



ASIA-PACIFIC LEADERSHIP NETWORK

FOR NUCLEAR NON-PROLIFERATION AND DISARMAMENT

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GENERATING POSITIVE SECURITY DYNAMICS: FROM 2011 TO 2025

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I was serving as Foreign Minister of Indonesia in May 2011, when the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network (APLN) was established. Today, as Chair of that organisation, I feel it incumbent to reflect – however cursory – on the differing security dynamics prevailing in the region then and now.

In 2011, Indonesia assumed the Chairmanship of ASEAN with several key priority agendas to promote. These included fostering positive dynamics in Myanmar's democratic transition, demonstrating that it is possible to synergise the promotion of democratic principles with respect for the principle of non-interference in internal affairs; addressing the stalled ASEAN-China management of potential conflicts in the South China Sea; and further strengthening the ASEAN-initiated regional architecture. However, Indonesia also prepared itself for unexpected developments.

For instance, the outbreak of hostilities between Cambodia and Thailand over their simmering border disputes in February demanded Indonesia's immediate attention. It worked to prevent the dispute from spiraling out of control and to ensure that ASEAN presented a unified position as the UN Security Council and the International Court of Justice addressed the issue.

On the South China Sea, while incidents at sea were not entirely eradicated, there was no doubt that ASEAN and China were placing diplomacy front and centre. The long-delayed adoption of the Guidelines for the Implementation of the Declaration of Conduct on the South China Sea was finally achieved, and discussions began in earnest about the potential elements of the (still pending) Code of Conduct.

Elsewhere in the region, the death of Kim Jong-il further heightened uncertainty in Northeast Asia. Yet even in Northeast Asia – arguably the epicenter of the region's

security challenges then and now – the ASEAN Regional Forum played a crucial, albeit informal and low-key, role in re-establishing stalled communication between the ROK and the United States on one side and the DPRK on the other.

In hindsight, the challenges to nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation faced at that time pale in comparison to those of today. Success in the simultaneous ratification of the Nuclear Weapons States to the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone came agonisingly near in 2011-12. Beyond traditional security issues, the earthquake and tsunami that struck Japan in March generated a common humanitarian response and sense of solidarity region-wide, with ASEAN at the forefront.

As we commence the year 2025, practically all the well-defined and intractable disputes in the region – in South Asia, Northeast Asia, the East China Sea, the Taiwan Strait, and the South China Sea, for instance – remain unresolved. Many of these are complex issues that have defied comprehensive solutions for decades, and they were certainly prevalent in 2011. However, there is a distinct shift in regional security dynamics between 2011 and 2024.

In 2011 – disputes notwithstanding – there was a palpable sense of general commitment not to allow such issues to consume and hold hostage regional cooperation. There was a deliberate effort to deepen regional cooperation to provide a buffer or safety net against the inevitable fluctuations in countries' ties. Essentially, there was an implicit understanding to “agree-to-disagree,” to manage the potential for conflict, and to minimise the risk of unintended conflict due to miscalculation.

As 2024 ended, however, these very same disputes have almost simultaneously come to the fore. Geopolitical divides have not only deepened but have also expanded beyond the traditional political-security domains into economic, technological, and global commons issues, including the climate crisis. Diplomacy and dialogue are facing headwinds. Regional architectures – including global supply chains – have become fragmented. The nuclear arms control and disarmament agenda is regressing, and dangerous rhetoric is becoming increasingly common. Trust is eroding, and a leadership deficit permeates.

The contrasting conditions and dynamics did not come about by accident; they were the result of deliberate policy choices, including neglect and acquiescence. Indonesia's policies – of which I am most personally familiar – were clear: to extrapolate and project to the wider region ASEAN's experience in transforming the trust deficit, once prevalent among the countries of Southeast Asia, into one of strategic trust. Instruments such as the Treaty of Amity of Cooperation (TAC), binding the countries of ASEAN to the non-use of force in resolving disputes among them; the expansion of ASEAN to include ten member states (and the initiation of Timor Leste's membership); and the elevation of ASEAN from an association to a community, including the Political and

Security Community, were indispensable. Not least among these efforts was the promotion of personal rapport between regional leaders, building a sense of cooperative partnership through direct formal and informal communication.

In 2011, ASEAN countries purposefully sought to extend these positive dynamics beyond Southeast Asia. ASEAN-led processes with its Dialogue Partners – including ASEAN Plus Three, the ASEAN Regional Forum, the ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting Plus, the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum, the East Asia Summit (EAS), which was suitably expanded to include the United States and Russia, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, the promotion of TAC accession by non-ASEAN states, and the 2011 Bali Principles, committing all EAS participating states to the non-use of force in settling disputes between them – are just some of the more obvious examples of such deliberate efforts to change dynamics.

Additionally, although ASEAN has long pursued an Indo-Pacific footprint, as evidenced in the aforementioned beyond-Southeast Asia processes, I purposefully used the term “Indo-Pacific” at a CSIS event in Washington, DC, in 2013 – before it became vogue – to codify and better capture ASEAN’s decades-long efforts to widen and deepen peace zones and dynamics. Beyond regional affairs, Indonesia also sought to inject positive dynamics on the global stage. As one of the so-called Annex 2 states whose ratification was needed to enable the entry into force of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), Indonesia ratified the CTBT in December 2011.

In short, in my personal view, the region’s security dynamics – whether positive or negative, virtuous or vicious – are determined by policy choices. As we begin the year, and as APLN marks its 14th year, it is clear that diplomacy and dialogue must remain at the forefront.

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 organisation 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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