

## Safeguarding Peaceful Nuclear Energy in Southeast Asia: Asean Commitments and Strategic Challenges to the Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in the Indo-Pacific

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**Abstract:** *The emergence of the AUKUS (Australia, United Kingdom, and United States America) defense pact forces centered in Australia has become a new disaster for the commitment of Non-Proliferation in the ASEAN-Pacific Region, especially ASEAN-Oceania, as well as has betrayed the trust in the disarmament and prohibition of nuclear weapons in the Region. The emergence of AUKUS from a defence perspective is considered an important step for the Western Bloc in placing nuclear warheads in Australia to minimise the potential for their defence failure from a future defence attack by the Eastern Bloc, but in terms of peace ASEAN is the most disadvantaged region of this defence pact. Asean through the presence of AUKUS is then faced with the problem of its defence strategic position, on the one hand ASEAN must maintain its commitment to peace by not participating in any bloc defence pact, but on the other hand ASEAN countries are certainly threatened by nuclear warheads placed close to their territory. Indonesia's role as the most strategic country in the ASEAN Region is in the spotlight, geopolitically Indonesia must continue to try dialogue efforts without being affected by the flow of any pact or bloc, the principle of free and active activity as the foundation of Indonesia's geopolitics must be maintained, this will be a new and great challenge for the credibility of Indonesia's geopolitical diplomacy and the ASEAN Region to maintain world peace which must start from the peace of the region itself.*

**Keywords:** ASEAN, non-proliferation, nuclear, AUKUS, peace, geopolitics

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### INTRODUCTION

The Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) plays a significant role in the ASEAN-Oceania region, with most countries in the area being signatories. The treaty aims to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons and promote peaceful uses of nuclear energy (Gillis 2009). However, the NPT's effectiveness and relevance in the region face several challenges. In the Indo-Pacific, the NPT's influence is limited due to the presence of nuclear-armed states outside the treaty, such as India and Pakistan. This situation creates potential nuclear flashpoints in the region, particularly between India-Pakistan and China-India (Thakur, 2021).

The recent AUKUS agreement between the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia has further complicated the NPT's implementation in the region. This pact, which allows Australia to acquire nuclear-propelled submarines, appears to violate the NPT and may fuel an arms race in the Asia-Pacific (Khan, 2022). Despite these challenges, the NPT remains an important framework for nuclear non-proliferation efforts in the ASEAN-Oceania region. The treaty's commitments include preventing the spread of nuclear weapons, promoting disarmament, and facilitating peaceful uses of nuclear technology (Noor Rachmayani, 2015; Hines, Colin, and Lowry, 1985). However, the future of the NPT in the region appears uncertain, as major powers' interests often overshadow the treaty's objectives, potentially leading smaller states to question their compliance with existing nuclear agreements (Khan, 2022).

Indonesia's role as a leader within ASEAN in promoting regional non-alignment and non-proliferation commitments is complex and multifaceted: Indonesia has long been considered the "natural born leader" or "first among equals" within ASEAN, dating back to the organization's establishment in 1967 (Roberts and Widyaningsih 2015). This leadership role has allowed Indonesia to shape ASEAN's approach to regional security issues, including non-proliferation.

ASEAN as a whole has been actively engaged in promoting international recognition of the Southeast Asian Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ) Treaty adopted in 1995 to ensure regional security (Qiao-Franco and Nandyatama, 2023). Interestingly, while Indonesia is seen as a leader, ASEAN's formation has also been interpreted as an effort to constrain Indonesian hegemony in Southeast Asia (Roberts and Widyaningsih, 2015). This suggests a delicate balance between Indonesia's

leadership aspirations and the need for consensus among ASEAN members. Additionally, ASEAN has traditionally rejected the idea of a military pact, favoring bilateral arrangements for military cooperation (Acharya, 1991). This stance aligns with the principle of non-alignment. Indonesia plays a key leadership role in ASEAN, the organization's approach to non-proliferation and regional security is characterized by consensus-building, the "ASEAN Way" of non-confrontational problem-solving, and a focus on dialogue rather than military alliances (Engel and Mattheis, 2019). ASEAN's efforts in this area are primarily centered on promoting dialogue, reducing mistrust among member states, and addressing non-traditional security threats through multilateral cooperation (Albek, 2017).

