



## NUCLEAR ARMS CONTROL IN CRISIS: TIME FOR ASIA–PACIFIC TO STEP UP

John Carlson and John Tilemann

# About the Authors

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# Introduction

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Since the end of the Cold War, political leaders and the public have become complacent about the danger of nuclear war. While the taboo against the use of nuclear weapons has held, the nuclear-armed states have ignored their moral and legal obligation to pursue nuclear arms reductions and disarmament.[1] They also seem now to deny or ignore the security benefits of effective arms control arrangements.

Instead, new nuclear arms races have started among multiple states. While a small number of key global and regional treaties limiting nuclear weapons-related activities are in place, almost all the treaties with specific arms control measures, which were concluded between the United States and Russia, have expired. The last such treaty, New START, will expire in February 2026 unless swift action is taken.[2]

There is an urgent need for the US and Russia to re-engage on nuclear arms control, and to include China, which has embarked on a major nuclear arms expansion. Arms control also needs to extend to the other nuclear-armed states, notably, in view of ongoing tensions, India and Pakistan.

Arms control is a broad term encompassing a range of measures and activities, aimed at both arms reductions—limits on the types and numbers of nuclear weapons—and risk reductions, that is, measures to reduce the risk of nuclear war. While primarily concerned with offensive capabilities, arms control can also address defensive measures, such as anti-missile defences. Deterrence depends on mutual vulnerability – by counteracting an adversary’s deterrence capability, defensive systems could have a destabilizing effect, increasing the risk of preemptive attack. These considerations led to the ABM Treaty, mentioned below, and demand continued attention particularly if the Golden Dome project proceeds.

The nuclear-armed states will not disarm unless they are confident this can proceed without endangering their national security, that is, that adversaries will not cheat or launch surprise attacks. The overarching objective of arms control agreements and associated arrangements is to establish the conditions which will enable progress to nuclear disarmament.

Risk reduction measures include the following elements, often described as ‘the four D’s’:

- Doctrine – clarifying the circumstances in nuclear weapons might be used. A key objective here is commitment to ‘no first use’, or ‘sole purpose’—that the sole purpose of nuclear weapons is to deter their use by others;
- Deployment – drastically reducing the number of nuclear weapons ready for immediate use;
- De-alerting – taking nuclear weapons off high-alert, launch-on-warning readiness; and
- Decreased numbers – substantially reducing the global stockpile.

Other essential measures include effective communications among the nuclear-armed states, and establishment of transparency, confidence-building and verification arrangements. Developing these agreements and measures will require a return to diplomacy in place of today’s political hyperbole.

This paper documents the framework of agreements and practical arrangements which have hitherto restrained actions of the nuclear powers and suggests actions that could be taken to revitalize and extend nuclear arms controls globally and regionally.

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[1] In its 1996 advisory opinion on the legality of nuclear weapons the International Court of Justice held that the legal obligation to pursue nuclear disarmament applies not only to the NPT nuclear-weapon states pursuant to article VI of that treaty, but to all nuclear-armed states by virtue of international humanitarian law. For a discussion of this issue see John Carlson, “The Legality of Nuclear Weapons – Revisiting the 1996 Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice”, APLN 15 March 2022.

[2] Mr Putin has proposed a one-year informal extension of the New START numerical limits, suggesting this could lead to an arms control dialogue with the US. At the time of writing the US reaction was not known.

# Global treaties

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## THE UN FRAMEWORK

The UN Conference on Disarmament (CD) is the sole multilateral disarmament negotiating forum, recognized by the United Nations General Assembly. The CD played an important role fostering negotiation of the NPT and the CTBT (see below) but has been moribund now for many years. A key issue on its stalled agenda is the negotiation of a Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT), which would ban the production of fissile material for nuclear weapons.

However, the CD does not preclude other negotiating forums—for example the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons was negotiated by a separate and independent UN mandated conference.

## NPT - TREATY ON THE NON-PROLIFERATION OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS 1968

The NPT recognises five nuclear-weapon states (US, Russia, UK, France and China), and requires them to pursue negotiations for cessation of the nuclear arms race and for nuclear disarmament. The treaty prohibits non-nuclear-weapon states from acquiring nuclear weapons, and requires them to accept safeguards inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to verify compliance with this prohibition.

