

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the inefficacy of nation-states and international institutions in managing global risks and introduced new dynamics—including economic recession, border closures, vaccine competition, and shifts in military behavior—that could heighten the risk of nuclear disaster in the years to come. The threat of nuclear war is particularly urgent in the Northeast Asia region, the locus of multiple simmering conflicts. Leaders today must take urgent action to mitigate the rising threat of nuclear war in the era of pandemics reflecting the voice of Nagasaki, “Let Nagasaki be the Last!”

Specific recommendations include the following:

- Slowing and reversing nuclear force developments and operations in the Northeast Asia region, including through nuclear-weapon-free zones and nonproliferation treaties
- Developing a secure, reliable nuclear hotline network for communicating in a nuclear crisis
- Launching public health security initiatives in the Northeast Asia region to respond to pandemics
- Engaging younger generations in the nuclear disarmament movement and mobilizing a broader base of potential stakeholders in nuclear issues
- Enlarging existing city networks such as Mayors for Peace and establishing new city/regional cooperation networks to play a more direct role in reducing nuclear risk and pushing for nuclear disarmament
- Solving the DPRK puzzle and denuclearizing the Korean peninsula
- Increasing monitoring and controls for the storage and transportation of nuclear materials
- Reforming existing global institutions and establishing new programs and initiatives to improve collaboration among nation-states

- Taking advantage of the proliferation of apps and sensors for “on-the-ground” information in a nuclear crisis, while ensuring that authorities do not abuse these apps for social and political control
- Developing new platforms for sharing emergency response information and ways to ensure the integrity of this information

These recommendations were developed through the Nagasaki 75th Anniversary Pandemic-Nuclear Nexus Scenarios Project, an international initiative aimed at exploring how the far-reaching effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (and future pandemics) could alter the landscape for nuclear risk and disarmament. This event aimed to identify opportunities for governments, civil society, and market actors to reduce nuclear risk and resume nuclear disarmament in Northeast Asia, with special attention to new strategies emerging from this unprecedented time in history.

Convened as a series of online workshops in October-November 2020, the project brought together nearly 50 participants from diverse backgrounds, ages, and nationalities.<sup>1</sup> The Project was co-sponsored by the Research Center for Nuclear Weapons Abolition, Nagasaki University (RECNA), the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament (APLN), and the Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainability, in cooperation with the Nagasaki University Planetary Health Project and the Panel on Peace and Security of Northeast Asia (PSNA).

The goals of the workshop were to (1) develop an analytical understanding of the interrelated nature of the co-occurring existential threats of nuclear weapons and global pandemics; (2) explore potential levers and pathways to influence the future under various conditions; and (3) identify concrete strategies to

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<sup>1</sup> The opening session, featuring Nagasaki Mayor Tomihisa Taue, former Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans, and four expert presentations, was livestreamed and may be viewed here: <https://youtu.be/qFrnkgrex0Q?t=135>

reduce the risk of nuclear war and resume nuclear disarmament by state and non-state actors, particularly in the Northeast Asia region.

The workshops were structured through a process of scenario planning, a widely used methodology for imagining future conditions that are highly uncertain and generating robust strategies for shaping the future. Participants developed four plausible futures for the year 2030 that aim to help explore the focal question:

*What are the opportunities driven by global pandemics for Northeast Asian governments, civil society, and market actors to reduce nuclear risk and resume nuclear disarmament?*



The scenarios were developed based on the intersection of two critical uncertainties: (1) Will the locus of influence and power in nuclear disarmament reside with nation-states, or will it shift toward non-state actors, such as local

governments and civil society organizations? And (2) will the relationships and mutual actions among actors be characterized by fragmentation and isolation or collaboration and cooperation? The scenario narratives are described in the [Scenarios section](#), beginning on page 14. In summary, the following four scenarios were developed:

- **Middle Powers Rising:** National governments are the primary locus of influence, and the approach to global risks is collaborative. The pandemic brings about a new recognition of the critical role of global,

multilateral collaboration for dealing with existential risks like pandemics and climate change. “Middle power” countries fill the leadership void left by traditional superpowers.

- **Local Powers Step Up:** The locus of power and influence shifts toward non-nation-state actors, and the approach to challenges is collaborative. The scenario envisions a new role for local governments and civil society to lead a bottom-up effort to address increasingly dire existential challenges that national governments prove incapable of tackling by themselves.
- **Island Mentality:** In this scenario, national governments are the primary drivers of influence, but the approach to global risks like pandemics and nuclear deterrence is fragmented. Resurgent nationalism around the world has led to heightened tension and a sense of instability and fear of war.
- **Fragile Optimism:** The role of nation-states has diminished and non-state actors—including cities and civil society organizations—have stepped up to fill the gap. But there is a lack of coordination among these groups, and they often find themselves working at cross-purposes.

Through exploring these scenarios, participants identified steps that could be taken today to help advance the challenge of nuclear disarmament in a world re-shaped by pandemics, as detailed in the [Recommendations](#) on page 29. The next step in this project will be to develop more concrete recommendations for policymakers, who must now adopt and implement practical measures to manage existential risks posed by the nexus of pandemics with nuclear weapons.