COMMENTARY

ASIA-PACIFIC LEADERSHIP NETWORK
FOR NUCLEAR NON-PROLIFERATION AND DISARMAMENT

THE THIRD NUCLEAR AGE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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Nuclear weapons have returned to the centre stage of global politics. The modernisation and in some cases expansion of nuclear stockpiles, rapid technological change in weapons technologies and support systems, a loosening of rhetorical and military restraint, crises involving nuclear-armed states, the return of great power nuclear competition, and the erosion and breakdown of international normative and legal frameworks, all point to an increasingly dangerous, unpredictable and different nuclear world. At the same time, the majority of UN member states have resisted this return of nuclear weapons politics by claiming agency in shaping the nuclear normative order, and by directly challenging the continued possession of nuclear weapons for deterrence. Concurrently, there is growing interest across the developing world in accessing the possible benefits of nuclear technologies to provide carbon-free energy for their rapidly growing economies. Taken together, these dynamics and sometimes antagonistic nuclear worldviews are increasingly being seen as representing a new era in our nuclear history, and perhaps the beginning of a "Third Nuclear Age."[1]

While global nuclear politics may be becoming more fractured, what often dominates the scholarly and professional debate regarding challenges to the global nuclear order is a certain Western nuclear ethnocentrism – that is, an inability to understand our nuclear world beyond the perspectives held by elites in the West, and to a lesser extent, the handful of states that operate nuclear weapons. This often also serves to reify the notion of nuclear weapons as permanent artifacts of international politics. What is often missing from this picture are the experiences, viewpoints and desires of states and people in other parts of the world that do not take part in nuclear deterrence, but will

[1] In Western discourse a First Nuclear Age is said to have existed between 1945-1990 and focussed on the superpower nuclear rivalry at the heart of the Cold War, and a Second Nuclear Age is said to have followed in the 1990s as attention turned to rogue state and terrorist nuclear threats.

nevertheless be affected – both positively and negatively – by nuclear technologies. Viewing the global nuclear order through dominant security narratives not only excludes the equally valid perspectives of other states, but more importantly impairs our ability to truly understand the universality of nuclear risk.

In March 2024, the Third Nuclear Age project convened a workshop in Jakarta to bring together experts from across Southeast Asia to unpack and explore what this emerging nuclear context means for a region not historically tainted by nuclear dangers. Looking at our nuclear world through a non-Western, non-nuclear-armed lens reveals a quite different picture of the global nuclear order: not just a strong cultural rejection of nuclear weapons as instruments of deterrence and danger, but at the same time a belief that nuclear technologies can play a role in a peaceful and equitable future.

Maintaining ASEAN centrality

Notwithstanding concerns about nuclear smuggling networks, Southeast Asia has been a region fairly untouched by nuclear threats. But with the growing perception of confrontation between China and the United States (as well as the United States' regional allies), and a realisation that Southeast Asia is likely to be a major theatre of operations in any conflict between those states, nuclear risks have become much more pronounced. The 1995 Treaty of Bangkok established a Southeast Asian Nuclear Weapons Free Zone (SEANWFZ), which prohibits its ten members[2] from the development, manufacture, acquisition or possession of nuclear weapons. While there are hopes that the nuclear-armed states would respect the SEANWFZ, the reality is that nuclear-armed and nuclear-propelled military vessels probably already transit the region, and the South China Sea is likely to be a major battleground in a future war.

Interestingly, there is no evidence that fears of a clash between the great powers, or the risk of becoming embroiled in a confrontation with a major nuclear-armed state, are directly driving military modernisation programmes in Southeast Asia. A number of states across the region are shifting their defence postures or pursuing meaningful military build-ups, especially investment in submarines, but these appear to be driven by internal dynamics and the need to protect the strategically important maritime domain, including the Malacca Strait and respective Exclusive Economic Zones. Most experts agree that that this is quite different from the pressures and objectives driving military modernisation in – for example – Europe.

Indeed, it is unhelpful in many ways to compare the security situation in Southeast Asia and the role of ASEAN with that of NATO in the Euro-Atlantic. While the current debate in NATO focusses on how to expand combined conventional capabilities and

[2] Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam.

strengthen the credibility of the nuclear umbrella, military modernisation in Southeast Asia is primarily driven by individual states rather than coordinated through any ASEAN regional mechanism. ASEAN does not operate by the same logic as NATO or its "Article V" collective defence clause, and there is no planning for military action against a particular adversary. ASEAN relations are not characterised by hard power security threats but by a shared priority for economic partnership and development. This, for instance, is apparent in the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, where member states express a desire for ASEAN centrality and a unified vision of a regional architecture that deals with cooperation and prosperity rather than rivalry.