The NPT entered into force in 1970. Having 190 parties, the NPT is almost universal—only five states (four with nuclear weapons) are non-parties (India, Israel, Pakistan, North Korea and South Sudan). The NPT and the IAEA's safeguards system are essential in opposing the spread of nuclear weapons. The Asia-Pacific members of the NPT in particular have been strong supporters of the treaty, convinced of its national security benefits—this despite the major challenge posed by North Korea's proclaimed 2003 withdrawal from the treaty and expulsion of IAEA inspectors.

The NPT is unfairly criticized over the lack of progress on nuclear disarmament. The NPT obligation here (Article VI) is to pursue negotiations in good faith for disarmament, disarmament is to be dealt with through “effective measures” (e.g. further treaties). Lack of progress is the fault of the nuclear-weapon states, not the NPT itself.

What more can supporters of the NPT do? States in a position to influence nuclear-weapon states, especially alliance partners, could be much more active in pressing the nuclear-weapon states to pursue the negotiations mandated by the NPT. The next five yearly NPT Review Conference (the eleventh such conference), to be held in April 2026, is a key timeframe for action.

## CTBT - COMPREHENSIVE NUCLEAR-TEST-BAN TREATY 1996

The CTBT prohibits all nuclear explosions, and provides for an International Monitoring System (IMS) and international inspections.

Asia-Pacific states were very active in the negotiation of the CTBT, with many spurred by the history of nuclear weapons tests in Australia and the Pacific.

The CTBT is not yet formally in force, EIF (entry into force) requires ratification by 44 named states. Eighteen of these states, including seven of the nine nuclear-armed states (US, Russia, China, India, Pakistan, Israel and North Korea) have not ratified. Operational aspects of the treaty, particularly the IMS, have been established in anticipation of EIF.

What more can be done? To achieve the CTBT's EIF, the most important ratification is that of the US - if the US ratifies, other key states will follow. States in a position to do so should be doing more to influence the US—this is difficult in present circumstances but it is essential to try.

## **PARTIAL TEST BAN TREATY - TREATY BANNING NUCLEAR WEAPON TESTS IN THE ATMOSPHERE, IN OUTER SPACE AND UNDER WATER 1963**

This treaty prohibits all nuclear test explosions except those conducted underground. It will be replaced by the CTBT, but remains relevant while the CTBT has not entered into force.

The treaty's EIF was in 1963, and currently there are 125 parties. Three nuclear-armed states (China, France and North Korea) are not party to this treaty.

## **ANTARCTIC TREATY 1959**

The Antarctic Treaty could be categorised as either 'global' or 'regional'. It applies to a specific geographic area, but there are no states located in this area. The treaty is global in the sense that it is open to any state; in practice most if not all parties are involved in Antarctic research.

The treaty provides that Antarctica is to be used only for peaceful purposes. It prohibits military bases and activities, including nuclear explosions, and provides for inspections.

The treaty's EIF was in 1961. Currently there are 58 parties, including several Asia–Pacific states. Three nuclear-armed states (Israel, North Korea and Pakistan) are not party to this treaty—these states are not active in Antarctica.

## **OUTER SPACE TREATY 1967**

This treaty prohibits states from placing objects with nuclear weapons or other weapons of mass destruction into orbit, and from installing weapons on celestial bodies and on the Moon. The treaty also prohibits any other form of military development or activities, such as military bases and fortifications, weapon testing, and military manoeuvres on celestial bodies.

EIF was in 1967. The treaty currently has 117 parties, including all the nuclear-armed states.

Proposals for anti-ballistic missile defence systems, such as Golden Dome, could be problematic in terms of the Outer Space Treaty—this is beyond the scope of this paper.

## **SEA-BED TREATY - TREATY ON THE PROHIBITION OF THE EMPLACEMENT OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS AND OTHER WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION ON THE SEA-BED AND THE OCEAN FLOOR AND IN THE SUBSOIL THEREOF 1971**

This treaty prohibits emplacing on the seabed beyond the territorial sea any nuclear weapons or any other types of weapons of mass destruction as well as structures, launching installations or any other facilities specifically designed for storing, testing or using such weapons.

EIF was in 1972. The treaty currently has 94 parties. Four nuclear-armed states (France, Israel, North Korea and Pakistan) are not party to this treaty.

## **MOON AGREEMENT - AGREEMENT GOVERNING THE ACTIVITIES OF STATES ON THE MOON AND OTHER CELESTIAL BODIES 1979**

This treaty, inter alia, reaffirms and elaborates on many of the provisions of the Outer Space Treaty as applied to the Moon and other celestial bodies.

