



ASIA-PACIFIC LEADERSHIP NETWORK

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MORE COORDINATED EFFORTS NEEDED TO REDUCE NUCLEAR WEAPONS

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It was no surprise that the recent Review Conference of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) ended in disarray at the United Nations. The 191 states attending this five-yearly review of a 1968 treaty widely considered one of the world's most important security agreements [failed](#) to make any real progress on its "three pillars" of non-proliferation, disarmament and the peaceful use of nuclear material.

The treaty is in growing danger of unravelling. The four weeks of meetings in New York [failed](#) to reach consensus, and were instead marked by acrimony and a clear divide, with the five nuclear weapon states in the NPT (Russia, Britain, France, China and the U.S.) on one side and the vast majority of members — the non-nuclear weapon states — on the other.

The five nuclear weapon states have promised under Article VI of the NPT to move towards the complete elimination of their arsenals. In return for this promise of disarmament, the non-nuclear weapon states have pledged never to develop nuclear weapons.

Sharp disagreement between the U.S. and Iran was the main sticking point this time, but the overarching reason for the breakdown is the refusal of states with nuclear weapons to keep their end of the bargain. For over 50 years, they have pledged to pursue disarmament and implement [risk-reduction measures](#) promised during the NPT's indefinite extension in 1995, yet their actions increasingly fall short.

Patience among the 186 states that have promised never to acquire nuclear weapons is wearing thin, especially as the nuclear states continue to advance new doctrines and activities that raise rather than reduce the risk of nuclear war.

Details of a series of developments which have damaged the NPT can be found in the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network's recent [report](#). These include the modernization of

arsenals by all nuclear states; the rapid expansion of warheads, most notably in China but also announcements by France and the U.K.; nuclear threats, most prominently by Russia but also by Israel, a state outside the NPT; attacks on nuclear facilities which risk radiation contamination; and the lapse of arms control. With the February expiration of the New START treaty, nothing now constrains Washington and Moscow — which together hold almost 90 percent of the world's nuclear weapons — from building and deploying more.

Added to this is the exception granted to Australia to acquire highly-enriched nuclear material for AUKUS submarines, reinforcing perceptions that the NPT favors Western nuclear states, and proliferation debates in countries such as South Korea and Japan.

But it was the U.S-Israeli attacks against Iran that most damaged the atmosphere of the meeting. No consensus document was reached because Washington insisted that Iran be named non-compliant with the NPT. By contrast, many non-nuclear states regard the nuclear weapon states themselves as failing to meet their NPT obligations. Perceptions of double standards have deepened, particularly given Israel's undeclared nuclear arsenal and non-membership in the NPT, and U.S. intelligence assessments that Tehran had suspended its nuclear program.

No substantive measures for the future were reached, further fueling the discontent among states that have waited decades for progress on disarmament. Many now see the NPT nuclear weapon states — as well as the non-NPT nuclear weapon states of Israel, India, Pakistan and North Korea — as holding the world hostage, driving growing support for the U.N.'s 2017 Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.

Eliminating nuclear weapons is arguably the most important task facing us today. The risk of nuclear war — by accident or design — remains too high, with devastating [humanitarian](#), ecological and climate impacts. Around 12,400 warheads still exist, with a destructive power equivalent to 146,500 Hiroshima-sized bombs.

Melissa Parke of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons notes that "in these uncertain times, some argue that nuclear weapons are the answer to ... security." Far better, she suggests, is to seek security not "[in the shadow of mushroom clouds but by those who believe in dialogue, diplomacy and disarmament.](#)"

If the NPT is to survive in a healthy form, it will require the restoration of trust and reciprocity between all member states. Without a genuine commitment to disarmament and a reversal of the recent changes to their nuclear weapon programs, the nuclear weapon states cannot expect the non-nuclear states to remain in a treaty with those who increasingly ignore their security concerns.

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 Network (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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