



Indonesia's evolving nuclear policy: the trajectory of a disarmament champion

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Introduction

Indonesia has historically been a strong supporter of nuclear disarmament. Nuclear weapons are seen as a threat to international peace and security, which explains Indonesia's continuous effort to promote nuclear disarmament in multilateral fora, encouraging the use of nuclear technology only for peaceful purposes. A recent reaffirmation of this position has been the ratification of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), which has been approved by the House of Representatives of Indonesia on 21 November 2023.¹ Despite this continuity, Indonesia's stance on nuclear disarmament has known evolutions over time – from its early interest in owning nuclear weapons to clearly determining the country's firm policy towards nuclear non-proliferation and total disarmament. This research examines the transformation of this policy over time, recalling the initial nuclear ambitions of the country in the 1960s, the transition to a staunch opposition to nuclear weapons and nuclear proliferation in the early 1970s, with Indonesia becoming one of the most vocal actors in Southeast Asia (SEA) on the topic. This rejection of nuclear weapons has been defended hand in hand with the promotion of the right of all countries to benefit from the peaceful use of nuclear energy. The paper ends on a description of the adaptation of Indonesia's position to its strategic interest – both at the regional and global level –, considering in particular how the country's strong supportive stance for disarmament can be in line with the renewal of big power competition in the Indo-Pacific.

1. Long past but not forgotten: Indonesian nuclear ambitions in the 1960s

Nowadays, Indonesia enjoys the image of a country that has always been articulate in its position against nuclear weapons on the international stage. However, this has not always been the case. Indonesian nuclear aspirations are often overlooked among scholars due to limited access to information.

¹ "Transkripsi Press Briefing Menlu RI Pengesahan RUU TPNW Dalam Rapat Paripurna DPR RI, 21 November 2023" [Transcription of the Press Briefing of the Indonesian Minister of Foreign Affairs Ratifying the TPNW Bill in the DPR RI Plenary Session, 21 November 2023], [Kementerian Luar Negeri Republik Indonesia](#), 21 November 2023.

The first public statement on nuclear weapons by the young Indonesian government was pronounced during the Meeting against the Atomic and Hydrogen Bombs on 12 June 1958 at the Presidential Palace, where the first President of the Republic of Indonesia, Sukarno, stated his opposition to arms race, in both the conventional and nuclear fields.² In addition, the same year, then-Indonesian Foreign Minister, Dr. Subandrio, made it clear that Indonesia did not possess any nuclear weapons and had no intention to seek any. The country however did show an interest for the applications of nuclear technologies. During the following years, Indonesia established the Institute of Atomic Energy, or Lembaga Tenaga Atom (LTA), for conducting research and development in the field of atomic energy. Indonesia signed a five-year bilateral agreement with the United States in 1960 under the Atoms for Peace program. Nuclear assistance from Washington included the supply of a small 250-kilowatt TRIGA-Mark II research reactor, which carried out the first successful nuclear reaction on 17 October 1964.

However, while the initial plan was to develop peaceful nuclear energy, Sukarno was also determined to separate Indonesia from the influence of Western colonialism, neocolonialism, and imperialism which he believed were still embedded in the SEA region. In this perspective, the new atomic knowledge was seen as one of the means that could guide Indonesia towards its complete independence from Western influence. Around November 1964, Sukarno expressed his support to the development of a national nuclear weapons program, but it was not until July 1965 that he publicly declared, in his speech at Muhammadiyah Congress in Bandung, that Indonesia would develop its own atomic bomb.³ Later, his statement was supported by the Director of the Army Ordnance Department, Brigadier General Hartono, who declared to Antara News, the national media, that Indonesia would be able to test its own nuclear bomb that same year in 1965. One year later, Sukarno justified the need for Indonesia to produce its own atomic bomb to defend its homeland against any threat to the nation's independence.⁴ The success of the first Chinese nuclear test in 1964 seemed to have drawn Sukarno to seek support from Beijing either in the form of providing Indonesia with an atomic bomb or of assisting the country to produce its own atomic device⁵ (China never seemed to have approved of the matter). All of this raised concerns from the United States and other countries, including neighbouring countries, such as Malaysia and the Philippines, which feared that Indonesia would attempt to become a regional hegemon.⁶

As mentioned previously, two specific reasons explain Indonesia's sudden interest in developing nuclear weapons. The first one is the creation of the Federation of Malaysia on 16 September 1963, with the support of the United Kingdom. The British government expected the establishment of Malaysia to be seen as a positive move by Indonesia and as part of an ongoing effort to decolonise the SEA region. Instead, Sukarno viewed this as a way for the British to spread their influence (perceived by Sukarno as neo-imperialism) in the region. This eventually led to a physical confrontation between the Indonesian Army and Malaysia

² Arsip Nasional RI (@ArsipNasionalRI), "Pidato Presiden Sukarno pada rapat umum menentang bom atom dan hidrogen di Istana Negara, Jakarta, 12 Juni 1958" [President Sukarno's speech at a rally against atomic and hydrogen bombs at the State Palace, Jakarta, 12 June 1958], [X Post](#), 12 June 2023.

