ASIA-PACIFIC LEADERSHIP NETWORK
FOR NUCLEAR NON-PROLIFERATION AND DISARMAMENT

80 YEARS SINCE NUCLEAR USE – LOOKING TO THE PAST TO SEE THE FUTURE

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It cannot be said too often that it is only sheer dumb luck that has enabled the world to avoid for 80 years a repeat of the indescribable horrors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Not because nuclear deterrence is a recipe for peace, not because systems are failsafe, not because of wise statesmanship. Just because of our incredibly good fortune in having enough operational-level cool heads in the right place and at the right time to hit the pause, not the launch, button on every one of those multiple occasions over the decades when human error or system error generated false alarms.

The deliberate first use of nuclear weapons cannot be ruled out, despite all the well-known risks involved. It simply cannot be assumed that calm, considered rationality will always prevail in the enormous stress of a real-time crisis. While the Dr Strangelove scenario – a complete madman's finger on the trigger – probably remains more fictional than real, what cannot be ignored is the possibility of an impetuous, ill-informed and unconstrained leader ordering a 'minimal' strike, maybe in misconceived pursuit of an 'escalate to de-escalate' strategy, with all the chance of the situation spiralling out of control that would entail.

That said, the bigger risk remains stumbling into a catastrophe through accident, human error, system error, or sabotage. Mishaps of the kind which occurred, to take just a few Cold War examples, when alarms of incoming missile barrages were triggered in the United States in 1979 by a military exercise tape being mistakenly fed into the live warning system, and twice in 1980 by the failure of a single computer chip, and in the Soviet Union in 1983 by the misreading of sunlight on high-altitude clouds.

And the mishaps and potential miscommunications continue. In the sub-continent, for example, when in 2022 an Indian launch-crew error sent a missile crashing into Pakistani territory with no hotline explanation following, and as recently as May 2025 when, following a terrorist attack, Indian drones went close to triggering a nuclear crisis by attacking a site very close to a key hub in Pakistan's nuclear command and control system. On all these occasions, and many others recently comprehensively documented by the

Federation of American Scientists, Armageddon has been avoided. But how can anyone rationally assume that the world's good luck will be avoided indefinitely?

After a post-Cold War period in which it was possible to dream that the elimination of the most indiscriminately inhumane weapons ever devised might ultimately be achievable, the world is now again awash with nuclear weapons, and states with the capability to build and use them. And perhaps the will, as the longstanding taboo against the aggressive first use of nuclear weapons appears to be weakening – with Russia's President Vladimir Putin in particular talking up this prospect in the Ukraine war in language not heard since the height of the Cold War.

The nine nuclear-armed states possess between them over 12,200 nuclear warheads, with a combined destructive capacity of more than 145,000 Hiroshima bombs. Some 9,000 of these are militarily active or deployed. Alarmingly, some 2,000 US and Russian weapons remain on high alert, ready to be launched within a decision window for each president of four to eight minutes. Every nuclear armed state is now modernising or increasing its arsenal, and all the most relevant arms control treaties are dead, dying or on life support.

The Nuclear Ban Treaty (TPNW) has captured the imagination of every state except those that matter most: the nuclear armed states, and those of their allies and partners who believe themselves sheltering under their umbrella. And the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) is in as fragile a condition as it has ever been, with fears of breakout increasing in Northeast Asia and Europe due to the loss of confidence in Trump's America, and in the Middle East, given the prospect of Iran responding to the humiliation of the assaults by Israel and the United States by finally building a bomb of its own.

In this desolate environment, what can be done by those of us in government or civil society around the world to advance the cause of global zero, or at least nuclear risk reduction? There are no short or easy answers, but to me the enterprise has always had two dimensions – rational and emotional.

The rational arguments for non-reliance on nuclear weapons, either to deter war or in actual warfighting, are strong and persuasive, and must continue to be made by the Asia Pacific Leadership Network and every other civil society organisation that cares, and every half-way decent government that understands the stakes. I have been proud to be associated with two big international commissions in which they have been made at length. The Canberra Commission on the Elimination of Nuclear Weapons, established with a stellar cast in 1996 by the Keating Government in Australia, stated the case with a succinctness much quoted and rarely bettered since: 'So long as any state retains nuclear weapons, others will want them. So long as any nuclear weapons remain anywhere, they are bound one day to be used – if not by design, then by human error, system error, miscalculation or misjudgement. And any such use will be catastrophic for life on this planet as we know it.'

The Australia-Japan sponsored International Commission on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament (ICNND, which I co-chaired in 2010 with former Japanese Foreign Minister Yoriko Kawaguchi), systematically addressed and countered all the familiar arguments made for the utility of nuclear deterrence, in the context not only of rivalry between great and major powers, but also that of smaller states feeling themselves vulnerable to attack without some super-weapon of their own. And it set out a credible multi-stage strategy for getting ultimately to elimination through a step-by-step process of nuclear risk reduction, one of the most crucial elements in which would be a universal doctrinal commitment to No First Use.

But the reality is that while rational arguments are a necessary condition for moving towards a nuclear-weapons free world, they are unlikely to be sufficient. The biggest hurdles to effective nuclear arms control will always be psychological, emotional and political. Nuclear weapons, for all the immense risks associated with their possession, seem to be an irresistible source of comfort to governments and publics feeling a sense of vulnerability. And for most, if not all, of the present nuclear armed states, the testosterone factor – considerations of status, prestige, and nuclear bragging rights – continue to be in play.

Somehow, we need to capture, or recapture, among policymakers and publics, a sense of total revulsion at the indefensible horror associated with any use, deliberate or inadvertent, of these weapons: the emotion I certainly experienced, with a force that has stayed with me for six decades, when I first visited the Hiroshima bomb site in 1964. Grass roots movements are struggling for traction. The Global Zero-sponsored film Countdown to Zero, produced by the team responsible for Al Gore's An Inconvenient Truth and hoping for the same global impact, disappeared almost without trace. And the Oppenheimer movie, which many of us had hoped would be a circuit breaker, showed us the Hiroshima bang, but none of the gruesome reality of the scores of thousands of men, women and children, who were vaporised, crushed, baked, boiled or irradiated to death by its impact. Sometimes I fear that the world will be shocked into action only if, God help us, a nuclear catastrophe actually occurs.

Every political leader who visits the Hiroshima Peace Park Museum seems to come away with the same traumatised sense of urgency that I experienced as a young student 60 years ago. I have long been part of a group led by the Prefecture Governor Hidehiko Yuzaki, whose aims include encouraging many more global political leaders to have that experience. As he was recently quoted in an Atlantic magazine interview, 'humanity is now risking something even more terrible than what happened here. Hiroshima is not the past. It's the present.'

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 (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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