To further strengthen the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and enhance regional security, ASEAN should focus on several key actions. First, it should continue to support the norms of nuclear disarmament and nuclear security through diplomatic efforts at both global and regional levels (Caballero-Anthony and Trajano, 2022). This includes promoting regional cooperation in advancing nuclear security and safety through frameworks like the ASEAN Network of Regulatory Bodies on Atomic Energy (ASEANTOM) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (Caballero-Anthony and Trajano, 2022).

ASEAN should also work towards addressing the challenges faced by the NPT, such as the need for progress on the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), the proposed fissile materials cut-off treaty (FMCT), and reducing the role of nuclear weapons (Abe, 2010). Additionally, ASEAN can contribute to strengthening the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and making the Additional Protocol a standard for non-proliferation efforts (Abe, 2010). By taking these actions and continuing to promote regional cooperation, ASEAN can play a crucial role in ensuring a safer region for its member countries while supporting global non-proliferation efforts.

International organizations represent a formalized mechanism of international cooperation, established with the primary aim of maintaining world peace and security. As fundamental structures in global governance, they play an indispensable role in shaping international relations and addressing cross-border challenges that individual states cannot resolve alone (Blake, 1984; Coppola, 2011). Comprising sovereign states bound by shared principles and charters, international organizations are designed to promote cooperation, reduce conflict, and create a predictable order in the international system. The very existence of international organizations is contingent upon the collective will of states, which is formalized through legally binding agreements. Such agreements, referred to as treaties in English or *traités* in French, serve as the foundation for establishing these institutions as subjects of international law. Unlike non-governmental organizations, international organizations derive their legitimacy and authority from intergovernmental agreements, making them unique actors in the global legal and political order.

The legal definition and framework for treaties are codified in the 1969 Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties. Article 2(1) of the Convention defines a treaty as "an international agreement concluded between States in written form and governed by international law, whether embodied in a single instrument or in two or more related instruments and whatever its particular designation." Furthermore, Article 5 extends the Convention's application to treaties that constitute the legal instruments of international organizations, as well as those adopted within such organizations. These provisions highlight the dual nature of treaties: as instruments that establish international organizations and as mechanisms for regulating their operations. In this context, treaties perform several critical functions. They are not merely technical agreements but serve as essential tools for maintaining legal certainty and political stability in the international arena. Sangroula (2013) emphasizes that treaties act as a meeting point for states to assume international obligations, while Czachor (2024) notes their role in structuring bilateral and multilateral relations. In the modern era, the importance of treaties has expanded significantly, strengthening the enforceability of international law and reinforcing the universality of human rights norms (Sangroula, 2013).

Thus, treaties and international organizations share a mutually reinforcing relationship. Treaties provide the legal foundation and normative framework for the establishment and operation of international organizations, while international organizations serve as institutional platforms for implementing, monitoring, and expanding treaty obligations. This relationship ensures that international organizations are not only political forums but also legally recognized actors that contribute to global governance by establishing norms, regulating member state behavior, and fostering peaceful cooperation among nations.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employs a **qualitative-descriptive research design** with a focus on *documentary analysis* and *case study approaches*. The primary objective is to examine how ASEAN, and particularly Indonesia, safeguard their commitments under the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) amidst evolving regional and global security dynamics.

### 1. Data Sources

The research relies on both **primary and secondary sources**. Primary sources include international treaties and agreements such as the **NPT (1970)**, the **Treaty of Bangkok (1995)**, official documents from the **International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)**, and policy statements from ASEAN and the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Secondary sources encompass peer-reviewed journal articles, think-tank reports (e.g., SIPRI, Carnegie Endowment), and recent policy papers (2019–2024) that provide critical perspectives on nuclear non-proliferation and regional security.

### 2. Data Collection

The collection process followed a systematic literature review framework. Academic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and JSTOR were searched using keywords including “NPT,” “IAEA safeguards,” “ASEAN nuclear policy,” and “Indonesia diplomacy.” Grey literature from reputable institutions (e.g., UNODA, IAEA reports, SIPRI Yearbook 2024) was also considered to ensure the comprehensiveness of the dataset.