³ Robert M. Cornejo, "When Sukarno Sought the Bomb: Indonesian Nuclear Aspirations in the Mid-1960s", *The Non-Proliferation Review*, Summer 2020, pp. 32-33.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ "Indonesia's Efforts to Acquire an Atomic Bomb", [Central Intelligence Agency](#), 28 March 2003.

⁶ *Ibid.*

(supported by the United Kingdom).⁷ Another factor was the deployment of two battalions of US troops in Vietnam in February 1965, which would lead to a major conventional war in the SEA region. This war was interpreted among Indonesians as illustrating the danger of US imperialism to Indonesia's revolution and a contestation of its alignment with China. Therefore, Sukarno was led by national security considerations when attempting to endow his country with nuclear weapons as he believed that such weapons would provide deterrence against Western influence in the region.

However, these ambitions were abandoned when a coup overthrew Sukarno following the September 30 Movement and the presidency turned to the Commander of Indonesian Armed Forces, Major General Suharto. Under the new leadership of Suharto, the government made it clear that improving bilateral relations with the United States was one of the major objectives of Indonesia, and that pursuing nuclear weapons was no longer part of the country's interest. The new government attempted to strengthen its cooperation with the United States after Washington refused to extend the five-year bilateral agreement with Indonesia under the Atoms for Peace program due to its pro-nuclear rhetoric.⁸ Not long after taking the presidential seat, in 1967, Suharto signed with the IAEA the Safeguards Transfer Agreement related to the bilateral agreement between Indonesia and the United States,⁹ Indonesia joined the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) as a Non-Nuclear Weapons State (NNWS) in 1970.

2. Nuclear energy in the ring of fire: right to peaceful use vs safety considerations

Along with a change of leadership, Suharto brought an era for atomic energy to the country and set the tone of Indonesia's promotion of nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament for many years to come. A clear vision of using nuclear energy with the sole purpose of peaceful activity was asserted in Indonesia's nuclear-related legislation. The government created the National Atomic Energy Agency (BATAN) and established three nuclear research reactors¹⁰ located in three different cities in Java: Bandung (1965),¹¹ Yogyakarta (1979),¹² and Serpong (1987).¹³

⁷ Aryo Putranto Saptohutomo, "Soekarno dan Mimpi Senjata Nuklir yang Kandas" [Soekarno and the Failed Dream of Nuclear Weapons], [Kompas](#), 14 June 2023.

⁸ Rinaldo, "Berawal dari Sukarno, Berakhir karena 'Sembrono'" [Starting from Sukarno, Ending because of 'Recklessness'], [Liputan6](#), 18 May 2015.

⁹ "The Text of the Safeguards Transfer Agreement Relating to the Bilateral Agreement between Indonesia and the United States of America", [IAEA](#), 9 April 1968.

¹⁰ H. Suseno, M. Daryoko, A. Goeritno, "Decontamination of TRIGA Mark II reactor, Indonesia", [National Nuclear Energy Agency of Indonesia](#), February 2002.

¹¹ Wisma Putra, "Asal-usul Reaktor Nuklir di BRIN Bandung" [Origins of Nuclear Reactors at BRIN Bandung], [detikJabar](#), 1 August 2023.

¹² "44 Tahun Reaktor Nuklir Kartini Mengabdikan" [44 Years of Service to Kartini's Nuclear Reactor], [BRIN](#), 2 March 2023.

¹³ "Radioaktif Batan Indah, Reaktor Nuklir di Serpong Tetap Aman" [Radioactive Batan Indah, Nuclear Reactor in Serpong Remains Safe], [CNN Indonesia](#), 17 February 2020.



Location of nuclear research reactors in Indonesia¹⁴

Despite early and clearly stated ambitions, the development of nuclear energy in Indonesia has been extremely slow. The three active research reactors established by the Indonesian government have not led to this day to the construction of power-generating commercial reactors, therefore Indonesia is not yet producing electricity of nuclear origin. In the early 1980s, BATAN had planned to build a nuclear power plant but the inadequate human resources due to the lack of technical knowledge on nuclear energy hindered the progress. In 1985, this became the reason behind the establishment of the Pendidikan Ahli Teknik Nuklir (PATN), a university aimed to produce more nuclear energy experts. The following year however, the Chernobyl accident led the public to start seeing nuclear energy under a negative light. Suharto explicitly expressed his concern on safety risks, but acknowledged the energy demands that needed to be met and what a nuclear power plant could bring to help bridge this gap.¹⁵ However, the on-and-off nuclear program was never successfully revived due to the Asian financial crisis that impacted Indonesia in 1998.¹⁶

Up to this day, Indonesia is still in the process of constructing its first nuclear power plant. From the 2000s onwards, the main reasons for the slow progress have been political, technical, and legality issues. In particular, regarding regulations, the head of BATAN, Djarot Sulistio, confirmed in 2016 that there was no national law that would allow the exploration of uranium as nuclear energy for commercial purposes, despite the fact that a nuclear research reactor had operated in Indonesia for almost 51 years.¹⁷ The Indonesian government has always been eager to ensure that its nuclear energy development complied with international norms. In 2009, IAEA declared that Indonesia had successfully passed the initial phase to build

¹⁴ This data is collected from open-source news articles. Main sources used include: Wisma Putra, "Asal-usul Reaktor Nuklir di BRIN Bandung" [Origins of Nuclear Reactors at BRIN Bandung], [detikJabar](#), 1 August 2023, "44 Tahun Reaktor Nuklir Kartini Mengabdi" [44 Years of Service to Kartini's Nuclear Reactor], [BRIN](#), 2 March 2023, and "Radioaktif Batan Indah, Reaktor Nuklir di Serpong Tetap Aman" [Radioactive Batan Indah, Nuclear Reactor in Serpong Remains Safe], [CNN Indonesia](#), 17 February 2020.