EIF was in 1984. The treaty currently has 117 parties. Pakistan is the only nuclear-armed state that is party to this treaty.



## TPNW - TREATY ON THE PROHIBITION OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS 2017

The TPNW prohibits parties using, threatening to use, deploying, possessing and stationing nuclear weapons. It also prohibits parties encouraging, assisting or inducing any activity prohibited under the treaty. It provides for nuclear-armed states to join the treaty and eliminate their nuclear weapons within a set time.

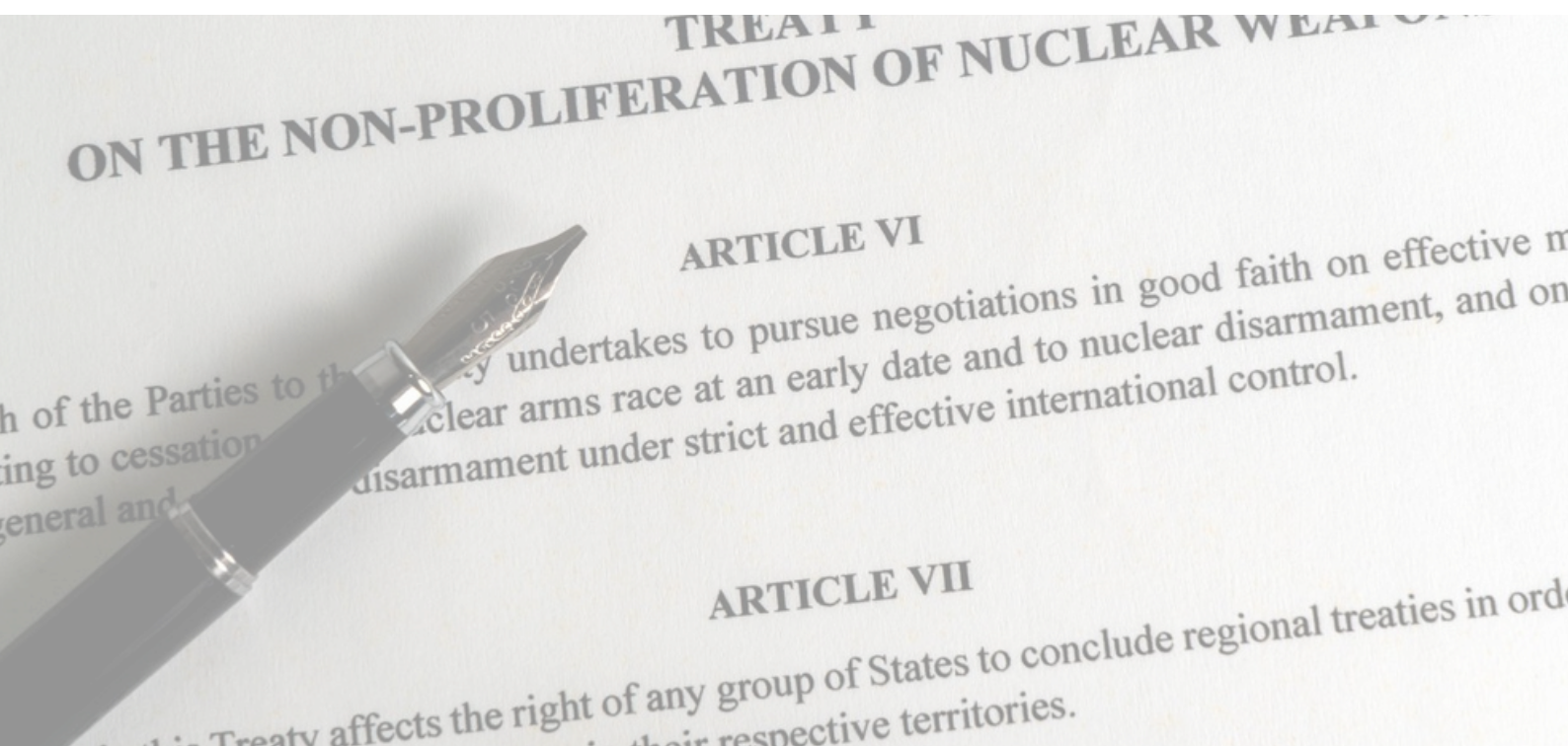
The TPNW's EIF was in 2021; currently, there are 74 parties. This relatively low number of parties—almost half the states that voted for adoption of the TPNW in 2017 have not ratified it—indicates that many states have serious reservations about the treaty.

