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### WHY SOUTH KOREA SHOULD EMBRACE THE TREATY ON THE PROHIBITION OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS

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Seven years ago this week, 122 countries voted to adopt a landmark treaty that imposes an outright ban on the most destructive and inhumane instruments of war ever created. Known as the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), it is our best hope for making meaningful progress towards global nuclear disarmament.

Although none of the nine nuclear-armed states participated in its negotiation, and none have since joined it, the TPNW is still a major step forward. It establishes the essential foundations for verifiably eliminating nuclear weapons, and sends a powerful message that their use and possession by any state can never be morally or legally justified.

When negotiations for the TPNW began in New York in March 2017, the newly appointed US ambassador to the United Nations, Nikki Haley, protested outside the UN General Assembly hall. Flanked by diplomats from several allied countries, including South Korea, she argued that the time was not right to outlaw nuclear arms.

Four years later, in January 2021, the treaty became binding international law after being ratified by the requisite number of states. UN Secretary-General António Guterres hailed it as “an extraordinary achievement and a step towards the eventual elimination of nuclear weapons”.

His immediate predecessor, former South Korean Foreign Minister Ban Ki-moon, also joined the chorus of voices supporting the treaty. In 2020, he was one of 56 former leaders and ministers from US-allied states who co-signed a letter urging current leaders to “show courage and boldness – and join the treaty”.

Consistent with this appeal, they argued that countries must reject any role for nuclear weapons in their defence doctrines, including as part of alliances. “By claiming

protection from nuclear weapons, we are promoting the dangerous and misguided belief that nuclear weapons enhance security,” they wrote.

Regrettably, the South Korean government has continued to shun the TPNW, despite this high-level statement of support and its own oft-stated commitment to the goal of a nuclear-weapon-free world. Given the treaty’s potential to reinvigorate multilateral efforts to achieve nuclear disarmament, South Korea should reconsider its position.

The ongoing threat posed by North Korea’s nuclear weapon and ballistic missile programmes is no reason to discount the TPNW. On the contrary, it is all the more reason for South Korea to play a leading role in this and other UN initiatives aimed at addressing global nuclear dangers.

The alternative is to continue down a dangerous path of escalation. In the [Washington Declaration](#) of April 2023, South Korea agreed to deepen nuclear-weapon-related cooperation with the US. A few months earlier, President Yoon Suk Yeol [spoke](#) of the possibility of redeploying US nuclear weapons to the country or even acquiring a South Korean nuclear arsenal, in violation of the long-standing Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT).

Steps of this kind would only further undermine South Korea’s security. If the government is not yet willing to accede to the TPNW, it should at least observe the treaty’s meetings, just as several other US allies, including Australia, have done. It would bring a unique perspective to these diplomatic discussions, not only because of the security challenges it faces, but also because of its legacy of nuclear harm.

It is seldom acknowledged that tens of thousands of the victims of the US nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 were forced labourers from Korea. There were also many Koreans in the two Japanese cities who survived the atomic bombings but suffered horrific injuries or developed cancers later in life due to their exposure to the bombs’ radiation.

Today, around 2,000 Korean survivors are still alive and [registered](#) with the Korean Atomic Bomb Victims Association. The TPNW is especially relevant to them, as it includes ground-breaking provisions to assist individuals and communities harmed by the use and testing of nuclear weapons.

By embracing the TPNW, South Korea could work with other countries to ensure that no one else ever becomes the victim of a nuclear attack. This can only be guaranteed through the total elimination of the [12,000](#) or so nuclear weapons that currently exist globally. It is a formidable task, certainly, given that all nuclear-armed states continue to invest heavily in the modernisation of their nuclear arsenals. But we now have an important tool at our disposal to advance our cause.

The TPNW can be used to strengthen the “nuclear taboo” and reinforce the fragile nuclear non-proliferation regime. It reflects the resolute commitment of the vast majority of the world’s nations to avert a nuclear catastrophe by taking urgent action to eradicate the nuclear scourge from our planet.

It is not too late for South Korea to join this crucial effort – and help pave the way to a more peaceful and secure future for all.

*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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