



**ASIA-PACIFIC LEADERSHIP NETWORK**  
FOR NUCLEAR NON-PROLIFERATION AND DISARMAMENT

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## TAMING ASIA'S NUCLEAR JUNGLE: LESSONS FROM THE COLD WAR?

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Sixty years ago, the Cuban missile crisis jolted Washington and Moscow into recognizing the urgent need to manage their nuclear relations and reduce the global existential threat posed by their spiraling nuclear arsenals.

Earlier efforts to put the nuclear genie back into the bottle had failed. U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower's Atoms for Peace proposals established a lasting foundation for international collaboration and control over the peaceful uses of nuclear energy through the creation of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). However, these initiatives did little to curb the mounting stockpiles of nuclear weapons.

### **Global nuclear order**

Instead, the nuclear superpowers and their allies created a matrix of global, regional and bilateral measures over the next 40 years to manage and minimize the associated risks.

On the international front, these measures included crucial treaties aimed at curbing the proliferation of nuclear weapons — most notably the indispensable Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) — as well as the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), designed to halt nuclear weapons testing.

Regionally, efforts were made through initiatives such as the Mutual and Balanced Force Reduction Talks between NATO and Warsaw Pact countries, and the linked Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. Tools were negotiated to limit various categories of weapons and facilitate transparency, exemplified by novel arrangements such as the Open Skies Treaty, which allowed surveillance flights over NATO and Warsaw Pact countries.

Bilateral agreements were reached to address fundamental issues related to nuclear weapon quantities and the methods of their delivery and deployment. This included the

Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) in the 1970s, succeeded by the New START Treaty, set to expire in February 2026.

However, recent years have seen a deterioration in relations between Washington and Moscow, resulting in the abandonment of most bilateral frameworks and a decline in regional cooperation.

Nevertheless, this history of institution-building and legal arrangements to manage nuclear threats has left a legacy that could one day serve as a foundation for rebuilding confidence and trust between the nuclear superpowers. It also provides a valuable store of lessons to be learned.

### **Indo-Pacific nuclear complexity**

While the Moscow-Washington nuclear competition continues, global nuclear threats and risks have been on the rise in the Indo-Pacific. There are currently eight nuclear-armed states asserting their strategic interests in the region, and some of them are actively growing their nuclear arsenals.

Hardly a week goes by without reports of some incident involving military or paramilitary elements, often involving one or more parties with nuclear capabilities or nuclear-backed security commitments. And there is no way of knowing how many such incidents go unreported.

The multilateral regime has weaknesses in the Indo-Pacific, particularly with three nuclear-armed states — North Korea, India and Pakistan — not bound by the NPT or the CTBT.

Fundamental bilateral arrangements, such as hotlines and prior warning mechanisms, are at best haphazard, but for the most part nonexistent.

Regional mechanisms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum and East Asia Summit have yet to seriously grapple with nuclear threat reduction. The only truly innovative and promising regional initiatives, the Korean Economic Development Organization and subsequently the Six-Party Talks, ultimately failed. However, they do serve as a reminder of the vision required to begin tackling the complex web of nuclear relationships that characterizes the region.

### **Lessons to be learned**

There is an emerging awareness amongst regional leaders, as demonstrated at the Shangri-La Dialogue last June, that Indo-Pacific nuclear threats necessitate dialogue and the establishment of “guardrails.” While this recognition is a positive start, the real work has yet to begin.

The Indo-Pacific is in urgent need of political leadership to channel attention and focus towards the looming nuclear threats. It also desperately needs the intellectual resources

to draw insights from the history of the first two nuclear ages and formulate a comprehensive agenda for reducing and eliminating nuclear threats in our region, especially in the context of the even more challenging third nuclear age.

While the nuclear challenges facing the Indo-Pacific differ significantly from those of the Cold War era, there are valuable lessons to be learned from both the successes and failures of the structures that managed the dangers of the Atlantic nuclear theater during the various crises in East-West relations over the last 60 years.

*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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