The TPNW was drafted primarily by and for non-nuclear-weapon states (it has no support from any nuclear-armed state). To some extent the TPNW replicates the obligation of non-nuclear-weapon states under the NPT not to acquire nuclear weapons, though the TPNW's safeguards provisions are poorly drafted and could compromise the IAEA verification standard. The TPNW also replicates the prohibition on stationing nuclear weapons which applies to parties to nuclear weapon-free-zone treaties (see below).

However, the TPNW goes much further than these other treaties. By prohibiting parties “under any circumstances to ... assist, encourage nor induce, in any way, anyone to engage in any activity prohibited” under the treaty (Article 1.1 (e)), the TPNW effectively precludes actions including acceptance of extended nuclear deterrence (the ‘nuclear umbrella’ offered by a nuclear-weapon state to an ally) and the operation of facilities that could contribute to decisions on deployment and use of nuclear weapons. This means that some important states in the Asia–Pacific – including South Korea, Japan and Australia – are most unlikely to join the treaty.

Progressing nuclear disarmament is a major challenge which will require a stable international security environment as well as robust verification and confidence-building measures. Renouncing alliances or significantly reducing defence cooperation would weaken national security and could destabilise the international strategic balance. The TPNW is unrealistic in expecting states to take such steps, at least in the current international environment.

States that have joined the TPNW have sent a powerful message of concern about the lack of action on nuclear disarmament. But they will also need to acknowledge that the TPNW itself will not generate the desired progress. Rather, TPNW and non-TPNW states alike need to collaborate in contributing to the development of the risk reduction, confidence building and verification measures that will be required, regardless of the TPNW, to make nuclear arms reductions and disarmament achievable. The substance and complexity of the measures needed is indicated by the treaties and arrangements discussed in this paper. For a start, in the Asia–Pacific, this work could be progressed in existing forums such as the ASEAN Regional Forum and the East Asia Summit.



## Regional treaties - nuclear weapon-free zones

Currently there are five nuclear weapon-free zone treaties. These are broadly similar, prohibiting acquisition, stationing and testing of nuclear weapons within each zone, and providing for inspections and other verification measures. Thus the treaties expand on the parties' NPT obligations, prohibiting collaboration with third party activities such as stationing (basing) nuclear weapons and nuclear testing.

The treaties may also include additional provisions to meet specific regional concerns. For example, the Treaty of Rarotonga bans the dumping of radioactive waste, and the Treaty of Tlatelolco provides for the creation of a separate regional organisation to oversee compliance.

These treaties are regionally based, with parties located in the particular region. Currently a total of 117 states, some 60 per cent of all states, are party to a nuclear weapon-free zone treaty.

**Table 1: Nuclear weapon-free zone treaties**

<p><b>Treaty of Tlatelolco</b> (Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons in Latin America and the Caribbean 1967)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• EIF 1968, 33 parties</li> </ul>
<p><b>Treaty of Rarotonga</b> (South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty 1985)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• EIF 1986, 13 parties.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Treaty of Bangkok</b> (Treaty on the Southeast Asia Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone 1995)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• EIF 1997, 10 parties.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Treaty of Pelindaba</b> (African Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone Treaty 1996)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• EIF 2000, 45 parties.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Treaty of Semipalatinsk</b> (Treaty on a Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone in Central Asia 2006)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• EIF 2006, 5 parties.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Mongolia</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In addition to the above treaties, Mongolia has declared itself a nuclear-weapon-free zone. There is no treaty as this is a single-state zone. This declaration was made in 1992 and has been reinforced through various international efforts.</li> </ul>

What needs to be done? The Treaty of Bangkok was concluded 30 years ago, yet the protocol providing a commitment not to use nuclear weapons within the zone has yet to be signed by the nuclear-weapon states, despite repeated assurances that they were preparing to address this shortcoming. The nuclear powers need to be reminded of their responsibilities.

With respect to the Treaty of Rarotonga, efforts should be made to persuade the US to ratify the treaty protocols. The protocols require nuclear-weapon states: to apply the basic provisions of the treaty to their territories in the zone; not to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against any party to the treaty; and not to test nuclear explosives in the zone. The US is the only nuclear-weapon state not to have ratified these protocols. US Administrations have unsuccessfully sought Senate approval to ratify the protocols since 2011.

A continuing nuclear security focus in the Asia–Pacific has been the pursuit of nuclear free arrangements for Northeast Asia. The immediate need is to address nuclear issues on the Korean Peninsula. Recent political developments including in Washington and Seoul suggest the time could be right to revive these efforts.