¹⁵ Fandy Hutari, "Ambisi senjata nuklir Sukarno, gagalnya pembangkit listrik Soeharto" [Sukarno's nuclear weapons ambitions, failure of Suharto's power plant], [Alinea.id](#), 26 September 2021.

¹⁶ Sulfikar Amir, "Nuclear Revival in Post-Suharto Indonesia", *Asian Survey*, vol. 50, n° 2, March/April 2010, pp. 265-286.

¹⁷ Hamidi Rahmat, "PLTN, Antara Kebutuhan dan Kekhawatiran" [NPP, Between Needs and Concerns], [Sekretariat Kabinet Republik Indonesia](#), 16 September 2016.

a nuclear power plant under the Integrated Nuclear Infrastructure Review (INIR) Mission.¹⁸ The completion of the initial phase includes infrastructure readiness and capacity-building, and should have led to the next phase, that is the physical preparation for the construction of a nuclear plant.

Indonesian Ambassador to Austria, il Gusti Agung Wesaka, stated in 2010 that “*Indonesia already meets all the preconditions to build a nuclear power plant except for public acceptance and a political decision*”.¹⁹ The lack of public acceptance and political decision at the time can also explain the slow progress in the development of Indonesia’s own nuclear energy. A survey conducted that same year by BATAN showed that 60 percent of Indonesians are in favour of building a nuclear power plant in the country.²⁰ However, this support eroded within a year following the Fukushima disaster in 2011, which led public enthusiasm to drop significantly due to the fear of nuclear accidents.²¹ As a country situated in the Ring of Fire, Indonesia is prone to earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. Many Indonesians were no longer convinced of the relevance of having a nuclear power plant due to the frequency of natural disasters occurring in the country.

The government has since been trying to better inform civil society regarding disaster mitigation and the safety of nuclear power plants. For example, the National Research and Innovation Agency (BRIN), in charge of the nuclear reactor in Yogyakarta, published a statement to the public that during the powerful 2006 Yogyakarta earthquake, the nuclear reactor detected only 0,15 Gravity (G),²² despite the earthquake reaching up to 6.3 magnitude.²³ Six years following the nuclear accident in Fukushima, the latest survey conducted by BATAN in 2016 shows that more than 77 percent of Indonesians support the plan of having a nuclear power plant.²⁴ Along with stronger public acceptance, Indonesia’s increased determination to develop its own civilian nuclear energy is mainly driven by the high energy consumption of the fourth most populous country in the world, which requires all types of power to generate electricity to meet this demand.

In March 2023, Washington and Jakarta announced a strategic partnership in support of the goal of Net Zero Emissions in Indonesia by 2060.²⁵ The partnership entails US assistance in the form of economic and technical support for the construction of the planned nuclear power plant, including deploying Small Modular Reactors (SMRs), nuclear power reactors capable of generating up to 300 MW(e) per unit. The construction plan will be carried out by US firms,

¹⁸ INIR Mission is a structured peer review offered by the IAEA to assist its member states in assessing the status of their national infrastructure for the initial plan of developing a nuclear power plant. The mission is conducted on the basis of the milestones approach and the infrastructure issues. INIR aims to ensure that the required infrastructure is developed and implemented in a responsible and orderly manner (source: “Integrated Nuclear Infrastructure Review”, [IAEA](#), June 2020).

¹⁹ “IAEA considers Indonesia ready to build nuclear power plant”, [Eco-Business](#), 16 December 2010.

²⁰ “IAEA Gives Go-ahead for RI Nuclear Program”, [Tempo.co](#), 25 August 2014.

²¹ Heru Purwanto, “RI most ready to build nuclear power plant in ASEAN”, [Antara News](#), 29 March 2011.

²² “44 Tahun Reaktor Nuklir Kartini Mengabdikan [44 Years of Service to Kartini’s Nuclear Reactor]”, [BRIN](#), 2 March 2023.

²³ “Magnitude 6.3 quake in central Java”, [Earth Observatory](#), 26 May 2006.

²⁴ “Ringkasan Eksekutif ‘Kajian Akademik Nuklir Sebagai Solusi dari Energi Ramah Lingkungan yang Berkelanjutan untuk Mengejar Indonesia Sejahtera dan Rendah Karbon pada Tahun 2050’” [Executive Summary ‘Nuclear Academic Study as a Solution for Sustainable Environmentally Friendly Energy to Pursue a Prosperous and Low Carbon Indonesia in 2050’], [UGM](#), 16 November 2021.