Where nuclear issues feature at all in Southeast Asian security politics, it is in concerns about nuclear smuggling and the possibility of non-state actors gaining access to nuclear material via the regions enormous maritime shipping system, and a growing concern about nuclear accidents. Arguably this reflects the fact that "Second Nuclear Age" challenges, such as "rogue" actors, nuclear security and nuclear terrorism that dominated Western debates two decades ago, remain at the heart of security planning in Southeast Asia today. At the same time, Southeast Asian states support the notion that nuclear security risk applies to all nuclear material and facilities – including those in military use – thus addressing nuclear security requires a comprehensive approach. This reflects a move from a Western-centric narrative that mostly confines these risk to peaceful nuclear material and facilities. It also reflects an awareness that the choices of those that operate nuclear technologies increasingly impact Southeast Asia. This maps on to an important difference in nuclear threat hierarchies and strategic cultures between Western and Southeast Asia societies: one that prioritises or appears to accept hard security and military threats, and one that rejects or at least seeks to minimise such views of international politics.

Many states across Southeast Asia maintain strong relations with both China and the United States, and desire more peaceful relations between the "great powers." China is a major economic player across the region and significant source of foreign direct investment, while the United States is often seen by some as the preferable security partner. Despite cultural links, India – the other major regional nuclear-armed power, appears to have relatively little influence in Southeast Asia. For most ASEAN states, there is no desire to "pick sides" in any future conflict, and there is even less appetite for being involved in great power nuclear competition in the region.

Protestors and defenders

While far from homogenous, Southeast Asian states can be categorised as "protestors" who criticise the lack of progress by the five nuclear-weapons states to work "in good faith" towards disarmament, and uphold their legal commitments under the 1968 Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT). Viewed in this light the NWFZ in Southeast Asia is seen as

reinforcing global efforts towards disarmament and is particularly important given the region's proximity to nuclear-armed states such as China, North Korea, India and Pakistan. The SEANWFZ is, however, the only regional NWFZ that has not been signed by the US, Russia, UK, France and China. Nuclear-weapon states have been reluctant to sign the SEANWFZ Protocol due to concerns over freedom of navigation, verification issues and potential impact on the efficacy of their nuclear deterrents and nuclear operations.

Historically, Southeast Asia's protest for nuclear disarmament was based on defending the global nuclear order against the perceived unfairness of the NPT regime from the sidelines. Under the NPT regime, non-nuclear-weapon states have fulfilled stringent non-proliferation obligations while the nuclear-weapon states are not seen as acting "in good faith" when it comes to progress towards nuclear disarmament. The movement has since evolved: today, their protest involves directly challenging the very foundation of nuclear deterrence practices by the great powers and the other nuclear-armed states. This is especially apparent in the support and enthusiasm of most Southeast Asian states behind the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW).[3]

The TPNW is particularly welcome in the region because it allows more non-nuclear armed states to act as stakeholders in global nuclear governance. It is also popular because its powerful humanitarian narrative expands the conception of nuclear risk from one limited to nuclear war and proliferation, to one that problematises nuclear weapons possession of any state and the catastrophic consequences of any nuclear detonation. The nuclear-weapon states reject the TPNW primarily because they believe that their security depends on maintaining an effective and credible nuclear deterrent. This marks a shift in relations where, in the process towards a UN-mandated global nuclear ban, non-nuclear-weapon states assumed normative agency while the nuclear-weapon states had their turn to assume a new role as the "protestors".

This suggests that in the Third Nuclear Age, the notion of responsibility can no longer be taken for granted. The logic of Western nuclear ethnocentrism, along with its notion that certain actors are "responsible", is being increasingly challenged. A pervasive view among Southeast Asian policy elites is that the nuclear-weapon states can no longer be considered responsible if they keep increasing unmanageable catastrophic risk through nuclear rhetoric and modernisation efforts rather than fulfilling their disarmament obligations.

The reluctance to engage with great power strategic rivalry may partly explain why these states had varied responses to the AUKUS nuclear-powered submarine deal. Across Southeast Asia, concerns about AUKUS vary from how the agreement impacts the strategic balance in the broader Indo-Pacific and the likelihood of confrontation between the United States and China, to the precedent it is setting given that Australia

[3] Out of the Southeast Asian nations, only Singapore has not signed the TPNW.

will not be held to non-proliferation standards as obliged by the IAEA Additional Protocol. In this way, many Southeast Asian states also see themselves as “defenders” of the nuclear order.

It is worth noting, however, that while reinforcing nuclear disarmament is a sentiment popular in Southeast Asia, unlike African and Latin American states, ASEAN states do not typically have a unified position in responding to nuclear developments in multilateral nuclear fora (such as the NPT and TPNW). Moreover, the level of understanding about nuclear weapons issues in the region is relatively limited and unfolds largely at the elite level (albeit signalling support for nuclear disarmament often plays out well domestically).

