



**ASIA-PACIFIC LEADERSHIP NETWORK**

FOR NUCLEAR NON-PROLIFERATION AND DISARMAMENT

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### TOWARD A NEW HIGH-LEVEL DISARMAMENT INITIATIVE

**Tanya Ogilvie-White**, Senior Research Adviser at the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network (APLN)

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On 10 December, the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Nihon Hidankyo—a group of organisations representing survivors of the August 1945 nuclear attacks on Japan. Known as hibakusha, these survivors have spent their lives courageously reliving the horror of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, telling their stories to anyone brave and wise enough to listen. Their testimonies are heartbreaking and harrowing. They remind us of the full horror of nuclear weapons at a time when reliance on nuclear deterrence is growing—and with it, the prospect that more states will seek to acquire nuclear weapons, despite the existential danger they pose.

The timing of Nihon Hidankyo's award is significant. Having been nominated and passed over in 1985, 1994, and 2015, the group's win this year should be a wake-up call to all humanity that nuclear dangers are grave and growing. Hidankyo's win is a chilling comment on the fact that global disarmament leadership currently relies on the efforts of civil society, including an inspiring but diminishing group of elderly atomic bomb survivors in Japan. This is extremely disturbing given that the potential for a conventional conflict to escalate into a nuclear war is widely acknowledged to be growing.

Now more than ever, we need courageous disarmament leadership from the leaders of the nuclear-armed states, who have the power to prevent nuclear war and steer us towards a safer world. That leadership has all but collapsed in recent years, as the international security environment has deteriorated and governments have increasingly looked to nuclear weapons to provide security. The expanding list of missteps is frightening: nuclear weapons programs are expanding; nuclear arsenals are growing and becoming more potent; the nuclear testing moratorium is wavering; military technologies, doctrines, and postures are changing in ways that make the use of nuclear weapons in conflict more likely. With the world's nuclear-armed states leading the

charge, disarmament leadership is being abandoned, and we are racing backwards, blind-folded, into a world of extreme, existential risk.

This crisis in global disarmament leadership goes much deeper than many experts and commentators are willing to admit. Beyond the usual suspects, leaders of states that do not possess nuclear weapons are actively contributing to the problem. Some are openly reneging on their non-nuclear commitments in full knowledge of the damage it will inflict on the nuclear non-proliferation regime. Others are raising the prospect of developing indigenous nuclear weapons capabilities as if they are a cure-all for insecurity, without acknowledging the wider proliferation consequences. Still others are treating nuclear deterrence as if it is a “necessary evil” that cannot or should not be challenged or even questioned. Many of these leaders are complicit in the rapid global backsliding on non-proliferation, arms control, and disarmament, helping to feed the permissive environment that is holding us all hostage to nuclear catastrophe.

In contrast, the hibakusha, now old and frail and with limited means, continue to step up, motivated by a shared mission to spare others the terror, suffering, and injustice inflicted upon them and their cities in August 1945. They are survivors of the most extreme and excessive violence humanity is capable of inflicting—violence that has grown exponentially in the intervening 80 years. Their experiences could have left them bitter, frozen in fear, and feeling hopeless about the future of humanity. Instead, they have recognised the power of the human spirit to bring light into the shadows, even against the greatest odds.

As the members of Nihon Hidankyo know and advocate, we can create a safer world if we work together, but we cannot continue to rely on nuclear weapons to help us do that. Depending on these weapons for our security is an extremely high-risk strategy, reliant on accurate information and rational decision-making. Yet time and again (often suddenly and unexpectedly), political leaders engage in rash, self-interested, destabilising, and even delusional behaviour. Added to this, artificial intelligence is impacting decision-making in ways that are not fully understood and constantly evolving. These sobering realities should lead us to conclude that there are no safe hands for nuclear weapons in today’s world—if there ever were.

Like the hibakusha, we need to have our eyes wide open to the full horror of nuclear use. Like them, we should all be demanding genuine, sustained disarmament leadership from those who have the greatest power to reduce and eventually eliminate nuclear dangers.

In 2025, the world urgently needs a new, high-level disarmament and security initiative that is led by political leaders and inspired by the spirit of the hibakusha, embracing courage, tenacity, and transparency, and wholly devoted to creating a world without nuclear weapons.

Who will be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2025 and beyond? Political leaders, it is time to step up.

*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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