²⁵ “United States, Indonesia Announce Partnership on Small Modular Reactor Nuclear Clean Energy”, [U.S. Embassy Jakarta](#), 18 March 2023.

including NuScale Power and ThorCon Power.²⁶ The first power plant is planned to be built on Gelasa Island, in the Bangka Belitung archipelago.²⁷ The power plant unit will be installed on the island by 2027, with the aim of receiving the operational permit from the Nuclear Energy Regulatory Agency (BAPETEN) by 2029; the first commercial power plant is planned to operate by 2030.²⁸ Bangka Belitung Island is estimated to hold approximately 95 percent of Indonesia's main source of thorium, which is fitting for the plan of constructing a thorium molten salt reactor that will produce uranium-233 as its fissile fuel material.²⁹ The chosen location – on the north shore – is considered to be the safest option as the planned area is not situated on the tectonic subduction zone, thus minimizing the risk of seismic and tsunami hazards.

3. Indonesia as an emerging disarmament champion

Indonesia's focus on developing nuclear energy over the past fifty years is not inconsistent with its clear stand against nuclear weapons. In order to understand Indonesia's present disarmament efforts, it is important to look back and to discuss the country's initial and somehow paradoxical steps towards disarmament. As was previously evoked, Sukarno's administration considered the acquisition of nuclear weapons for security purposes. However, his involvement in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) also led him to take a public stand in favour of disarmament. The organization of the first Asian-African Conference on 18-24 April 1955 in Bandung showed Indonesia's willingness to play a leading role in the emergence of a third force on the international stage. The NAM was established in 1961, with Sukarno as one of its five founders.³⁰ Apart from the political and economic interests, the NAM was created under the urgency of addressing the most pressing international security issues, including disarmament. This was reaffirmed during the First Summit Conference of the NAM at Belgrade in 1961, where all participating states considered disarmament as "an imperative need and the most urgent task of mankind".³¹

Indonesia's somewhat paradoxical position can be compared with that of Nehru's India. Indeed, the first Indian Prime Minister was known for his enthusiasm for nuclear disarmament, in particular his campaign for the adoption of the Limited Test Ban Treaty in 1963.³² However, while championing for a nuclear-weapon-free world, Nehru approved Project Phoenix to recover bomb-grade plutonium in January 1958, which later led to the development of atomic bombs.³³

Ambivalence was therefore a common feature of both India and Indonesia at that time, with loud calls in favour of disarmament within the NAM, but also national initiatives to explore the possibility to develop nuclear military technologies for security purposes. Of course, in

²⁶ "US firms plan to build pioneering nuclear power plants in Indonesia", [The Jakarta Post](#), 26 October 2023.

²⁷ "Nuclear Power in Indonesia", [World Nuclear Association](#), December 2022.

²⁸ Firda Dwi, "Indonesia Mau Bangun Pembangkit Nuklir Perdana, Ini Lokasinya" [Indonesia wants to build its first nuclear power plant, here is the location], [CNBC Indonesia](#), 2 November 2023.

²⁹ Sung-Mi Kim, "Indonesia's Nuclear Dream, Revived?", [The Diplomat](#), 31 December 2020.

³⁰ "Non-Aligned Movement (NAM)", [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia](#), 9 December 2022.

³¹ "1st Summit Conference of Heads of State or Government of the Non-Aligned Movement", [NAM](#), 6 September 1961.

³² Bakhtiar K. Dadabhoy, "Homi Bhabha, Jawaharlal Nehru and the Bomb", [The Wire](#), 25 April 2023.

³³ *Ibid.*

contrast to India's leaders, Sukarno never truly commanded any action that would lead to an actual plan to develop its own nuclear weapons.

4. Towards the elimination of nuclear weapons: Indonesia's present position on nuclear issues

Under a new leadership in 1967, Indonesia's pursuit of nuclear technology for energy purposes was carried out in parallel with a vocal rejection of any military use of nuclear power. Indonesia signed the NPT in 1970 and ratified it in 1978.³⁴ Indonesia was also the first ASEAN country to sign a Safeguards Agreement with the IAEA on 14 July 1980.³⁵ From that time, Indonesia has been more involved in the effort towards global disarmament. For Jakarta, in order to achieve the total elimination of nuclear weapons, the condition of disarmament must also be applied in a non-discriminatory fashion and equally to all parties, which means extending the responsibility to Nuclear Weapons States (NWS). Indonesia openly argued at the Seventh Conference of the NAM in 1983 that the legitimization of nuclear weapons by NWS was an obstacle and could result in the failure of disarmament commitments under the evolving rationale of nuclear deterrence.³⁶ Indonesia's non-proliferation and disarmament endeavours also served for mobilizing support purposes,³⁷ meaning that the country was also using it to seek collective political support from Asian and African countries³⁸ on the global stage through conferences and multilateral fora with a view to reforming the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).

According to the Indonesian Foreign Ministry, the country's diplomacy is directed towards the total elimination of nuclear weapons and, in this regard, multilateral diplomacy is seen as a critical element, which is in line with Indonesia's general policy of relying on the centrality of the UN multilateral disarmament machinery.³⁹ Following this principle, Indonesia has participated in a variety of multilateral frameworks across international treaties. The country logically supported the ban of nuclear weapons throughout the SEA region, known as the Treaty on the Southeast Asia Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ) or Bangkok Treaty. Indonesia signed the treaty on 15 December 1995 and the treaty entered into force on 27 March 1997.⁴⁰

³⁴ M. Solichah, A. S. Zarkasi, "Legal Frame Work and Implementation of the Strengthened Safeguards System in Indonesia", [Nuclear Energy Control Boards](#), 11 November 1999.

