



The Korea Times

ASIA-PACIFIC NUCLEAR NEXUS IN 2024

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03 January 2024

As we begin the New Year, we face a world marked by geopolitical volatility. The U.S.-China competition, Russia's war in Ukraine, and the war in Gaza present a few of the many intractable issues facing us today. Amid this volatility, and risk of nuclear weapons use not only remains high but is increasing precipitously. All nuclear-armed states are expanding and/or modernizing their nuclear stockpiles and the associated delivery vehicles. No nuclear arms control negotiations are underway. The path to disarmament seems much harder to navigate in light of worsening geopolitical dynamics in 2024.

Nuclear weapon risks in the Asia-Pacific region, in particular, demand close attention and commensurate action. Home to over 4 billion people; over half the global population and six of the world's nine nuclear-armed states, the region not only faces heightened risks of nuclear use but massive catastrophic consequences. North Korea continues to expand its nuclear and missile program while worries persist of a forthcoming nuclear weapons test. Relations between nuclear-armed India and Pakistan remain fraught. India-China relations are also difficult. China's expansion of its nuclear stockpile and delivery system, coupled with a lack of transparency about its capabilities and intentions, worries many in the international community. Moreover, the U.S.-China competition plays out most acutely in the Asia-Pacific region with several countries in the region reluctant to side with either of the two major powers, while others are being drawn into a cycle of increased militarization and arms races.

Meanwhile, the capacity of key governments to pursue nuclear risk reduction and disarmament measures in 2024 will be reduced as populations in the U.S., India, Taiwan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia, South Korea and Russia hold elections. The role and influence of middle power countries, and organizations such as ASEAN, will also grow as countries operate within an unstable international environment marked by ongoing election cycles and geopolitical competition.

To address nuclear risks in the face of international volatility and limited governmental capacity, an important step would be to assess whether the responses to complex dynamics are reducing nuclear risks or exacerbating them. This includes evaluating the implications of evolving alliance relationships and the effect these have on nuclear-armed dynamics, for instance, the Quad, or AUKUS; assessing the impact of new technologies on defense policies, the expanded use of AI could be considered a confidence-building measure to enhance surveillance activities or as a threat that undermines defense; and considering alternatives to nuclear deterrence policies and postures by considering how to enhance security without relying on nuclear weapons. Middle-power countries have an important role to play. For instance, countries such as South Korea, Japan and Australia can reflect on whether changes in defense policies are enhancing or eroding regional peace and security.

Region-wide informal mechanisms such as the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific and organizations such as the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament have a vital role to play in this effort by broadening policy dialogues and helping policymakers and others better understand the risks in current dynamics and how these are changing.

Moreover, deepening engagement to identify gaps in current thinking is critical to avoiding groupthink and unintended consequences. The aim is to capture how and why policymaking is evolving and to pre-empt and prevent crisis escalation and nuclear arms races. This ambition can be achieved by fostering an inclusive collaboration between governments and research institutions across the region enabling the cross-fertilization of ideas and perspectives and analysis between different communities.

This approach to the nuclear challenge can help achieve three important goals.

First, it helps create a sense of shared ownership and responsibility for current actions and outcomes. In doing so, it helps build an epistemic community that better understands and engages with differing perspectives, interests and analyses to ultimately break out of the stasis seen in current nuclear deterrence debates and dynamics.

Second, to reduce the barriers to constructive engagement and innovative ideas through more inclusive collaboration between policymakers and civil society.

Third, to encourage a greater diversity of voices and ideas in nuclear deterrence and disarmament discussions, injecting Asia-centered thinking into policy discussions that have historically been driven by Western perspectives.

In 2024, when nuclear risks are growing, it is vital to foster supportive frameworks for dialogue, prioritize nuclear risk reduction, and utilize expert and academic communities and expertise in a year of limited governmental bandwidth and heightened volatility.

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 was originally published in the [Korea Times](#), and on the [APLN website](#).

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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