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2026 SIGNALS CRITICAL MOMENT TO PRESERVE NUCLEAR ORDER

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As we begin 2026, the global community must face the reality that the nuclear order is under extreme pressure. With the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty's (NPT) Review Conference (RevCon) only months away, what steps can countries take to bolster nonproliferation and reduce nuclear dangers?

Looking back to 2025, several developments challenged the treaty's resilience. In January, North Korean leader Kim Jong-un declared 2025 a "crucial year" for its nuclear forces, and by November, satellite imagery revealed extensive modernization at the Yongbyon nuclear site, including what is likely a new uranium enrichment facility. Unveiling its newest and most advanced intercontinental ballistic missile, the Hwasong-20, during its Oct. 11 military parade, Pyongyang showcased its determination to expand its nuclear capabilities.

Meanwhile, diplomatic engagement by major global powers to pursue denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula waned significantly. For the first time, the United States made no mention of North Korean denuclearization in its 2025 National Security Strategy. China quietly dropped wording about denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula in its latest white paper on arms control, disarmament and nonproliferation, released in November. And back in September 2024, Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov declared North Korean denuclearization a "closed issue."

In May 2025, India and Pakistan — two nuclear-armed neighbors — engaged in their most intense fighting in decades. The four-day conflict, triggered by a terrorist attack in Pahalgam that killed 26 civilians, saw missile and drone strikes conducted deep in each country's territory for the first time since 1971. U.S. intervention was required to help broker a fragile ceasefire. This conflict showed that nuclear deterrence cannot prevent miscalculation and military escalation between nuclear powers.

The following month, the world witnessed Israel and the U.S. conducting strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities at Natanz, Fordow and Isfahan. While the Pentagon claimed that the strikes set Iran's enrichment program back by one to two years, the International Atomic Energy Agency's director-general warned that the strikes risked collapsing global nonproliferation efforts by potentially hardening Tehran's resolve to move towards nuclear weaponization.

In October, President Trump announced that the United States would resume nuclear testing, ending a decades-long moratorium. While officials later clarified that this would not involve nuclear explosions right away, the announcement caused confusion and disquiet around the world, with worries that a return to testing will trigger reciprocal moves by other nuclear-armed states.

These developments have added pressure to the fragile global nuclear order as the 11th NPT RevCon, scheduled for April 27 to May 22 in New York, approaches. The lead-up has not inspired confidence, with the third preparatory session in 2025 failing to produce consensus recommendations, and the 2015 and 2020 conferences both ending without agreed consensus outcome documents — a critical measure of success. The NPT remains the only legally binding global framework obligating nuclear-armed states to pursue disarmament while providing the basis for safeguards that have prevented states from acquiring nuclear weapons. Giving up is not an option.

Three priorities should guide the Asia-Pacific's approach to the 2026 RevCon.

First, states must tackle the crisis of confidence in the treaty's disarmament pillar. Non-nuclear states cannot take their nuclear-armed counterparts' Article VI disarmament commitments seriously when nuclear arsenals are being modernized and expanded, and thresholds for use are being lowered. NPT states that parties cannot bear this cognitive dissonance indefinitely. Nuclear states must show sincere and concrete commitments to risk-reduction measures, including conducting nuclear fail-safe reviews, dialogues on strategic stability, exploring the adoption of "No First Use" policies and steps towards de-alerting, which refers to the removal of nuclear weapons from high alert status.

Second, nuclear-weapon-free zones (NWFZ) should be reaffirmed at the RevCon as a means to strengthen nonproliferation. NWFZs cover major parts of both hemispheres, yet their potential remains underutilized. China's recent arms control white paper notably omitted any specific references to supporting a Korean Peninsula "nuclear-free zone" or "denuclearization," marking a departure from prior versions that raises questions about Beijing's long-term commitment to a nuclear-free Northeast Asia. Meanwhile, none of the five nuclear states have ratified all relevant NWFZ protocols. RevCon should press those states to honor their negative security assurances and explore how NWFZs might contribute to stability in regions where they do not yet exist.

Third, countries in the Asia-Pacific must show that they collectively and individually value the NPT and pressure nuclear states to show the same commitment. Vietnam's

Ambassador Do Hung Viet will preside as president of the 2026 NPT RevCon, a welcome recognition of the region's importance. Countries across the region have a common interest in preventing proliferation and reducing nuclear risks, and should coordinate on positions that can carry weight in New York.

Whether the events of 2025 mark the beginning of accelerating disorder or serve as a wake-up call that prompts renewed commitment to the NPT depends on choices made in the months ahead. The NPT Review Conference provides an opportunity for the international community to work together to manage worsening nuclear dangers. The stakes could not be higher.

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.

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ABOUT APLN

The **Asia-Pacific Leadership (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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