



APLN STATEMENT ON COVID-19 AND NUCLEAR SECURITY

The COVID-19 global health and economic crises have exposed fundamental flaws and weaknesses in the institutions dealing with international peace and security – and the absence of effective political leadership to correct them. The world faces heightened tensions between the United States and China, increasing prospects for protectionism and rivalry rather than international cooperation, and a turn away from multilateralism toward nationalism and unilateralism.

All this has alarming implications for nuclear security, already at risk from discord over arms control between the United States and Russia, and adverse developments in North East Asia and the Middle East. The INF and Open Skies treaties, Iran nuclear deal, and the New START treaty are dead or on life-support. The United States, Russia and China are developing hypersonic and other advanced weapons, and the Trump administration is reportedly considering resuming nuclear weapons testing. The Review Conference of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) scheduled for April 2020 has been postponed, with minimal prospects for consensus if and when it does meet.

Worsened China-US bilateral ties, fueled by COVID tensions, coupled with the erosion of global nuclear governance, have stirred a nuclear populism in China that rejects the country's long tradition of restraint and commitment to minimal deterrence and calls for a dramatic increase in its nuclear stockpile. In South Asia, three nuclear-armed states are at each other's throats over disputed territories and borders. Dialogue with North Korea has broken down. Overall, the prospects in both our Asia-Pacific region and the world at large for containing nuclear proliferation and moving toward disarmament are very bleak. And the chances of present tensions leading to a catastrophic nuclear weapons exchange – by aggressive design, or more likely human error, system error, miscalculation or misjudgment – are greater now than at any time since the height of the Cold War.

COVID-19 is a grim reminder that the world continues to face existential threats that know no borders – from climate change over time, and from pandemics or nuclear weapons at any time. Addressing these complex threats requires, above all, concerted global and multilateral efforts, based on trust and cooperation.

Our hope must be that the longer-term impact of COVID-19 will be not to reinforce inward looking distrust of global institutions and processes, but in fact serve as a wake-up call as to their absolute necessity if the world's most dangerous human security challenges are to be met.

The indispensable ingredient in meeting all these existential challenges is effective, principled political leadership. On the nuclear threat, that leadership could most immediately be shown by the heads of the three major nuclear powers – the United States, Russia and China – each committing themselves to a serious resumption of nuclear arms control negotiations at all relevant bilateral and multilateral levels, and restating what Presidents Reagan and Gorbachev so profoundly and relevantly articulated 35 years ago: “A nuclear war can never be won and must never be fought” .

Gareth Evans, Chair

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