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NUCLEAR FAULTLINES AND SOUTH KOREA'S CHOICES

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The Korean Peninsula is a particularly risk-prone region in the Asia-Pacific. Locked in a dispute with its southern neighbor since the end of the 1950-53 Korean War, North Korea eventually armed itself with nuclear weapons. Hostility on the peninsula has lingered over the past decades.

Meanwhile, the Asia-Pacific region is steadily accumulating nuclear risks through the spread of nuclear capabilities, the hardening of strategic rivalries and the rising possibility of miscalculations. In other words, what may appear manageable in isolation becomes uncontrollable collectively. The Asia-Pacific region may not be akin to the Europe of 1914 that collapsed under the weight of rigid alliance structures, accelerating arms competition and misplaced confidence that systemic complexity could provide stability.

Nevertheless, the possibility that institutional fragility and the advent of emerging and disruptive technologies could combine to create an increasingly dangerous security environment merits serious consideration. The central question is whether the region's governments and strategic communities will recognize these risks early enough to shape the future proactively, rather than let a future crisis shape it.

For a decade now, security in the Asia-Pacific has been viewed primarily through the lens of the U.S.-China competition. Despite their rivalry, however, both sides have held a common desire for avoiding a catastrophic conflict. While this framework still exists, it is increasingly challenged amid deepening U.S.-China tensions, which some have characterized as the new Cold War.

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), withdrew from the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), developed nuclear weapons, tested increasingly capable delivery systems and articulated a doctrine that permits the

preemptive use of nuclear weapons under defined circumstances. This is no longer a hypothetical proliferation scenario. Instead, it has generated a security dilemma for South Korea and provided a structural impetus for arms competition across the region. Layered onto this are unresolved territorial disputes in the South China Sea and tensions across the Taiwan Strait, where the potential for miscalculation remains ever present. Taken together, these dynamics make the Korean Peninsula one of the most strategically volatile regions in the world.

While artificial intelligence (AI) is generally viewed as a factor of transformative disruption, it may also intensify preexisting vulnerabilities. The advent of AI has fueled concerns about frightful scenarios in which fully autonomous systems could launch unauthorized strikes without a human in the loop. While such scenarios may still belong to the realm of science fiction, a more immediate concern is about the compression of the time available between threat detection and the decision to respond.

As the time available to respond to an incoming missile strike reduces significantly, the space for diplomatic back channels, political deliberation and measured judgments, shrinks steadily. Historically, this decision-making window has assisted in preventing conventional crises from escalating across nuclear thresholds. Now, however, decision-makers will be increasingly compelled to act under intense time pressure.

Recent events in South Asia have amply illustrated this. The military confrontation between India and Pakistan in May 2025 demonstrated how AI-enabled strike systems and drone capabilities can generate escalatory sequences that outpace the political mechanisms designed to contain them. The crisis did not cross the nuclear threshold, owing substantially to Pakistan's deliberate restraint and third-party intervention. Yet these stabilizing factors were far from being structural. In varying circumstances, or with different leaders operating under greater pressure, the outcome could have been starkly different. The Korean Peninsula, with its dense force postures, compressed geography and a nuclear-armed DPRK, offers even narrower margins for error.

What the Asia-Pacific does not lack is analytical awareness of the risks. Think tanks, peer-reviewed scholarship and Track Two dialogues have mapped them with sophistication. What the region still requires however, is the translation of that awareness into institutional and operational practice. This includes, for example, agreed protocols that will still function when automated systems are engaged, communication channels are under stress, decision-makers need to act on incomplete information and decision time keeps shrinking.

For such scenarios, existing frameworks are now inadequate. The Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia has neither the membership nor the mandate to govern the use of military AI in crisis scenarios. Association of Southeast Asian Nations-centered forums are deliberately nonconfrontational by design.

A U.S.-China dialogue on military AI cannot substitute for multilateral engagement in scenarios where South Korea is not a peripheral observer but a central actor.

Meanwhile, the dominant regional discourse remains framed almost entirely around competitive advantage, prioritizing decision superiority, autonomous lethality, sensor-to-shooter speed and related capabilities. In the absence of parallel investment in norms, transparency mechanisms and crisis communication architecture, these developments can increase rather than reduce strategic risk. The competitive deployment of military AI without agreed guardrails does not produce stability. Instead, it becomes a slippery slope towards instability, especially given the DPRK's adamant stance.

South Korea occupies a position of both acute vulnerability and genuine strategic influence. As a state with advanced AI capabilities, deep alliance commitments and an existential stake in regional stability, its interests extend well beyond the bilateral.

If Seoul were to actively promote structured regional dialogue on military AI and nuclear risk, not as an accommodation to the DPRK, but as a sovereign investment in long-term stability, it would carry a degree of credibility and influence that few others could match. This is an argument that deterrence, if it is to remain credible over time, must be embedded within a broader framework of crisis management. Without such a framework, even the most capable deterrence posture would rest on assumptions about human judgment and decision time that the current technological trajectory is steadily eroding.

The emerging dangers will be shaped either by deliberate collective choice, that prioritizes dialogue, norm-building and institutional innovation, or they will impose themselves through crises. This is the moment for South Korea to make a choice and take the lead.

The opinions articulated above represent the views of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network.

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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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