



ASIA-PACIFIC LEADERSHIP NETWORK

FOR NUCLEAR NON-PROLIFERATION AND DISARMAMENT

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US RESUMPTION OF NUCLEAR TESTING: A DANGEROUS POSSIBILITY

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Policymakers in the Asia-Pacific are already scrambling to keep up with the impacts of the new Donald Trump administration in the US — from tariff disputes to cuts in critical foreign aid. Now, a more serious crisis lurks around the corner: the possibility of the United States resuming nuclear testing.

If Washington breaks its 30-year moratorium on nuclear testing, it will generate significant policy dilemmas for many states in the region. Given their alliances and partnerships with the United States, condemning nuclear testing will take courage and a willingness to face blowback from the Trump administration. However, failing to respond to new nuclear testing is also risky, given the likelihood of negative domestic sentiment. Moreover, a resumption of nuclear testing would deal a profound blow not only to the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), but also the larger nuclear nonproliferation regime, both of which most countries in the region strongly support. In addition, US nuclear testing will open the door to other states, including China, Russia and North Korea, to follow suit.

A real possibility

How likely is it that the United States will resume nuclear testing? Numerous signs indicate that it is a real possibility. During Trump's first term, the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review noted that the United States must remain ready to conduct nuclear tests, and numerous Trump officials advocated a return to nuclear testing, including national security advisers John Bolton and Robert O'Brien. Just last year, O'Brien published an op-ed arguing for US nuclear testing; he was reportedly involved in helping to choose

Trump's current nominee for administrator of the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA), Brandon Williams.

Williams, a former congressman and nuclear submarine officer, lacks the technical physics background typical of past NNSA leaders. However, his appointment may align with a broader push to restart nuclear testing, as many experts within the US nuclear weapons labs oppose such a move and would therefore not be politically palatable. Most experts argue that testing is unnecessary for stockpile safety, and with data from over 1,000 past tests, the United States has a significant advantage over other nuclear weapons states — an advantage that would erode if other states resumed testing as well.

What of Trump's recent calls for nuclear arms control talks with Russia and China? Unfortunately, nothing is likely to come of it, as both Russia and China will be resistant. In fact, Trump may turn to nuclear testing as a show of strength if the two countries formally reject his offer for talks.

More states may follow

Regional political and diplomatic fallout from resumed US nuclear testing would be significant. The global norm against nuclear testing — violated in the past 20 years only by North Korea — would be weakened, making it easier for other states to restart their nuclear tests. As China modernises its nuclear arsenal, access to more test data would be beneficial; consider Beijing's 45 tests compared to Washington's 1,054. Meanwhile, Russia has already indicated it is ready to begin nuclear testing "at any moment." North Korea may also take advantage of the weakening prohibition. While France resuming testing in the Pacific is unlikely, it cannot be ruled out in such an environment. Therefore, not only would the resumption of global nuclear testing heighten strategic tensions, but it would also lead to negative human health and environmental effects in the Asia-Pacific, as even underground testing can contaminate ecosystems.

Severe global impacts on norms, treaties

The impact on the global nuclear nonproliferation regime would also be severe. Resumed nuclear testing would deal a significant blow to the CTBT, which was negotiated in 1996 but never entered into force due to the failure of several key states to ratify it, including China and the United States. The CTBT is already under pressure with Russia's 2023 revocation of its ratification. However, the CTBT is just the tip of the proverbial iceberg.

The larger nuclear nonproliferation regime, made up of dozens of treaties, institutions, informal groupings and norms, already faces tremendous challenges. Review Conferences for the regime's cornerstone treaty, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty

(NPT), failed to produce a consensus document in both 2015 and 2020, and prospects for the next one in 2026 are dim. Growing polarisation within the regime became evident with the 2021 entry into force of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). All nuclear weapons states, and many of their regional allies, argue that the TPNW is unrealistic and undermines the NPT, while TPNW proponents, including many states in the region, contend that it upholds the disarmament commitments of the NPT.

The demise of the CTBT and the global norm against nuclear testing would not take place in an otherwise healthy diplomatic space. Rather, it will further erode and possibly fracture the normative and institutional frameworks that have helped prevent the spread of nuclear weapons for more than 50 years. Given how deeply states in the Asia-Pacific rely on this regime, and the leadership roles that regional states have played in it, this threat is perhaps the greatest of all.

Questions for regional political leadership

Political leadership across the region must take seriously the possibility that the United States may resume nuclear testing, and consider two questions: What influence can we exert, if any, to prevent such an outcome? And if it does occur, how should we respond? A tepid response from Asia-Pacific states could be almost as big a blow to the regime as the resumption of testing itself.

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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