



ASIA-PACIFIC LEADERSHIP NETWORK

The Korea Times

SEVEN LESSONS TO ESCAPE A WORLD IN DISORDER

Gareth Evans, former Foreign Minister of Australia

1 July 2026

Our international environment today is as chaotic, disorderly and bleak as any of us can remember. The last decade or more has been a far cry from the cooperation and optimism that generally prevailed in the first two decades after the end of the Cold War.

The litany of what has gone wrong is long. We have seen an erosion of respect, especially by the biggest powers, for international law, multilateral institutions and processes. We have witnessed the waging of aggressive war in Ukraine and Iran, the militarization of the South China Sea, paralysis in the U.N. Security Council and a collapse of development assistance funding. The United States has withdrawn from multiple international agencies, and retreated from the World Trade Organization while adopting trade coercion. There has been a failure of response to mass atrocity crimes, assaults on the International Criminal Court and weakness in collective responses to the great existential threats of climate change, pandemics and nuclear war. Nuclear arms control agreements are either dead, dying or on life support, and no solutions have yet emerged for the new risks associated with artificial intelligence.

One driver of all this has clearly been the absence of effective leadership in too many of the countries that really matter. The digital media age has encouraged dumbed-down populism, making courageous or sophisticated policy responses ever more difficult. And there is a troubling amnesia among policymakers and publics about how military aggression so often ends catastrophically, and how peace and prosperity are best ensured by diplomacy and cooperation, finding security with others, not against them.

But while the current breakdown may seem structural and depressingly complete, I believe there is a chance it may prove temporary if current and future leaders absorb and apply the lessons now crying out to be learned from our recent history. Let me list seven of them.

First, military might does not necessarily guarantee victory or dominance. Russia found that in Ukraine. The United States has learned it again in Iran. Nor does it guarantee one's own security, as Israel has found elevating muscle over diplomacy in Palestine.

Second, nuclear weapons are simply not the assets they are so often assumed to be. They are not usable as weapons of compellence, as Russia has found in Ukraine. And their deterrent utility is wildly overstated, certainly not inhibiting Iran and its proxies attacking Israel. The real threat of nuclear weapons lies not in deliberate aggressive use, but in the ever-present risk of human or system error. The critical need for reenergized risk-reduction efforts is beginning to resonate again.

Third, there is power in competence. Impetuous, irrational, non-evidence-based decision-making, especially to initiate military action, is more likely than not to end in tears. A madman strategy only works if the decision-maker is not actually mad. It is beginning to dawn on the U.S. administration that preserving primacy in the Asia-Pacific is a lost cause, and that a far more intelligent approach than confrontation is the pursuit of Cold War-style detente. The recent Xi-Trump summit language embracing “strategic stability” suggests some movement along this learning curve.

Fourth, there is power in numbers. As Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney's rallying call at the World Economic Forum made clear, the world's middle powers have a real capacity to step up through creative and cohesive coalition-building. After the United States walked away from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the remaining partners recreated it as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership. We have seen, with more to come, collective pushback against tariffs through alternative market access and supply chains, cohesion in the European Union and NATO response to Ukraine, as well as new minilateral security arrangements emerging in our region.

Fifth, there is power in decency. Soft power really does continue to matter. Being and being seen to be a good international citizen, committed to purposes beyond narrow self-interest, including peacemaking, atrocity prevention, humanitarian response and poverty reduction, is in every country's national reputational interest. It increases the chances of effectively addressing collective action problems, including reducing the big existential risks of climate change, pandemics and nuclear war.

Sixth, there is power in honesty. The lesson is beginning to dawn that attacking corruption, or at least excessive capture by big money, may be the most effective way to challenge irresponsible populist leaderships and political movements. That certainly proved the case with the overthrow of Viktor Orbán in Hungary, and may be the best way of spiking the aspirations of his imitators elsewhere.

Finally, there is power in optimism. I have always believed that it is crucial for all of us in government and civil society who want to recreate a better regional and global order to stay optimistic. To never stop believing that change is possible, and working toward that change. Optimism is self-reinforcing, just as pessimism is self-defeating.

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 was originally published in the [Korea Times](#), and on the [APLN website](#).

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.



@APLNofficial



@APLNofficial



apln.network