³⁵ "The Text of the Agreement of 14 July 1980 between Indonesia and the Agency for the Application of Safeguards in connection with the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons", [IAEA](#), September 1980.

³⁶ Mochtar Kusumaatmadja, Mahathir bin Mohamad, S. Rajaratnam, Pham Van Dong, "Statements by Heads of Delegations from Southeast Asian Countries at the Plenary Meeting of the Seventh Summit Conference of the Non-Aligned Countries in New Delhi, India, on 7–11 March 1983", [ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute](#), June 1983.

³⁷ Intan Besida, "Indonesia's National Role Enactment and Diplomatic Strategy in Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament", [VCDNP](#), May 2022.

³⁸ "Indonesia and the UN Security Council Reform", [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia](#), 20 January 2016.

³⁹ "Statement by the Representative of the Republic of Indonesia on behalf of the Group of the Non-Alignment Movement 2023 Substantive Session United Nations Disarmament Commission", [UNODA](#), 3 April 2023.

⁴⁰ "Treaty of Bangkok", [United Nations](#).

Indonesia was one of the 44 states included in the Annex 2 of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) that ratified it.⁴¹ CTBT was open for signature in 1996 but it was not until 6 February 2012 that Indonesia formally ratified it.⁴² This sixteen-year gap was not due to Indonesia's lack of interest in joining the treaty, but mainly to a long constitutional process. Indonesia had clearly stated this during the 2001 CTBT Conference where it confirmed that the ratification process was ongoing.⁴³ Shortly after Indonesia's formal accession as a state party, the country was appointed as CTBT Co-Chair alongside Hungary for the 2013-2015 period to promote CTBT at various regional and international meetings.⁴⁴ Senior officials confirmed that Indonesia would try to make use of its voice to promote CTBT at the highest political level in Asia, the Middle East and beyond.⁴⁵ Indonesia has repeatedly called on the NWS to join the nuclear test ban treaty, emphasizing that *"Indonesia's ratification has no significance unless nuclear states take the same step"*.⁴⁶

Not only did Indonesia show its commitment to enforcing proliferation norms through ratification of the CTBT and became a party to a variety of non-proliferation and disarmament arrangements, it also played an active role in advancing these international instruments. During its ASEAN Chairmanship in 2011, Indonesia successfully raised a wider acceptance of the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone Treaty (SEANWFZ Treaty) through the completion of negotiations and discussion with the five NWS (P5).⁴⁷ However, twelve years after the 2011 talks, these states have still not signed the protocol of the SEANWFZ Treaty.⁴⁸ Objections from P5 states stem from several factors. The protocol calls for signatories to respect the provisions of the treaty, which prohibits state parties to *"allow, in its territory, any other state [...] to station nuclear weapons"*.⁴⁹ The treaty also requires mutual arrangements *"to allow visits by foreign ships and aircraft to its ports and airfields, transit of its airspace by foreign aircraft, and navigation by foreign ships through its territorial sea or archipelagic waters and overflight of foreign aircraft above those waters"*.⁵⁰ In addition, each party to the protocol must *"undertake not to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against any State Party to the Treaty. It further undertakes not to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons within the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone"*, which may or may not be in line with various P5's negative security assurances policies.

Both Russia and the United States have expressed concerns and refused to be bound by the protocol commitments regarding the transit of their nuclear weapons and nuclear explosive devices, as the United States in particular applies a policy of ambiguity on the location of its nuclear-capable vessels known as *"neither confirm, nor deny"*. The increasing rivalry between the United States and China makes the South China Sea a key theatre of operation for NWS,

⁴¹ "Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT)", [CTBTO](#), 19 November 1996.

⁴² "Indonesia Deposits Instrument of Ratification to the CTBT", [UNODA](#), 6 February 2012.

⁴³ "Statement by Ambassador Makmur Widodo, Head of the Delegation of the Republic of Indonesia, Conference on Facilitating the Entry into Force of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty", [United Nations](#), 11 November 2001.

⁴⁴ "Disarmament and Non-proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction", [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia](#), 7 April 2019.

⁴⁵ "CTBT brought closer to entry into force by Indonesia's ratification", [CTBTO](#), 6 February 2012.

⁴⁶ Daryl G. Kimball, "Indonesia Ratifies Nuclear Test Ban Treaty", [Arms Control Association](#), January 2012.

⁴⁷ "Achievement of Indonesia's Chairmanship in ASEAN in 2011", [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia](#), 26 March 2012.

⁴⁸ Aditia Maruli Radja, "ASEAN-P5 talks on nuclear-free zone proceeding positively", [Antara News](#), 15 November 2011.