### 3. Data Analysis

The study applied **thematic content analysis**, identifying recurring themes such as (1) the limitations of the NPT in disarmament, (2) ASEAN’s role in advancing regional non-proliferation, (3) Indonesia’s preventive diplomacy, and (4) the nexus of nuclear energy security and safeguards. Comparative analysis was conducted between global trends (e.g., U.S.–Russia arms control treaties, modernization of Chinese and Indian arsenals) and regional responses (SEANWFZ, ARF, ASEANTOM).

### 4. Scope and Limitations

The scope of this research is limited to **the Asia-Pacific and Indo-Pacific regions**, with a focus on ASEAN’s collective stance and Indonesia’s diplomatic initiatives. While the study integrates global nuclear governance to contextualize regional dynamics, it does not engage in technical nuclear engineering assessments. The limitation lies in its reliance on publicly available documents, which may exclude classified or restricted diplomatic communications.

Through this methodological framework, the study ensures analytical rigor, reliability, and relevance in addressing the intersection between global nuclear governance and regional security commitments under the NPT.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Nuclear Governance and the IAEA Safeguards

The devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 demonstrated the catastrophic consequences of nuclear weapons, leading to global calls for institutional mechanisms that could regulate the use of atomic energy. This demand culminated in U.S. President Eisenhower’s Atoms for Peace speech in 1953, which paved the way for the establishment of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in 1957. The IAEA operates on three fundamental pillars—safety, security, and technology transfer—while also implementing verification measures to ensure that nuclear programs remain peaceful.

The 1968 Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), which entered into force in 1970, further institutionalized the prohibition of nuclear weapons proliferation. While 191 states are now parties to the treaty, notable absences include India, Pakistan, and Israel, reflecting persistent structural gaps in the global regime. Although Article I and II of the NPT prohibit nuclear weapon transfer and acquisition, the treaty lacks a clear enforcement mechanism. Moreover, Article VI obliges states to pursue disarmament negotiations “in good faith,” yet nuclear-weapon states (NWS) continue to modernize their arsenals, revealing the disjunction between normative commitments and strategic realities.

### Disarmament and Regional Commitments

Despite more than five decades of existence, the NPT’s disarmament agenda has made limited progress. During the Cold War, bilateral agreements such as the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) and the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaties (START I and II) between the U.S. and the Soviet Union represented incremental steps toward arms control. More recently, the New START agreement *Safeguarding Peaceful Nuclear Energy in Southeast Asia: Asean Commitments and Strategic Challenges to the Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in the Indo-Pacific*

(2011) remains the only legally binding instrument limiting deployed strategic nuclear forces. Nevertheless, the persistence of approximately 12,121 warheads worldwide, with 9,585 in military stockpiles (SIPRI, 2024), underscores the treaty's unfulfilled promise of "general and complete disarmament."

Parallel to the global framework, regional treaties have reinforced non-proliferation norms. These include the Treaty of Tlatelolco (1967), the Rarotonga Treaty (1986), the Bangkok Treaty (1995), and the Pelindaba Treaty (1996), which collectively designate nuclear-weapon-free zones (NWFZs). Among them, the Bangkok Treaty institutionalized ASEAN's stance against nuclear weapons through the Southeast Asia Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ), thereby aligning regional security with the NPT's objectives.

### **Contemporary Security Dynamics in Southeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific**

Despite these normative commitments, the Indo-Pacific remains a theater of intensifying nuclear risks. Geopolitical frictions in the South China Sea, the emergence of AUKUS in 2021, and the modernization of Chinese, Indian, and Pakistani arsenals illustrate the fragile balance of deterrence in the region. SIPRI (2024) reports that China possesses around 350 warheads, India 150, and Pakistan 165, while North Korea continues to advance its nuclear capabilities despite international sanctions.

Although ASEAN states remain nuclear-free under SEANWFZ, their security environment is increasingly shaped by external nuclear powers. AUKUS, in particular, introduces ambiguity by equipping Australia with nuclear-powered submarines—raising concerns of proliferation by precedent, even if no nuclear warheads are involved. These dynamics challenge ASEAN's centrality in regional security architecture, as external powers set the agenda for nuclear deterrence in the Indo-Pacific.

