

**ASIA-PACIFIC LEADERSHIP NETWORK**

FOR NUCLEAR NON-PROLIFERATION AND DISARMAMENT

WIDENING GULF: NUCLEAR DETERRENCE VERSUS NUCLEAR DISARMAMENT

Ristian Atriandi Supriyanto, Lecturer with the Department of International Relations, Universitas Indonesia (IRUI)

26 August 2025

The non-use of a nuclear weapon in the last eighty years should not delude us into thinking that these weapons are already obsolete. Despite calls for global disarmament, and the more recent international efforts to ban the nuclear weapon, proponents of nuclear deterrence still hold sway – they might even argue that the non-use is *prima facie* evidence of deterrence success. Eighty years on, the gulf between the disarmament and deterrence camps has, therefore, widened. The growing divide persists even though both sides claim to share the common goal of global stability.

However morally objectionable nuclear weapons may be, the fact remains that they are still here – and are unlikely to disappear anytime soon. The number of nuclear-armed countries has almost doubled since the Cold War, and many are expanding and modernising their arsenals. This is not necessarily because states do not abhor nuclear weapons. Rather, it stems from a chronic trust deficit caused by a multitude of factors, including geopolitics. For the global disarmament agenda to find any credibility among the nuclear-weapon states (NWS), it must first acknowledge and directly address this fundamental lack of trust.

First, disarmament talks cannot resolve legacy geopolitical problems, which have persisted long after – and some even predated – the Cold War. From Europe to the Indo-Pacific, unresolved conflicts in places like Ukraine and Taiwan continue to threaten global stability and carry nuclear risks. Consider the unsettling counterfactual: would Russia have dared to invade Ukraine had the latter kept its nuclear arsenal? While we can never know the answer, the mere possibility would have complicated Russia's strategic and military planning. This is, however, no proof that nuclear weapons would have guaranteed Ukraine's security from a full-scale invasion. Moscow would have invaded anyway, perhaps in a more circumscribed manner. But this uncertainty is precisely the point which gives Ukraine and other vulnerable nations serious pause about the wisdom of disarmament.

By the same token, would a military conflict over Taiwan between the United States and China remain strictly conventional? The stakes are dangerously asymmetric. For

Beijing, Taiwan is a core national interest, and its loss would profoundly harm the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) legitimacy. For Washington, however, the loss would be a foreign policy setback for an administration that can simply be voted out of office. This is not to say Washington would surrender Taiwan without a fight once Beijing invaded and enforced the so-called "reunification". This raises a critical question: how far would China's leaders go to take Taiwan and preserve the CCP's grip on power? Given the imbalance of political will, assuming such a conflict would not escalate to the nuclear level is a risky proposition.

Second, cascading from the first, nuclear deterrence offers a (false) sense of security from military escalation and aggression. While nuclear weapons have not stopped conventional wars over the last eighty years, some believe their inherent ambiguity helps limit escalation. For example, compare and contrast the recent Iran-Israel conflict with North Korea. Would Israel and the United States have attacked Iran had Tehran, like Pyongyang, left the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and become an NWS? Would a nuclear-armed Iran have retaliated with atomic weapons? While these hypotheticals are impossible to answer, the contrast presents a stark and unsettling reality: a non-nuclear Iran was attacked for its transgressions, while a nuclear-armed North Korea has not been. This suggests that nuclear weapons do not prevent wars, but they can change the calculus of aggression in unpredictable ways.

Third, declaratory measures by NWS to limit or rule out the use of nuclear weapons suffer from a severe credibility problem. Neither China's '[no-first-use](#)' nor the United States' 'sole-purpose' policies is mutually reassuring, and both are deemed insincere at best. Even NWS participation in nuclear-weapon-free zones (NWFZ) has not engendered complete confidence from all Non-NWS. China's offer to join the Southeast Asian NWFZ, for example, is preconditioned on zonal states recognising its maritime claims in the South China Sea. This linkage [partly](#) explains why countries with maritime or territorial boundary disputes with China, such as the Philippines, disregard the offer as a disingenuous tactic rather than a genuine security guarantee.

Fourth, the lines between conventional and nuclear deterrence are blurring, largely due to artificial intelligence (AI) and unmanned systems. AI risks lowering the threshold of nuclear use by delegating critical decisions from human to machines. An AI-enabled [early warning system](#), for instance, could pre-select nuclear retaliation as a default response to an alert, short-circuiting human judgment in a crisis. Furthermore, dual-use technologies like drones could be used to compromise or hunt an opponent's nuclear deterrent, such as their ballistic missile submarines. In the long run, decreasing survivability of nuclear weapons and delivery systems may ironically tempt countries to pour more, not fewer, resources into developing countermeasures.

The widening gulf between the nuclear deterrence and disarmament camps highlights the importance of a broader conversation – one that confronts not only the horror of nuclear weapons but also the inherent perils of deterrence strategy itself. Sadly, the

current debate seems like a dialogue of the deaf. The deterrence camp often dismisses abolitionists as naïve, while disarmament activists accuse deterrence advocates of fuelling paranoia and risking Armageddon. The irony is that both sides are motivated by the same goal: preventing nuclear war to maintain global stability. Moving forward, we must escape the rigid “deterrence versus disarmament” framework. The only way to achieve our shared goal of global stability is to bridge this gap, respecting the merits of each argument and forging a more integrated approach to nuclear security.

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.



@APLNofficial



@APLNofficial



apln.network