⁴⁹ "Treaty of Bangkok", *op. cit.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

which means that P5 members might be even more reluctant to commit to the SEANWFZ protocols.⁵¹

However, for Indonesia, the 2011 talk is still seen as a positive step to keep the SEA region free from nuclear weapons and its continuous effort in that direction did not stop there. During its Chairmanship of the ASEAN in 2023, the country further pushed the P5 to sign the protocol of the Bangkok Treaty. Even though none of the P5 have yet acceded to that request, China has been the first NWS to declare an intention to do it.⁵² During a meeting in March 2023 with ASEAN Secretary General, Kao Kim Hourn, Chinese State Councillor and Foreign Minister Qin Gang declared that Beijing was willing to take the lead in signing the protocol.⁵³ However, there is no clear timeline as to when China plans to do so. During the 2023 Meeting of the Commission of the SEANWFZ in Jakarta, Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi emphasized the need to bring P5 to sign the SEANWFZ Treaty Protocol as, she stated, *“Southeast Asia is still not a truly safe region as long as there are countries that have nuclear weapons”*.⁵⁴ This outreach effort was visible when Ms. Marsudi asked Moscow's support to preserve the SEA region as a nuclear free-zone by signing the SEANWFZ Treaty Protocol during the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting with Russia in Jakarta on 13 July 2023.⁵⁵

Most recently, Indonesia's efforts in nuclear disarmament gained international spotlight as on 21 November 2023 the country's House of Representatives (DPR RI) approved the ratification of the TPNW. Not long after, Indonesia's instrument of ratification was transmitted to the UN Secretary General early in 2024 for the completion of the ratification process.⁵⁶ Following the ratification approval, Ms. Marsudi asserted that *“the ratification of the TPNW has an important value to emphasize that the possession and use of nuclear weapons cannot be justified for any reason [...] I hope that more countries will ratify the TPNW to put pressure on nuclear-possessing countries and also to create strong anti-nuclear weapons norms”*.⁵⁷ Subsequently to the country's ratification, a seminar on the Ratification of TPNW and Nuclear Diplomacy was held in December 2023 at Universitas Gadjah Mada Yogyakarta, where Mr Muhadi Sugiono from the Department of International Relations stated that nuclear disarmament has been a critical topic in Indonesia's foreign policy, and called it *“the DNA of Indonesia's foreign policy”*.⁵⁸ Indonesia has voiced its support for the TPNW from the conception of the draft treaty, the country acting as one of the vice-presidents of the bureau in the negotiation of the treaty at the 2017 UN Conference in New York and voting in favour

⁵¹ Tuya Nyamosor, “Nuclear Weapons-Free Zones in Asia”, [Asia-Pacific Leadership Network](#), February 2022.

⁵² Prime Sarmiento, Leonardus Jegho, “ASEAN to step up anti-nuclear push”, [Asia News Network](#), 26 April 2023.

⁵³ Maria Siow, “China support for Asean nuclear weapon-free zone ‘counter-intuitive’ if other states do not sign pact”, [South China Morning Post](#), 6 April 2023.

⁵⁴ “FM Marsudi: Southeast Asian Region Must Remain Free of Nuclear Weapons”, [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia](#), 11 July 2023.

⁵⁵ Jayanty Nada Shofa, “China Committed to Signing ASEAN's Anti-Nuke Treaty, Malaysia Says”, [Jakarta Globe](#), 13 July 2023.

⁵⁶ “Transkripsi Press Briefing Menlu RI Pengesahan RUU TPNW Dalam Rapat Paripurna DPR RI, 21 November 2023” [Transcription of the Press Briefing of the Indonesian Minister of Foreign Affairs Ratifying the TPNW Bill in the DPR RI Plenary Session, 21 November 2023], [Kementerian Luar Negeri Republik Indonesia](#), 21 November 2023.

⁵⁷ Yashinta Difa, Resinta Sulistiyandari, “TPNW Bill ratification encourages world peace: Minister”, [Antara News](#), 22 November 2023.

⁵⁸ “SEMINAR TPNW ‘Ratifikasi Traktat Pelarangan Senjata Nuklir dan Diplomasi Nuklir – SDGs’ [TPNW SEMINAR ‘Ratification of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons and Nuclear Diplomacy’ – SDGs], [Universitas Gadjah Mada](#), 14 December 2023.

of its adoption.⁵⁹ Soon after, Jakarta became one of the first fifty countries to sign the TPNW on 20 September 2017.⁶⁰ In this case, Indonesia's ratification to the TPNW could be viewed as a significant political development, as it signals a clear commitment by one of the world's largest states to support the total elimination of nuclear weapons.

This noteworthy move from Jakarta could influence neighbouring countries in SEA (Brunei, Myanmar and Singapore); and in the South Pacific (Papua New Guinea and Australia). Among ASEAN member states, both Brunei and Myanmar have signed, yet none of them have ratified the treaty. Brunei reiterated its support towards the entry into force of the TPNW during the 76th session of the UN General Assembly (UNGA) in 2021.⁶¹ As for Myanmar, the country initially planned to ratify the treaty back in 2020, but the process was hindered due to the military coup in 2021. Despite this, Myanmar continues to show its willingness to become a state party in the future.⁶² Among ASEAN states, Singapore remains the only country that has openly opposed joining the treaty. Following the negotiation of the TPNW in 2017, Singapore abstained during the vote on the text.⁶³ Justification for this position was officially the lack of reference to the SEANWFZ Treaty in Article 7 and the failure to include a suggested phrase on the treaty's relationship with other non-proliferation and disarmament norms in Article 8.⁶⁴ Another explanation could be the country's close relationship with NWS, especially the United States. Singapore has been a reliable partner to the United States both in economic and security matters, and the country has also been a strong advocate of US influence in the Indo-Pacific.

