



ASIA-PACIFIC LEADERSHIP NETWORK

HOW TO MANAGE EXISTENTIAL RISK IN THE AGE OF TRUMP

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Coinciding as it is with what are arguably the [most consequential decades](#) for the future of humanity – it’s worth asking: what does Trump’s historic comeback portend for [existential risk](#)? While it might feel like an age, we’re only one month into Trump: the sequel. Like any reality entertainment show worth its salt, season two has opted for a repeat of the original, only dialled up to 11 and with a new cast with fewer inhibitions that spell trouble for the world’s ability to tackle the greatest challenges of our time. That is, those things like pandemics, climate change, and nuclear exchange that could conceivably irreparably destroy civilisation or render humans extinct. These are, by definition, global issues – but they have particular salience in the Asia-Pacific region.

At a rally following Trump’s second inauguration, Elon Musk boasted that his victory was “a fork in the road of human civilisation.” Considering the adverse impacts that are already becoming clear from Trump’s actions this could be the darkest of ironies. Just look at the President’s swathe of executive orders. His [snap decision](#) to pause billions in USAID funding and dismantle the agency – leaving aside the [devastating impact](#) on the lives of the world’s most vulnerable – greatly reduces the ability of organisations and initiatives working on issues pertaining to existential risks.

Or take the multilateral Pandemic Fund, for example, which invests in the capacity of low- and middle-income countries to strengthen global pandemic prevention, preparedness, and response. According to its [inaugural progress report](#), the Fund represents “a commitment to collective action to address one of the greatest existential threats to humanity.” Yet Trump’s executive order pulls the plug on [almost a third](#) of its funding (US\$700m), just as his decision to exit the World Health Organization [undermines](#) vital global coordination mechanisms. Being the Fund’s largest donor (and WHO’s [largest contributor](#)), a US retreat jeopardises [projects planned](#) in Cambodia, Fiji, Indonesia, Mongolia, Philippines and Samoa, among others. And as UN Secretary-General António Guterres [has said](#): “we are only as strong as the weakest health system in our interconnected world.”

Trump's (second) withdrawal from the Paris Agreement will likewise hamper collective action on climate at a time when it has [never been more urgent](#). You'd think that watching parts of America's second largest city burn for weeks [in the middle of winter](#) would give some pause. It did for most Americans, with 65% of respondents to a [YouGov poll](#) attributing the fires to climate change. And that's not to mention the material cost, with some estimates putting it as the [most expensive US natural disaster](#) ever. But Trump, true to form, decided instead to gaslight, [baselessly claiming](#) that California's environmental policies were to blame. While his promise to "drill, baby, drill" isn't itself an existential threat globally, it could be for the world's [most climate-vulnerable](#) countries, many of which are in the Asia-Pacific. The decision also gives cover to other governments looking to scale back their own ambition, which in the long run could well be [globally catastrophic](#).

Nuclear unpredictability

The President's unpredictability – which Zack Cooper calls "[a feature rather than a bug of Trump's approach to foreign policy](#)" – is especially concerning when looking at an issue as consequential as nuclear weapons. Trump has [explicitly endorsed](#) Richard Nixon's 'madman' approach, stating he wants adversaries to "think maybe we would [use nuclear weapons]." This could be particularly problematic if efforts to end the war in Ukraine break down (along with the erstwhile Trump-Putin bromance), given the Russian President's [penchant](#) for nuclear brinksmanship. Few either could forget Trump's threat that North Koreans would "be met with fire and fury like the world has never seen", and there are [numerous accounts](#) of him questioning why the United States has such weapons if it isn't willing to use them.

Nuclear experts warn that policy proposals from the administration's putative playbook, Project 2025, [lay the groundwork](#) for the United States to reinstate nuclear testing, despite it being technically and militarily unnecessary. This would effectively kill the testing taboo and open the door for nuclear powers including China, India, Pakistan and North Korea to restart or ramp up testing of their own, [accelerating a nuclear arms race](#).

The gutting of the US public service could also adversely impact the maintenance of US nuclear weapons, as well as efforts at non-proliferation. The decision last week to fire [one sixth](#) of National Nuclear Security Administration staff, only to reverse it days later, illustrates a [lack of understanding](#) on the part of the administration of the critical roles and responsibilities of federal workers who manage existential risks.

Trump's transactional approach to US alliances could also encourage proliferation by pushing countries such as Japan or South Korea (or even Taiwan) to [acquire their own nuclear deterrent](#) if they feel they can no longer rely on the US nuclear umbrella. As one analyst [bluntly puts it](#): "the potential impact of Trump's second term on the global nuclear order is profoundly negative."

Managing existential risks without the United States

Perhaps a less obvious but no less significant impact of Trump on efforts to mitigate existential risk is his aptitude for dominating the media cycle. Mere weeks into his presidency and already countless commentators have expressed exhaustion at covering it. And that's the point – the administration is [taking its cue](#) from [Steve Bannon](#) and “flooding the zone with shit.” This constant flow makes it hard to separate the wheat from the chaff – is it bluster? Is it substance? – and in the end everything makes headlines. The result is that it's even harder to get policymakers – famously preoccupied with short-term electoral and media cycles – to pay attention to existential risk (though there are [notable exceptions](#)).

But the perception that these are long-term risks that are improbable and/or futuristic is a [false dichotomy](#); they are already with us. That should be cause for concern, but it also provides impetus for action – none of them are, fortunately, *fais accompli*. There are proactive steps that governments can take to mitigate against them, [however modest](#).

Regional middle powers like Australia, Japan, South Korea and others should, for example, seize the opportunity of the US retreat to [work together](#) and step up on global health. Ditto on climate – inaction isn't an option and there is scope for paradiplomacy to [support US states](#) to lead on American climate action, as happened during Trump's first term. On the nuclear question, given the button ultimately rests on Trump's desk alone there's less relatively that external actors can do. But so long as he maintains an [appreciation](#) of mutually assured destruction, America's friends should continue to reiterate why restraint is [in US interests](#).

As for separating the signal from the noise, policymakers and the public alike would do well to remember to pay attention to what he does rather than what he says. Much of what comes out of the Oval Office is a deliberate [strategy to overwhelm](#); chaos masquerading as command. On issues as consequential as existential risk we can't afford such distractions.

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ABOUT APLN

The **Asia-Pacific Leadership Network (APLN)** is a Seoul-based organization 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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