficial



apln.network