



APLN QUARTERLY NUCLEAR MEMO

Inaugural issue

As part of APLN's 2026-2030 Research Strategy, we are delighted to launch a new publication -- **APLN Quarterly Nuclear Memo**. The document tracks, analyses and summarises nuclear developments shaping the Asia-Pacific security environment. These are grouped into four categories: **Disruptive** (developments posing acute or immediate risks to the nuclear order and regional stability), **Stabilising** (steps that reduce risk or build confidence), **Worrisome** (trends that, if unchecked, could worsen the nuclear order), and **Dialogue-based** (activities that involve two or more interlocutors). This inaugural issue covers January to April 2026; future editions will follow a standard quarterly cycle.

Disruptive Nuclear Developments

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- Military Strikes on Nuclear Facilities
- Extensive Use of Coercive Nuclear Signalling

Stabilising Nuclear Developments

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- Celebration of UN International Day for Disarmament
- Preparations for NPT Review Conference



Disruptive Nuclear Developments

- **Expiry of New START**

On 4 February 2026, the New Start treaty expired. For the first time since the 1970s, there are no mutually accepted restrictions on nuclear weapons of the United States and Russia. The collapse of the bilateral arms control architecture removes transparency and verification mechanisms that have underpinned strategic stability for decades and raises the prospect of unconstrained competition between the two largest nuclear arsenals.

China's ongoing nuclear expansion, therefore, faces no pressures from any existing arms control template. The unfettered growth of the Chinese nuclear capability could bring nuclear arms racing into the region. Its force structure and force posture decisions would impact extended deterrence commitments to allies in Northeast Asia and the broader regional balance in Southern Asia.

- **Military Strikes on Nuclear Facilities**

On 28 February 2026, the United States and Israel launched Operation Epic Fury, a comprehensive military operation targeting Iranian military and nuclear sites, including the uranium enrichment facility in Natanz, Esfahan Province. The strikes came just one day after Oman's foreign minister reported a diplomatic breakthrough in which Iran had agreed to halt uranium stockpiling, permit comprehensive IAEA inspections, and permanently reduce the quantity of its current enriched material to the "lowest level possible".

Technical talks between the IAEA and Iran scheduled in Vienna during the week of 2 March were overtaken by events. On 3 March, additional strikes targeted a facility in Minzadehei, which Israeli authorities alleged was housing scientists working on a critical aspect of nuclear weaponry.

The IAEA has stated that complete verification of Iran's nuclear material is unattainable without further cooperation. The broader West Asia conflict has seen repeated attacks on or near nuclear facilities including around the Bushehr nuclear power plant and reported Iranian missile strikes on the Israeli Dimona nuclear site.

For the Asia-Pacific, these developments carry significant implications: they set a precedent for military action against nuclear infrastructure that could influence calculations in Northeast Asia; they complicate non-proliferation diplomacy at a moment when the NPT Review Conference is imminent; and they may affect the hedging calculations of states in the region that have considered indigenous enrichment capabilities.

- **Extensive use of Coercive Nuclear Signalling**

The period has also been marked by the use of exceptionally harsh and threatening language by a nuclear weapon state. The normalisation of signaling through such brinkmanship rhetoric creates a precedent that can make such actions more permissive within the global nuclear order.

This is a particularly alarming development for the Asia-Pacific that houses seven of the nine nuclear armed states which are troubled by unresolved territorial disputes. Routine nuclear threat-making through casual rhetoric and adoption of risky strategies of ambiguity would heighten risks of nuclear escalation



Stabilising Nuclear Developments

- **Continuation of Commitment to India-Pak Non-Attack Agreement**

On 1 January 2026, India and Pakistan exchanged lists of their civilian nuclear facilities, continuing an unbroken tradition since 1992 under the bilateral agreement of non-attack of each other's nuclear facilities. In a period of heightened global nuclear risk, the continued functioning of this confidence-building measure between two nuclear-armed rivals is a stabilising signal, and a reminder that even modest bilateral mechanisms can endure when institutionalised.

- **Southeast Asian SMR Momentum**

On 14 March 2026, GE Vernova and Hitachi, Ltd. signed a memorandum of understanding to explore joint ventures for the deployment of small modular reactors (SMRs) across Southeast Asia, including expanding the regional supply chain through Japanese vendors. While the growing interest in nuclear energy in Southeast Asia as part of climate change mitigation measures is a beneficial development, its intersection with the non-proliferation regime will need to be closely monitored.



Worrisome Nuclear Developments

- **Continued Risks to Nuclear Reactors in Ukraine**

The persistence of conflict-related nuclear risks to the safety and security of nuclear facilities in Ukraine have remained acute. In March, the temporary disconnection of the main power line to the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant forced reliance on a backup line, underscoring the plant's limited and unstable off-site power options. Similar vulnerabilities were observed at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant too, where attacks on electrical substations led to grid disruptions and the activation of emergency diesel generators. Drone sightings near nuclear facilities and repeated damage to energy infrastructure have been reported.