Meanwhile, Indonesia's closest neighbours in the South Pacific region, Australia and Papua New Guinea, have not signed the TPNW. However, during the Pacific Roundtable Meeting on the TPNW in 2021, Papua New Guinea declared that the country is looking forward to becoming a state party in the future.⁶⁵ Ever since the negotiations of the treaty, Papua New Guinea has actively participated and consistently voted in favour of UNGA resolutions in support of the Treaty since 2018.⁶⁶ Australia, for its part, did not participate in the negotiation of the TPNW and has voted against the resolutions presented at the UNGA in support of the TPNW from 2018 to 2021. In 2022 and 2023, the country's voting behaviour changed as the Labour government in Canberra decided to abstain.⁶⁷ This shift of position was largely seen as

⁵⁹ "United Nations conference to negotiate a legally-binding instrument to prohibit nuclear weapons: Second session", [United Nations](#), 7 July 2017.

⁶⁰ "Transkripsi Press Briefing Menlu RI Pengesahan RUU TPNW Dalam Rapat Paripurna DPR RI, 21 November 2023" [Transcription of the Press Briefing of the Indonesian Minister of Foreign Affairs Ratifying the TPNW Bill in the DPR RI Plenary Session, 21 November 2023], [Kementerian Luar Negeri Republik Indonesia](#), 21 November 2023.

⁶¹ "National Statement by Mr. Abdul Azim Kassim The Representative of Brunei Darussalam to the United Nations in New York", [United Nations](#), 11 October 2021.

⁶² "Statement by Ambassador Kyaw Moe Tun, Permanent Representative of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar to the United Nations at the Second Meeting of States Parties to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons", [Reaching Critical Will](#), 29 November 2023.

⁶³ All other countries taking part to the conference voted in favour of the agreed text except the Netherlands, which voted against ("United Nations conference to negotiate a legally-binding instrument to prohibit nuclear weapons: Second session", *op. cit.*).

⁶⁴ Mely Caballero-Anthony, Julius Cesar Trajano, "Examining Southeast Asia's Diplomacy on Nuclear Disarmament and Nuclear Security: Shared Norms and a Regional Agenda", [Asian Journal of Peacebuilding](#), Vol. 10, n° 2, September 2022, pp. 1-25.

⁶⁵ "Papua New Guinea", [Nuclear Weapons Ban Monitor](#), 7 December 2021.

⁶⁶ "United Nations conference to negotiate a legally-binding instrument to prohibit nuclear weapons: Second session", *op. cit.*

⁶⁷ Daniel Hurst, "Australia drops opposition to treaty banning nuclear weapons at UN vote", [The Guardian](#), 28 October 2022.

a positive step in the region. Nevertheless, Canberra had previously stated that joining the TPNW would mean breaching its obligations with Washington under the US extended nuclear deterrence cooperation.⁶⁸ Recent developments make the prospect of Australia signing the treaty even less likely as the country is set to take part in possibly the biggest trilateral security arrangements with the United States and the United Kingdom under the AUKUS deal.



The non-proliferation and disarmament policies of Indonesia's regional partners are to some extent influenced by the major geopolitical tensions that are at play in the region and the relationship that each country has with specific NWS, in particular the United States and China. In this context, Indonesia is constantly redefining and navigating its foreign policy strategy amidst the growing tensions between the two powers, including on that topic. In order to fully understand Indonesia's position on nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament ongoing developments in the Indo-Pacific, especially with new emerging security arrangements such as AUKUS, Jakarta's strategy towards Washington and Beijing needs to be explored.

5. Indonesia's stance in the Indo-Pacific: caught up in the US-China power rivalry?

The geopolitical rivalry between the United States and China has undoubtedly impacted the SEA region, and Indonesia is not an exception. As the country is situated strategically within a critical maritime hub, with a vast archipelago stretching between the Indian and the Pacific Oceans, this gives Indonesia significant geopolitical importance. However, Jakarta has repeatedly advocated neutrality and has refused to take sides or to engage in major power

⁶⁸ Paul Karp, "Labor set for nuclear showdown as Gareth Evans warns of risk to US alliance", *The Guardian*, 17 December 2018.

competition. Even so, there is no denying that Indonesia is faced with increasing militarization on both sides. Beijing has deployed a strong military presence around three islands in the disputed South China Sea with anti-ship, anti-aircraft missile systems, and fighter jets.⁶⁹ In addition, Chinese coast guard vessels were deployed to Indonesia's North Natuna Sea at least six times between January and June 2023.⁷⁰ Meanwhile, to the South, the United States has enhanced its military presence in Australia as an attempt to counter Beijing forces in the region.⁷¹