## Bilateral treaties

To date, all specific nuclear arms control treaties have been concluded bilaterally between the USSR/Russia and the US, the states with by far the largest nuclear arsenals. Apart from the Threshold Test Ban Treaty and the Peaceful Nuclear Explosions Treaty, the only bilateral arms control agreement now operating is New START.<sup>[3]</sup> Bilateral arms control treaties that have expired or lapsed are listed in Table 2. New START will expire in February 2026 unless Washington and Moscow agree otherwise.

### NEW START (NEW STRATEGIC ARMS REDUCTION TREATY 2010)

New START's EIF was in 2011. The treaty was extended by 5 years in 2021. In 2023 Russia announced it was suspending implementation of New START. The treaty is due to expire on 5 February 2026.

New START limits each side to **1,550** warheads on deployed intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), deployed submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) and deployed heavy (long-range) bombers. It also limits the numbers of deployed ballistic missiles and heavy bombers assigned to nuclear missions to 700. Other provisions deal with monitoring of non-deployed missiles and limiting non-deployed launchers.

**Table 2: Expired US/Russia nuclear arms treaties**

<p><b>SORT</b> (Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty 2002)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• EIF 2003, superseded in 2011 by New START.</li> <li>• SORT itself did not set new limits. Rather, each side committed to reduce deployed warheads to <b>1,700-2,200</b> over the following decade, to be formalised in a further agreement (which was, in due course, New START), and agreed to extend START I while working towards these limits.</li> </ul>
<p><b>START II</b> (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty II 1993)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Signed in 1993 but for various reasons never entered into force. Partly superseded by SORT.</li> </ul>
<p><b>START I</b> (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty I 1991)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• EIF 1994, expired 2009. Replaced by New START.</li> <li>• This was the first strategic arms reduction treaty, and served as the framework for subsequent agreements. Established on-site inspections and other verification procedures.</li> <li>• Limited each side to 6,000 deployed strategic nuclear warheads, and 1,600 deployed ICBMs, SLBMs and heavy bombers.</li> </ul>
<p><b>INF Treaty</b> (Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty 1987)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• EIF 1988, lapsed 2019.</li> <li>• Required both sides to eliminate and permanently forswear all nuclear and conventional ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles with ranges of 500 to 5,500 kilometres by 1991.</li> <li>• Beginning in 2014, the US alleged that Russia was in non-compliance. Russia denied this and accused the US of non-compliance. Both sides withdrew from the treaty in 2019.</li> </ul>

[3] The Threshold Test Ban Treaty 1974 is a bilateral agreement between the US and the USSR prohibiting underground nuclear weapon tests with a yield above 150 kilotons. The Peaceful Nuclear Explosions Treaty 1976 (PNET) was concluded to complement the Threshold Test Ban Treaty and prohibits peaceful nuclear explosions with yields exceeding 150 kilotons. Both treaties entered into force in 1990. They will be replaced by the CTBT when this enters into force.



**SALT II** (Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty II, 1974)

- Signed in 1974 but never entered into force. Eventually superseded by START I.
- Limited each sides' nuclear forces to 2,250 delivery vehicles and placed a variety of other restrictions on deployed strategic nuclear forces, including multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicles (MIRVs).

**SALT I** (known as the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty I 1972, or the Interim Agreement)

- EIF 1972, expired 1977.
- Both sides agreed not to construct new ICBM silos, and to limits on ballistic missile submarines. The agreement ignored strategic bombers and did not address warhead numbers, leaving both sides free to deploy MIRVs.

**ABM Treaty** (Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty 1972)

- EIF 1972, lapsed 2002 following US withdrawal.
- Limited strategic missile defences to 200 interceptors each and allowed each side to construct two missile defence sites, one to protect the national capital, the other to protect one ICBM field.

## What next?

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The bilateral treaties outlined above were complemented by arrangements for engagement between the two sides, including emergency hotlines, regular meetings between military and policy counterparts, experts meetings and bilateral inspections. In the last decade or so these arrangements have been allowed to lapse.

Complementing bilateral mechanisms, in the 1970s the Helsinki Process was established, involving the US, the USSR, 32 other European states and Canada. This led to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) which fostered the establishment of practical measures such as the Open Skies Treaty. These mechanisms too are now on life support. Nevertheless, the OSCE initiatives do offer lessons for possible confidence building measures for reducing nuclear risks in our region.[4]

There is an urgent need to revive these forms of engagement, and to negotiate further arms control agreements, beginning with the successor to New START.