Harnessing the power of the atom

At the start of the atomic age, there was a belief that nuclear technology could be controlled and that widespread applications of civilian nuclear energy could coexist with a managed system of nuclear disarmament. For sure, a handful of advanced states moved ahead and built significant nuclear energy infrastructure, but this remained largely confined to the developed, Western, world. It is only recently that a confluence of factors have opened up the possibility of developing nuclear technology in large parts of the post-colonial world. To the extent that the framing of the move into a Third Nuclear Age has traction in Southeast Asia, it is therefore overwhelmingly about how nuclear technologies can facilitate economic development and meet rapidly expanding energy demands.

Historically, there is a perception that the dominance of (Western) non-proliferation narratives has had a direct impact on the ability of many Southeast Asian states to harness the power of peaceful nuclear technology. Access to nuclear technology for development was one of the main reasons why many non-nuclear weapon states agreed to join the non-proliferation regime, and arguably sign the TPNW. But while many advanced Western societies have benefitted from non-military applications of nuclear technology for energy generation, economic development and scientific research, these same opportunities were largely withheld from the developing world, including Southeast Asia. There is a strong belief that Western non-proliferation concerns have been unfairly prioritised over the considerable human and societal developmental applications of nuclear technology in other parts of the world. This perception of unfairness, and the belief in the unalienable right to access nuclear technologies for peaceful purposes, has also often been left behind in studies of the global nuclear order.

While the use of nuclear power to generate electricity is now on the retreat in some parts of the developed world, several nations across Southeast Asia have increased their interest in building nuclear power plants (notably, Indonesia, Philippines and Vietnam). Although the 2011 Fukushima nuclear accident in Japan and susceptibility of many

states in the region to earthquakes has tempered some of this enthusiasm, the political salience of Net Zero and reducing carbon emissions seems likely to make nuclear an important part of Southeast Asia's energy future. This highlights the importance of asking the right questions that are pertinent for the people in the region when seeking to understand Southeast Asia in the Third Nuclear Age: is access to nuclear technology inalienable? How can nuclear technology contribute to energy security and climate change mitigation? What is the link with the achievement of UN Sustainable Development Goals in the region? The fact that China, Russia and the US are all involved in discussions to build civilian nuclear facilities in the region makes this even more prominent.

Access to nuclear technology for peaceful purposes is part of a larger dynamic across parts of what is often termed the Global South, where there is a view that developed states haven't shared the spoils of nuclear technology fairly. Since its inception, the Non-Aligned Movement, a loose political association of 120 countries not formally aligned with or against any major power (including all Southeast Asian states), has pushed for "redistributive justice" and for the rights of all states to harness the power of the atom. It is for this reason that non-aligned states, including most Southeast Asian states, support the right of Iran to enrich uranium as long as it meets its non-proliferation obligations, and consider the weapons proliferation fears in the West as exaggerated. In general, there is a strongly held belief that non-proliferation double standards undermine the integrity of the global nuclear order.

Nuclear futures

Perhaps the most striking thing about the nuclear debate in Southeast Asia is that there is simply not the same acceptance (grudgingly or otherwise) of the immutability of nuclear weapons and nuclear deterrence that seems to be present in orthodox Western security narratives. This is a reflection of a particular historical experience, and the fact that other than a very brief period in the 1960s, none of the states in Southeast Asia have seriously entertained building nuclear weapons, nor see a role for nuclear deterrence. Today, nuclear debate in Southeast Asia reflects a dual dynamic in the region: growing concerns about universal nuclear risk, driven by worsening relationships among major powers and the development of destabilising weapons systems that undermine disarmament and non-proliferation commitments, coupled with a rising interest in civilian nuclear applications of nuclear technology. That said, there is no one shared "view" of the meaning of the Third Nuclear Age in Southeast Asia; domestic politics, alliances, and geography create quite different agendas.

It is less clear how or whether the states across Southeast Asia, or indeed across the Global South, can produce enough agency or power to change this unfolding context. It is also unclear how the popularity of nuclear disarmament as a societal and political

issue at the UN translates into global pressure for genuine change. Perhaps as a result, it remains to be seen what impact the TPNW and a more coordinated pressure from non-nuclear armed states and their NGO allies will have on the nuclear-armed states and their extended deterrence allies, and whether this will override the perceived national security concerns of elites in the nuclear-armed states in the foreseeable future.

But perhaps what makes the Third Nuclear Age different from previous nuclear eras is the fact that we are even asking these questions at all. Southeast Asia and other Global South voices are increasingly being heard and are shaping the debate, and not just on the periphery. The broader nuclear discourse is in the process of being challenge if not transformed, and previously marginalised viewpoints that envision alternative nuclear futures are increasingly shaping the academic and policy space when it comes to nuclear politics. Ultimately, the destructive power of nuclear weapons (and the utopian possibilities of nuclear energy) makes everyone on the planet a stakeholder in the Third Nuclear Age, and it is a good thing that competing narratives and visions become more prominent and engaged with.

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.

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ABOUT APLN

The **Asia-Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament (APLN)** is a Seoul-based organization 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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