Such incidents continue to set a dangerous precedent for the treatment of nuclear facilities in conflict zones. As new nuclear power programmes are initiated, or existing ones expand in the Asia-Pacific, such behaviour is a matter of concern.

- **North Korea's Unchecked Nuclear Ambitions**

During the 9th Party Congress (19–26 February 2026), North Korean leader Kim Jong Un pledged to “swiftly and consistently modernise” the country's navy by arming both surface and subsurface forces with nuclear weapons. North Korea is focusing on “underwater-launch nuclear strategic weapons” to increase its long-range strike capabilities. On 23 March 2026, Kim Jong Un told the Supreme People's Assembly that North Korea's status as a nuclear-armed state was “irreversible”.

Also, to recall, China's White Paper on arms control, disarmament, and non-proliferation released in November 2025 had, for the first time, excluded any explicit reference to ‘denuclearizing’ the Korean Peninsula.

These declarations cast a shadow on the viability of denuclearisation diplomacy. Meanwhile, Pyongyang's accelerated efforts to build a sea-based nuclear capability have direct implications for ROK and Japanese defence planning, as well as for crisis stability in the waters around the Korean Peninsula.

- **US Accusations of Chinese Nuclear Testing**

At a February meeting at the Conference on Disarmament, the United States publicly accused China of conducting a covert "yield-producing" nuclear testing in 2020, along with efforts to conceal such activities using decoupling techniques to evade seismic detection. The accusations were made amid calls from Washington for a broader arms control framework that would include China alongside the United States and Russia, which Beijing has consistently declined to join.

The allegations, if substantiated, would represent a serious breach of the nuclear testing moratorium and could likely be used to justify resumed US testing. This can be expected to have a cascading effect on the Asia Pacific.

- **France's Nuclear Expansion**

On 2 March 2026, France announced an ambitious plan to increase the number of its nuclear warheads and allow the temporary deployment of its nuclear-armed aircraft to eight European countries. President Macron also introduced the idea of "advanced deterrence", and a deeper, structured nuclear-security relationship with key European partners, distinct from but complementary to NATO's nuclear arrangements.

While geographically distant, this development reinforces the global trend of vertical proliferation and the growing centrality of nuclear weapons to national security strategies. For the Asia-Pacific, it strengthens the rhetorical case made by proponents of nuclear hedging in South Korea and Japan and raises questions about whether similar extended nuclear arrangements could emerge in the Indo-Pacific.

- **US Nuclear Security Regulatory Rollback**

United States announced new rules under a Department of Energy reactor pilot programme that reduces requirements for environmental protection, site security and the physical protection of nuclear materials. Experts have warned that these rollbacks risk weakening long-standing nuclear security standards, especially in areas related to guard training and material protection.

For Asia-Pacific states developing or expanding civil nuclear programmes, US regulatory standards have historically served as a benchmark; any weakening of these standards could have a permissive effect on the global nuclear security regime.



Dialogue-based Nuclear Developments

- **Celebration of UN International Day for Disarmament**

On 5 March 2026, the UN International Day for Disarmament and Non-Proliferation Awareness was celebrated to enhance public awareness and understanding of nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation issues. Situated in the Asia-Pacific, the UN Regional Centre for Peace and Disarmament (UNRCDP) in Asia and the Pacific organised a webinar on increasing military spending across nations.

Such activities draw attention to the destabilising trends and nuclear risks and seek to build momentum for positive actions through mobilisation of public opinion. At a moment when political will for elimination of nuclear risks, leave alone nuclear weapons, is at such a low, marking such days is even more critical.

- **Preparations for NPT Review Conference**

The Eleventh Review Conference of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) is scheduled to open on 27 April 2026 in New York at one of the most challenging moments in the treaty's history. The conference will be a critical test of whether states parties can reach consensus on strengthening the non-proliferation regime. APLN members and partner organisations will be actively engaged in side events and advocacy throughout the review cycle. The outcome of the Conference will have direct and indirect ramifications for the Asia-Pacific as we will discuss in the future issues of this Memo.

Looking Ahead...

Key developments to monitor in the coming quarter include the outcome of the NPT Review Conference and its implications for Asia-Pacific non-proliferation diplomacy; the trajectory of the Iran conflict and resolution of its nuclear issue; further DPRK naval nuclear developments, including possible SLBM testing; the ROK's pursuit of enrichment and reprocessing capabilities, as well as nuclear submarines; AUKUS submarine programme milestones; and movement on trilateral US-Russia-China arms control discussions. We will keep a close watch on these developments and more.

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About APLN Quarterly Nuclear Memo

The APLN Quarterly Nuclear Memo is a cross-cutting initiative of the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network's 2026–2030 Research Strategy. For questions or to suggest developments for future issues, contact the APLN Secretariat at apl@apl.network. We would sincerely appreciate your feedback or suggestions.

APLN'S 2026-2030 RESEARCH STRATEGY

