

**ASIA-PACIFIC LEADERSHIP NETWORK**

FOR NUCLEAR NON-PROLIFERATION AND DISARMAMENT

ACCELERATING SEANWFZ: A TIMELY CALL FOR A NUCLEAR-FREE SOUTHEAST ASIA**Minh Tuan TA**, Associate Professor at the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam (DAV)

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Over the past five years, particularly since the onset of the military conflict between Russia and Ukraine in early 2022, nuclear weapons and non-proliferation have re-emerged as critical agendas in global security discussions. While nuclear issues in Asia have traditionally garnered less attention compared to other regions—aside from the nuclear programs of North Korea and Iran—recent developments and debates signal a shift in focus.

First, nuclear-armed powers such as Russia, the United States, and China have been recalibrating their nuclear policies to varying degrees. Among these, Russia has made the most visible adjustments, while the United States and NATO have bolstered their readiness for potential nuclear contingencies. Meanwhile, China has undertaken significant steps to modernise and expand its nuclear arsenal. In the Middle East, Israel and the United States have intensified rhetoric about striking Iran's nuclear facilities. These developments have normalised discourse surrounding nuclear threats and countermeasures, raising the specter of nuclear conflict to levels unseen since the end of the Cold War. The risks are further compounded by a lack of restraint among major powers and an increasing likelihood of irresponsible actions that could escalate into catastrophic scenarios, potentially resulting in a global-scale conflict of destructive proportions.

Second, regional powers with latent nuclear capabilities, including Iran, Japan, and the Republic of Korea, are increasingly uneasy about their volatile security environment. In the Republic of Korea, ongoing discussions about nuclear self-reliance, though still speculative, have raised concerns among neighboring states. Facing nuclear-armed North Korea and China on one hand and the complexities of US-China strategic rivalry on the other, the Republic of Korea may question whether sole reliance on the US nuclear umbrella is sufficient to safeguard its security interests. The Republic of Korea's decision to pursue nuclear weapons, however unlikely, could prompt Japan to consider a similar path, further destabilising the Indo-Pacific security landscape.

Third, the Indo-Pacific region continues to assert itself as the most economically dynamic and rapidly growing area in the world, driven by a steadily increasing population. Several Southeast Asian nations are emerging as pivotal production hubs for leading global technology corporations, including Samsung, LG, Panasonic, and Apple. Concurrently, semiconductor giants such as Nvidia and Google are accelerating their investments in the region, establishing large-scale manufacturing plants and data centers. This is accompanied by an immense demand for energy to sustain industrial growth and production. Meanwhile, climate change exacerbates the challenge, placing regional nations in precarious positions as they struggle to secure reliable and stable energy supplies, particularly electricity. Moreover, international commitments to reducing carbon emissions and achieving net-zero targets are also pushing these countries to seriously consider adopting greener and more sustainable energy solutions. In this context, nuclear energy has emerged as a viable alternative. Countries like the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, and, most recently, Vietnam have expressed interest or initiated concrete plans to revive nuclear power projects.

Given the current dynamics, whether driven by security concerns or economic development needs, Southeast Asia is confronting significant challenges related to nuclear issues. The 1995 Bangkok Treaty established the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ), and its Protocol invited the five recognised nuclear-armed states to participate. To date, despite nearly 30 years of continuous efforts by Southeast Asian countries and progress in clarifying the positions of various stakeholders, particularly within the frameworks of ASEAN mechanisms, no nuclear-armed state has signed this Protocol.

Since 2013, ASEAN has issued three consecutive Plans of Action to Strengthen the Implementation of the Treaty on the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (2013–2017, 2018–2022, and 2023–2027). However, these plans have largely reiterated the same core themes, emphasising the need to “continue consultations with the Nuclear Weapon States.” Notably, the 2023–2027 Action Plan includes a new emphasis on intensifying efforts among states parties and between states parties and nuclear weapon states to resolve all outstanding issues in accordance with the objectives and principles of the SEANWFZ Treaty. It is clear that the time has come to accelerate the realisation of SEANWFZ.

First, a unified ASEAN stance is critical to advancing SEANWFZ. Member states must prioritise the inclusion of nuclear weapon states in the Protocol of the Bangkok Treaty. This calls for increased diplomatic efforts and resource allocation to achieve meaningful engagement with these states. Simultaneously, public awareness within ASEAN must be heightened regarding the urgency of establishing a nuclear-free Southeast Asia. Greater transparency in ASEAN’s SEANWFZ-related meetings and decisions would foster understanding and engagement. Public debates through mass media, academic forums, and expert dialogues on nuclear issues in the region should be encouraged.

Second, ASEAN must adopt a more assertive and pragmatic approach in its discussions with nuclear-armed states. This involves addressing their legitimate concerns and interests while framing participation in the Protocol as both a symbolic and practical commitment to global peace. ASEAN must emphasise that its pursuit of peace and stability aligns with the broader objectives of international non-proliferation. Without the involvement of nuclear-armed states, SEANWFZ risks being reduced to a largely symbolic framework with limited real-world impact.

Third, the Bangkok Treaty requires further refinement to address the legitimate concerns and interests of all parties involved, including provisions safeguarding the peaceful use of nuclear energy as outlined in the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). This is particularly relevant as several Southeast Asian nations are advancing plans to construct nuclear power plants. Additionally, the Treaty should incorporate provisions addressing nuclear proliferation and nuclear terrorism in alignment with international agreements and mechanisms on nuclear safety and security established after the Treaty's initial adoption.

Fourth, ASEAN needs a committed and capable leader to spearhead the realisation of SEANWFZ. Such a figure must possess the vision, diplomatic acumen, and credibility to galvanise ASEAN's collective efforts and advocate effectively on the international stage. With the backing of ASEAN member states, this leader could unify regional efforts and strengthen ASEAN's voice in negotiations with nuclear-armed states.

Amid the evolving international security landscape surrounding nuclear weapons, the renewed focus on SEANWFZ is both timely and necessary. Such efforts represent a strategic contribution to maintaining stability and ensuring peace within the Southeast Asian region.

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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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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