

**ASIA-PACIFIC LEADERSHIP NETWORK**

FOR NUCLEAR NON-PROLIFERATION AND DISARMAMENT

DISARMAMENT IN RETREAT: CAN THE NPT SURVIVE A PROLONGED DISARMAMENT DROUGHT?

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The endurance of the global nuclear non-proliferation regime hinges on a foundational bargain: nuclear-weapon states (NWS) commit to disarmament, and non-nuclear-weapon states (NNWS) refrain from acquiring such weapons. But this compact, enshrined in the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) since 1968, is now under severe strain, hopefully not terminal. Trust is wearing thin among many states, especially across Latin America, Asia and Africa, as nuclear powers modernise their arsenals while totally ignoring their disarmament obligations. At the heart of this incredulity lies an unsustainable oxymoron: Nuclear weapon states impudently insist on non-nuclear parties of NPT strictly complying with their side of the bargain, while reserving for themselves the practice of non-compliance by expanding and modernising their nuclear arsenals in clear contravention of the spirit, if not the letter, of the disarmament provisions of the Treaty.

The disarmament drought

Article VI of the NPT and the bargain struck at the 1995 Conference to permanently extend the Treaty obligate NWS to pursue disarmament ‘in good faith.’ But decades of inaction have rendered that promise hollow. As nuclear powers continue to proliferate vertically, the NNWS are left exposed, questioning the utility of their restraint under an inherently unequal system.

The 2017 Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), backed by over 120 countries, was a direct response to this disillusionment. Although dismissed by nuclear powers, the TPNW reflected a principled world-wide rejection of a system that indefinitely defers disarmament.

My own personal experience as a delegate to decades of multilateral negotiations is a living testimony to this impasse. The Conference on Disarmament (CD) in Geneva, ostensibly the sole multilateral forum for such talks, has failed to negotiate even a single

word on nuclear disarmament in decades—blocked repeatedly by nuclear states abusing the consensus rule as a veto mechanism.

Compact being unravelled?

The continued refusal of NWS to address disarmament doesn't just undermine diplomacy—it emboldens arms races and nuclear brinkmanship. Nuclear tensions in global flashpoints—the Korean Peninsula, the Middle East, South Asia, and even Europe—are intensifying. Yet, nuclear-armed states show no real interest in even initiating ‘talks on talks’ on arms control, let alone disarmament. At the 2022 Review Conference, the norm-setters of the NPT – the NNWS – condemned this brazen neglect, and the conference ended in failure.

The conundrum is expected to deepen and widen further after the United States (an NPT depository state), in alliance with Israel (an NPT-evading state with a covert nuclear arsenal), bombed Iran (a hitherto treaty-compliant state) - which continues to remain under IAEA oversight and is still willing to subject its sovereign right to develop nuclear capability to an internationally negotiated arrangement. This reckless militarisation of a diplomatic task could persuade Iran that the actual acquisition of the bomb rather than a negotiated framework, is the only credible deterrent against such foreign aggression.

The last arms control treaty between the United States and Russia – New START – expires in 2026 with no successor in sight. For the first time in decades, the world’s two largest nuclear powers may soon be operating without any mutual restraints.

Nuclear threats are no longer hypothetical. They have been invoked directly or indirectly. Once taboo, nuclear rhetoric is now embedded in conflict narratives. The implicit message to other nations is that nuclear weapons confer protection. That is a chilling precedent.

All is not lost though?

Nuclear disarmament is unlikely to happen amid deepening geopolitical shifts and rivalries in a fluid multipolar world. But meaningful steps are still achievable to sustain what is now an increasingly tenuous non-proliferation and arms control bargain.

A constructive binary is needed: reinforce non-proliferation through diplomatic, not military means, while initiating gradual but visible disarmament efforts.

Key actions include:

- Ratifying the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) by holdout states;
- Negotiating a Fissile Material Treaty (FMT) to regulate weapon-usable material;
- Reducing alert levels and resisting the potential automation of nuclear command through AI in order to prevent accidents and miscalculations;

- Establishing nuclear risk-reduction dialogues and confidence-building measures, including a deep review of the nexus between the doctrine of nuclear deterrence and proliferation.

These are pragmatic trust-building measures. They are technically feasible, institutionally supported by existing verification regimes, and would demonstrate genuine intent while helping to restore credibility to a treaty regime under siege.

The NPT was never simply about halting the spread of nuclear weapons — it was a geopolitical contract based on mutual obligations. Though imperfect, this arrangement helped prevent widespread proliferation for over half a century.

Crucially, nuclear-armed states must stop acting as if Article VI of NPT did not exist. Initiating disarmament ‘talks’ does not equate to full disarmament overnight—but refusing to even begin is indefensible.

The next NPT Review Conference in 2026 can be an inflection point. A repeat of the 2022 failure would severely damage the treaty regime, triggering new proliferation waves, nuclear hedging, and increasing the risks of conflict miscalculation.

Efforts towards disarmament are not a moral favour. They are a binding legal obligation and the foundation of a longstanding global consensus against the world’s most destructive weapons. Failure to honour that commitment risks the collapse of the very system that has, however imperfectly, held the nuclear line for over fifty years.

Without real movement on that front, the world may soon find that non-proliferation can no longer survive the ongoing disarmament drought.

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](#).

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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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