

**ASIA-PACIFIC LEADERSHIP NETWORK**

FOR NUCLEAR NON-PROLIFERATION AND DISARMAMENT

NUCLEAR ARMS CONTROL ARCHITECTURE ON LIFE SUPPORT

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The year 2025 is critical for the life of nuclear disarmament and arms control architecture. Two crucial milestones are fast approaching toward 2026. The New START, the last remaining nuclear arms control treaty between the two largest nuclear possessors, is due to expire on February 5 next year. If the New START expires without a replacement agreement, legally binding limits cease to exist on the US and Russian nuclear arsenals. This will turn the nuclear clock back to the pre-1972 period and likely reopen the nuclear arms race, posing significant risk to global nuclear stability. Unfortunately, however, the prospects for a replacement treaty look bleak in view of current geopolitical tensions in the wake of Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Another crucial milestone is the on-going 2026 NPT review process. The recent two consecutive failures of the NPT review on top of the continuous dismantling of nuclear arms control treaties has already put the nuclear on life support.

Disappointment of NNWS is mounting on a number of fronts including in particular the trend of weakening commitment to disarmament and growing signs of a renewed nuclear arms race on the part of five NWS. This frustration led to the push for another “NPT”, the nuclear prohibition treaty in 2017, officially called the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). This treaty was adopted with the overwhelming support at the United Nations, and entered into force in 2021 with 50 ratifications; now signed by 94 states and ratified or acceded by 73 states. But it has suffered from serious structural deficiency of zero participation by NWS both in and out of the NPT framework as well as umbrella states which depend on the extended deterrence provided by some NWS.

Geopolitical circumstances are both complex and uncertain. Major power rivalry is heating up with the United States-China hegemonic competition at the center. Division between the Global West and East is deepening. Tensions along the geopolitical fault lines between the two camps are building up. Russia’s nuclear threat during the war against Ukraine made the specter of nuclear winter alive.

On top of all these, the return of the Trump presidency significantly compounds the risks. The future of nuclear disarmament and arms control architecture will be put under serious doubt, in view of his well-known disbelief in norm-based arms control and propensity for aggressive deterrence. If the New START expires without a successor agreement nor interim arrangements, it will cast dark shadows on the NPT review process.

Despite these risks, we cannot afford to let the NPT regime, the lynchpin of the nuclear architecture, collapse. Failure is not an option. The NPT collapse will lead the world to greater peril. The Doomsday clock will move even closer to midnight from 89 seconds of this year, the closest ever since the clock started in 1947, even as it keeps breaking the record consecutively for the last seven years. World governments owe tangible action to prevent the NPT from further weakening.

Primary responsibility of the N-5

We should not let the upcoming NPT review fail again to produce an outcome. For that, a ‘business as usual’ approach must be discarded. The biggest onus should be on the five NWS under the NPT called the N-5 (Nuclear Five), coinciding with the P-5 (Permanent Five) at the United Nations Security Council.

First, the NPT review methodology must be revisited. Aiming for a consensus outcome document as before is likelier to fail to produce an outcome. A third consecutive failure will seriously weaken the integrity of the NPT and a sense of defeatism will begin to prevail on NNWS. Diminished trust in the NPT runs the risk of encouraging potential proliferators to break out. The NPT parties must redefine the methodology in a way to allow the views of a large majority of parties to be recorded on the outcome document alongside with the minority views on important issue areas. This way will allow the parties to continue to work on narrowing down the differences in-between the review conferences.

Secondly, the N-5 must come up with a package of tangible steps that can be viewed as meaningful and credible by NNWS. A recent [statement](#) by the Euro-Atlantic Security Leadership Group (EASLG), has suggested three steps for reversing the slide to nuclear war: to prevent a return to explosive nuclear testing and strengthen existing testing moratoria; to advance nuclear fail-safe measures in all nuclear-armed states; and to affirm and strengthen fundamental principles governing the use of outer space.

These steps may be short of the NNWS expectation level for disarmament. But they will be meaningful for confidence building, transparency and risk reduction. The N-5 can reaffirm their commitment to take these steps, unilaterally or together. This way will allow the N-5 to be more flexible in writing down points of convergence. Of course, the N-5 will be most welcome to come up with any other meaningful steps.

Given the growing political division among the N-5, however, it will be an uphill task to engineer any steps that all N-5 can agree on. The other N-3, China, the United Kingdom and France, must step up to fill the void in nuclear disarmament and arms control left by the United States and Russia.

Thirdly, China must be more proactive as the current Chair of the N-5. Persuading the two nuclear giants will be a huge challenge, but it can be a good opportunity for China to show its leadership on the nuclear front, which can then spill over to the other issue areas of multilateralism. It is also in the strategic interests of China to preserve the NPT to prevent a nuclear domino in East Asia. It would be a strategic nightmare for China if South Korea, Japan and even Taiwan are tempted to go nuclear in the face of growing strategic instability and the perceived nuclear threats spiking in the region. China can work more closely with the United Kingdom and France to come up with a N-5 statement upgraded from the last version of 2022 containing meaningful confidence-building and transparency steps as well as some indication of future disarmament efforts.

Umbrella states as a bridge

Umbrella states are often caught between their reliance on the allies' nuclear umbrella and their commitment to non-proliferation and disarmament under the NPT. In view of the growing division of the NPT parties, umbrella states can play a bridging role between NWS and non-umbrella NNWS including in particular the TPNW states parties. The umbrella states in Europe and Asia-Pacific stand at the geopolitical fault lines between the Global West and East. They will be the first and foremost victim if the NPT collapses. The NPT collapse coupled with the weakening credibility of the nuclear umbrella will make many of them face enormous domestic pressure for developing their own nuclear weapons. In a larger sense, umbrella states have highest stakes in preserving the NPT bargain of nuclear non-proliferation in return for disarmament. Therefore they share the same strategic interest and incentive in coordinating their roles with the division of labor to facilitate greater engagement of NWS and NNWS in the lead-up to the 2026 NPT review outcome.

Way forward: global common journey to avert nuclear peril

The nuclear architecture is currently on life support. 2026 will be an inflection point to determine its future. Time is running out to avoid the worst. Our action must start from preserving the NPT. The N-5 must live up to its primary responsibility and come up with a credible package of confidence-building and transparency steps as well as, hopefully, some elements for nuclear disarmament.

Depending on the actions taken by world governments or lack of them, humanity will head to nuclear peace or peril. The global intellectual and civil society cannot sit idle, leaving this critical journey solely to the hands of political leaders in charge of governments. Intellectual leaders across national borders must help government leaders

find and expand common ground. Civil society leaders must gather their voices and create political pressure points to make government leaders heed. Humanity must work as one in our common journey to avert nuclear peril. We owe our joint efforts to our succeeding generations.

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.

This commentary is also published on the [APLN website](#).

ABOUT APLN

The **Asia-Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament (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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