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WAR IN GAZA: THE IMPERATIVE TO STRENGTHEN THE TRADITION OF NON-USE OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS

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Nuclear weapons are ethically repugnant, militarily ineffective, and politically useless. Several studies have demonstrated how nuclear weapons have repeatedly failed to prevent non-nuclear weapon states and non-state entities from undertaking military action against nuclear-armed governments. Yet, the ideas of nuclear deterrence and nuclear war have not disappeared from the public rhetoric and military doctrines of nuclear armed states. At the same time, widespread anxiety about nuclear use over the decades has made it seem legitimate for nuclear armed states to deploy conventional military force excessively and disproportionately. This normalisation of violence contributes to the breakdown of the tradition of non-use and inadvertently increases the likelihood of nuclear war.

One worrying case is Israel's ongoing war in Gaza. Hamas was well-aware of Israel's unparalleled conventional military capabilities, its nuclear weapons, and the unwavering military and diplomatic support of its Western allies when the group decided to break the decades-long siege of Gaza and challenge Israel's military prowess a year ago. Israel immediately resorted to a full-scale war. Three weeks into the conflict, Israel's minister of heritage Amichai Eliyahu explicitly stated that dropping a nuclear weapon on the Gaza strip is "an option." Fearing international outcry for openly acknowledging what Israeli historian and non-proliferation expert Avner Cohen calls the world's "worst-kept secret," both the Israeli Prime Minister and Defense Minister denounced the idea, yet without imposing any significant repercussions on Mr. Eliyahu.

Was the statement made by Mr. Eliyahu just empty rhetoric? Why does Israel continue to possess nuclear weapons despite having superior conventional military capabilities and advanced defense systems? Is Israel's nuclear arsenal intended for deterrence, as

other nuclear-armed states claim to justify their nuclear weapons programmes? If this is the case, Israel's nuclear weapons have failed to deter Hamas in the Gaza Strip, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Ansar Allah in Yemen, and the Islamic Republic of Iran from engaging militarily with Israel. This list includes both state and non-state actors, exposing the limits of nuclear deterrence irrespective of the actor's identity.

If not deterrence, are Israel's nuclear weapons meant for use? The possibility of nuclear use cannot be completely ruled out. So far, despite Israel's massive use of force, it has failed to defeat its rivals in a war that has now lasted more than a year. Israel's international reputation is at its lowest since its creation in 1948. In his work on the tradition of non-use of nuclear weapons, non-proliferation scholar T.V. Paul contended, "Although Israel has observed the tradition of non-use and has been partially influenced by it, the country remains perhaps one of the leading candidates to use nuclear weapons against a non-nuclear state and thereby break the tradition of non-use."

Earlier this month, in his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech on behalf of Nihon Hidankyo for its work on eradicating nuclear weapons, Toshiyuki Mimaki, a Hibakusha who survived the Hiroshima bombing, also drew international attention to the possibility of Israel using nuclear weapons against Gaza, urging the world leaders to act before it is too late.

The possibility of nuclear use raises two important questions. First, what would Israel stand to gain by using nuclear weapons? Second, what would it take to prevent Israel from using them?

There is no gainsaying the fact that if used, nuclear weapons will cause unimaginable destruction in a short period, killing an enormous number of people and rendering the land uninhabitable for a while. But would the horror of such destruction subdue resistance or spread it across West Asia? If history is any guide to the present, the likelihood of resistance against Israel will only grow in the long term. Yet, the trajectory of the ongoing war and the unprecedented scale of indiscriminate violence that the Israeli government has inflicted upon the people in Gaza (and now in Beirut) elude any long-term thinking or rational articulation of military objectives. Such normalisation of the disproportionate use of force can lead to the otherwise incomprehensible decision to use nuclear weapons.

Is it possible to prevent Israel from using the bomb? The temptation to fall for the idea of "mutual assured destruction" as a viable path to security may be strong among regional actors, but their ability to stop Israel from using nuclear weapons would remain low, even if one or more regional states were to acquire nuclear weapons. The failure of regional states to stop Israel's continuous perpetuation of what is tantamount to genocide has clearly revealed the limits of their influence on Israel's decision-making.

To reinforce the tradition of non-use of nuclear weapons, the United States' and Israel's European and Asian allies must take concerted action to criminalise the disproportionate

use of force in conventional warfare. Holding Israel accountable for its actions against non-combatants is essential to strengthening the tradition of non-use of nuclear weapons. If the tradition of non-use breaks down, the entire world will suffer the consequences.

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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