### **ASEAN and Indonesia in Safeguarding NPT Commitments**

ASEAN's role in upholding the NPT is twofold: consolidating its internal nuclear-free zone through SEANWFZ, and projecting this commitment globally through platforms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). At the international level, ASEAN has consistently advocated for the ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) and for strengthening IAEA safeguards, including the Additional Protocol.

Indonesia, as the largest ASEAN member and a founding state of both the NPT and SEANWFZ, has emerged as a key diplomatic actor. Jakarta has emphasized preventive diplomacy in de-escalating regional disputes, particularly in the South China Sea, while also promoting disarmament in multilateral forums. At the 56th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting in 2023, Indonesia reiterated its commitment to a nuclear-free Southeast Asia and urged nuclear-weapon states to accede to the SEANWFZ protocol.

In addition, Indonesia has worked closely with the IAEA in strengthening nuclear energy security, recognizing the dual-use nature of nuclear technology. According to the IAEA Safeguards Implementation Report (2022), nearly 3,000 verification activities were conducted across more than 1,300 facilities worldwide, including in Southeast Asia. Indonesia also promotes regional regulatory cooperation through ASEANTOM, which enhances transparency, capacity-building, and safeguards implementation.

### **Synthesis and Policy Implications**

The findings highlight three key insights. First, while the NPT remains the cornerstone of global non-proliferation, its credibility is undermined by disarmament stagnation and selective enforcement. Second, ASEAN's SEANWFZ and diplomatic activism provide a normative buffer, yet external pressures—particularly AUKUS and Chinese modernization—threaten to dilute its effectiveness. Third, Indonesia's leadership in preventive diplomacy and nuclear energy security positions it as a bridge between normative commitments and practical implementation.

Policy-wise, ASEAN must strengthen internal cohesion to safeguard its nuclear-free identity while simultaneously engaging nuclear-armed states through sustained diplomatic channels. Indonesia, leveraging its diplomatic capital, should continue promoting IAEA safeguards, advocate for universalization of the Additional Protocol, and integrate nuclear energy security within the broader discourse of regional resilience.

## **CONCLUSION**

Indonesia has consistently demonstrated a strong commitment to supporting the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and ensuring a nuclear-weapon-free Southeast Asia through the SEANWFZ Treaty. This commitment is reflected in Indonesia's active role in diplomatic efforts at both regional and global levels, aiming to promote nuclear disarmament and prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons. However, significant challenges remain, notably the fact that no nuclear-weapon states have yet signed

the SEANWFZ Protocol, highlighting the need for more intensive diplomatic efforts from Indonesia and ASEAN to achieve a fully realized nuclear-free zone. In the future, Indonesia must continue to strengthen its diplomatic role by encouraging nuclear-weapon states to sign the SEANWFZ Protocol, thereby fully realizing the nuclear-free commitment in Southeast Asia. Additionally, Indonesia should focus on strengthening international cooperation in forums such as the United Nations and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), ensuring that the NPT is effectively and equitably implemented for all countries, while also mobilizing support from non-nuclear states to jointly pressure nuclear-armed nations to fulfill their disarmament obligations.

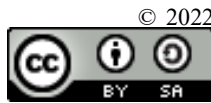
A key element of Indonesia's role in this process is ensuring that nuclear energy security is also integrated into its non-proliferation efforts. As the world transitions to cleaner energy sources, the need for secure, peaceful nuclear energy development becomes increasingly important. Indonesia, while actively supporting disarmament, must also ensure that its energy security is not compromised by external pressures or geopolitical conflicts. This involves advocating for a global nuclear energy framework that ensures safety, security, and non-proliferation principles are upheld in the development of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. Indonesia's leadership in ASEAN is vital for navigating the balance between promoting a nuclear-free zone and ensuring access to safe, sustainable, and secure nuclear energy resources, which are essential for the region's long-term energy security. Through these strategic diplomatic actions, Indonesia can continue to play a crucial role in maintaining both regional and global peace and security, while securing a sustainable energy future for the regions.

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