



The Korea Times

ASIA-PACIFIC REGION KEY TO RETHINKING NUCLEAR DETERRENCE

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24 July 2025

Eighty years after the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the world is confronted with a clear and present nuclear danger. What should have been decades of the gradual and systematic dismantling of nuclear weapons, as promised by the nonproliferation treaty, have instead culminated in far more entrenched dogmas of nuclear deterrence and coercion.

International conflicts have erupted at an alarming pace, with rising confrontations involving nuclear armed states. At the same time, the political and diplomatic willingness of nuclear powers and their strategic beneficiaries, to engage in dialogues and efforts for nuclear risk reduction and arms control is at an all-time low. From reckless nuclear rhetoric to the suspension of nuclear agreements, the renunciation of treaty obligations, revisions to nuclear doctrines and a growing appetite for nuclear breakout, the strategic scale is increasingly leaning toward nuclear instability.

Many scholars have argued that the present multipolar nuclear order, with its vastly different composition and strategic logic than the Cold War, merits a serious rethinking of nuclear deterrence and of the utility of nuclear arms in maintaining state security. To rethink nuclear deterrence, however, is to also be able to contextualize it to the experiences, domestic politics, historically-developed patterns of conflict and enmity, and the relative economic and technological resources of the actors who possess them, as well as of those who are subjected to the threat of nuclear deterrence. Three interventions could arguably be consequential in reconsidering the traditional principles of nuclear deterrence.

First, we need to focus on how states in the Asia-Pacific region think about nuclear deterrence. At least six of the nine countries currently possessing nuclear weapons have a direct military presence in the region, producing multiple and complex security equations with dyadic and triadic deterrence dynamics, such as those involving the United

States and China in East Asia and the Pacific; India, Pakistan and China in Southern Asia; and the United States, North Korea and China in Northeast Asia.

Add to that the fears of nuclear breakout among the United States' own strategic allies in Asia — South Korea and Japan — as the nuclear armament debate reignites within the domestic politics of these two states, a debate driven mostly by the rapid modernization and expansion of Chinese and North Korean nuclear capabilities and the uncertainty of U.S. assurances of extended nuclear deterrence. The significance of the Asia-Pacific to the 21st century's global nuclear order makes it key to investigating the theoretical, practical and political underpinnings that inform nuclear doctrines, policies, alliance relationships and strategic competition across the region and globally.

Second, there is a need to revisit and question the very vocabulary of nuclear deterrence. For instance, how do we define the use of a nuclear device? Is it simply the first or retaliatory use of a nuclear weapon against an adversary, or do the threats of accidental, unintentional and inadvertent nuclear events carry similar strategic deterrent impacts? Does exposing populations and the environment to the harmful fallouts of nuclear tests, with or without their consent, also meet the definition of use? Does the credibility of deterrence lie merely in the certainty of implementing the nuclear threat or do strategies to avoid deterrence breakdown strengthen the credibility of the nuclear deterrent?

We need to develop a broader and more realistic comprehension of the costs, consequences and implications of nuclear weapons use, to include not only military, political and humanitarian impacts, but also the environmental and ecological costs, economic costs and invisible costs like trauma and multigenerational impacts. This understanding will help the efforts not only for risk reduction but also toward universal nuclear disarmament.

Third, we need to rethink nuclear deterrence more innovatively, using creative tools to point out the theoretical and practical limitations of traditional nuclear deterrence thinking and to offer new lenses that add greater perspective to our nuclear policy discourse. Poetry, literature, art, design and visual media such as films and photography have been powerful tools to question and critique old ideas and to innovate new thinking and practices suitable to the new realities of the modern world.

Sadako Sasaki's origami paper cranes, for instance, have become a global symbol of peace and a call to disarmament, at the same time evoking strong images of extraordinary destruction and suffering from nuclear use. The anti-nuclear activism led by women from the Pacific Islands has offered valuable lessons on how creative forms of communication can become powerful ways to think about contemporary nuclear policies and practices. The literary activism of Teresia Teaiwa or the History Project by Marshallese poet Kathy Jetñil Kijiner, for instance, have exposed not only the cultural loss from nuclear testing but also the gendered impacts of these tests in the Pacific Islands. These creative tools

need to find greater space in our intellectual and policy engagement on rethinking nuclear deterrence.

As we fold paper cranes yet again this year to remember and honor the victims and sufferers of the nuclear weapon, we must acknowledge that the long road to nuclear abolition will have to involve shattering the neat and calculable assumptions of nuclear deterrence and reforming its current vocabulary and doctrines. The Asia-Pacific will, no doubt, be indispensable to this rethinking of nuclear deterrence.

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 was originally published in the [Korea Times](#), and on the [APLN website](#).

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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