It is essential to extend these arrangements and negotiations beyond the US and Russia to also engage China. China appears to believe that arms control is about numeric limits, which it will not accept, at least at this stage. It is vital to show China that arms control involves much more than numeric limits—arms control encompasses risk reduction steps that are very much in China's interest.

It is also essential to involve the other nuclear-armed states in the further development of arms control agreements. India and Pakistan in particular would benefit from the establishment of bilateral nuclear risk reduction measures. And as noted, efforts have to be revived to curb nuclear threats on the Korean Peninsula.

The five NPT nuclear-weapon states have jointly stated that “nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought”, yet they continue to act otherwise. The actions of some of these states have led to some non-nuclear-weapon states questioning whether they must acquire nuclear weapons. The nuclear-armed states need to be reminded of their moral and legal obligations both to pursue nuclear disarmament and meanwhile to take practical steps to reduce the risk of nuclear war. President Trump has opened a window: at the Davos conference earlier this year Mr Trump said “we want to see if we can denuclearize, and I think that's very possible.” In addition, the non-nuclear-weapon states must be reminded that any further spread of nuclear weapons will inevitably increase the risk of nuclear war.

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[4] For an analysis of the OSCE's role in the European security architecture see Fred Tanner, “Adapting Co-Operative Security: The OSCE's Challenges and Opportunities in a Fragmented World”, Toda Peace Institute, 9 April 2025.

## ASIA–PACIFIC: THE NEW EPICENTRE OF GLOBAL NUCLEAR THREATS NEEDS TO STEP UP

It is now generally accepted that the Asia–Pacific region (including South Asia) is today the epicenter of global nuclear threats. This fact, together with the region’s history of nuclear weapon use and testing, gives Asia–Pacific states a particular interest and responsibility to take a leading role in efforts to contain and eventually eliminate nuclear threats once and for all.

Some work is being done by the [Toda Peace Institute](#) and the [Asia–Pacific Leadership Network on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament](#) (APLN) in imagining policies, pathways and mechanisms to tackle the issues. But there is so much more to be done: for bridges to be built between historical enemies, and for institutions to be created for government-to-government dialogue and supporting track 2 and track 1.5 exchanges.

Five inflection points identified in this paper suggest the time is right for a new major push for action from the Asia–Pacific:

- the shift in global nuclear threats from the Atlantic to the Asia–Pacific
- the rapid expansion of China’s nuclear arsenal
- the looming demise of the one remaining bilateral arms control treaty between the nuclear giants: US and Russia
- the opportunity and challenges offered by the 2026 NPT review conference
- the personal interest expressed by the current US President in reducing nuclear weapon stocks, if not eliminating them, for being practically useless but hugely expensive (so doing would leave a legacy which will be remembered for generations).

From where might the leadership come? China as the emerging regional nuclear giant has most to gain from engaging in steps to limit and eliminate nuclear threats. Its commitment not to be the first to use nuclear weapons gives it the moral high ground. The new nuclear order when it emerges will have China at the high table—it is only a matter of how and when, but the sooner China engages the better for all concerned, including its own global standing.

Indonesia, a major rising power, has for decades followed nuclear matters closely as the highly respected coordinator of disarmament and nuclear issues for the Non-Aligned Movement. With a new President keen to refresh his country’s leadership in regional affairs, we might hope Indonesia could take a leading role, especially in making best use of the existing mechanisms of ASEAN, the ASEAN Regional Forum and the East Asia Summit.

Japan, as so far the only victim of nuclear weapons, has always presented as a leading advocate of nuclear restraint; and in the past has collaborated with Australia in seeking to define practical steps to nuclear disarmament. Former foreign ministers Gareth Evans of Australia and Yoriko Kawaguchi of Japan led the International Commission on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament—the Commission’s 2009 report remains today a compelling guide to what must be done. Both states are close allies to the US and could help generate the needed momentum.

South Korea has a vital interest in this subject because of the actions of its neighbour in repudiating its NPT commitments and pursuing nuclear weapons.

In summary, as nuclear threats proliferate, two deadlines loom, namely, the expiry of New START and the 2026 NPT review conference. These demand a response. Our region has potential champions of sufficient weight to stem the drift towards nuclear catastrophe, but this requires them to step up and accept the challenge.



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