While maintaining its neutral position, Jakarta has undertaken strategic steps in this intensified military build-up between the two great powers, which is mainly focused on two strategic areas: the economy and security. In relationship with China, Jakarta has been bolstering economic ties through trade and investments. Beijing is the second largest foreign investor in Indonesia with an investment of around 7,4 billion USD in 2023,⁷² in comparison with the United States in the sixth place.⁷³ However, Jakarta is not completely silent over China's offensive action in Natuna. Sovereignty over these waters is non-negotiable and the Indonesian government has sought to respond to illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing from Beijing. For this reason, Indonesia has tightened security and military cooperation with the United States. The two countries share an extensive range of military exercises, with more than 220 activities annually.⁷⁴ These high-intensity military drills are viewed by China as a US effort to build an alliance in the Indo-Pacific aimed at curbing its growing military and diplomatic influence in the region.⁷⁵

Jakarta's position of balance and non-alignment amid the US-China power rivalry is also reflected in its efforts to ensure that the SEA region is free from the threat of nuclear weapons. Thus, Indonesia's stance when facing China-US strategic competition must be understood in a context where it refuses any action that could be seen as fuelling the tensions and risks of escalation between Washington and Beijing. It is noteworthy to understand that Indonesia's strategic alignment towards these two states must not jeopardise the non-proliferation and disarmament agenda in the region. Bilateral relations with the US and China also provide an explanation on Indonesia's reaction towards AUKUS, the submarine deal that has grasped the attention of the Indonesian government and raised questions regarding the implementation of non-proliferation principles.

⁶⁹ "China has fully militarized three islands in South China Sea, US admiral says", [The Guardian](#), 21 March 2022.

⁷⁰ Kiki Siregar, "IN FOCUS: What the remote Natuna islands reveal about Indonesia's stance on China", [Channel News Asia](#), 5 August 2023.

⁷¹ Luis Martinez, "US and Australia deepen military ties to counter China", [ABC News](#), 29 July 2023.

⁷² Jayanty Nada Shofa, "Indonesia Attracts \$90B Investment in 2023", [Jakarta Globe](#), 24 January 2024.

⁷³ Ricky Kusmayadi, "Securing US Investment Worthy of US\$500 Million, Minister of Investment Underlined Indonesia's Focus is Not Only on Certain Country's Investments", [Kementerian Investasi/BKPM](#), 24 June 2023.

⁷⁴ Christopher S. Chivvis, Elina Noor, Beatrix Geaghan-Breiner, "Indonesia in the Emerging World Order", [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#), 9 November 2023.

⁷⁵ Niniek Karmini, "US, Indonesia and 5 other nations hold war drills amid China concerns", [AP News](#), 1 September 2023.

6. The AUKUS deal: between strategic considerations and non-proliferation principles?

Even though Jakarta and Washington have conducted joint military activities and engaged in bilateral agreements for arms transfer lately, Jakarta has not been quiet following the announcement of the submarine deal between Canberra, Washington and London.⁷⁶ AUKUS is considered to be one of the most ambitious defense partnerships in recent history. It encompasses a promise by the United Kingdom and the United States to equip Australia with nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSNs). According to the agreement in September 2021, the two countries should provide Canberra with 3-5 Virginia-class US submarines by early 2032.⁷⁷

Indonesia has questioned the deal for its involvement in nuclear technology transfer from NWS to a NNWS and the potential vulnerability this entails. Indonesia has not expressed a plain objection but its concern towards the risk stemming from the transfer of a nuclear naval propulsion device (NNP). Among the arguments used in a working paper presented to the 2020 NPT Review Conference: (1) the uranium enriched to fuel naval propulsion is near weapons-grade levels and even weapons-grade; (2) the production, use, and disposition of highly enriched uranium could be used to shield material for a nuclear weapons program; (3) the application of nuclear materials for naval propulsion could lead to safety risks; (4) transferring to and receiving the transfer from any recipient of nuclear weapons and nuclear explosive devices is against the backdrop of Article I and II of the NPT; and (5) any transfer involving nuclear materials and technology for military purposes from NWS to NNWS could lead to potential proliferation.⁷⁸ During the Preparatory Committee of the NPT Review Conference in August 2023, Indonesia noted that it had been following closely the development of the NNP, stressing that *“challenges may arise from the potential dual-use nature of this technology, where the same advancements can be applied to the development of nuclear weapons and weakening the safeguards regime”*.⁷⁹

It is noteworthy that the AUKUS deal does not violate the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty also known as the Treaty of Rarotonga, to which Australia is a party.⁸⁰ This could explain why Jakarta's concern over the deal does not question its legality but points primarily to the perceived potential security risks. The Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs delivered a statement directed to Australia emphasizing the importance of Australia continuing to meet its nuclear non-proliferation obligations as well as maintaining regional peace, stability, and security in accordance to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation.⁸¹ A more explicit statement by

⁷⁶ Daniel Hurst, “Aukus could weaken China deterrence, US congress research paper suggests”, [The Guardian](#), 4 October 2023.

⁷⁷ Ashley Townshend, “The AUKUS Submarine Deal Highlights a Tectonic Shift in the U.S.-Australia Alliance”, [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#), 27 March 2023.

⁷⁸ “Nuclear naval propulsion: working paper submitted by Indonesia”, [United Nations](#), 18 July 2022.

⁷⁹ “Statement by H.E. Mr. Febrian A. Ruddyard, Alternate Head of Delegation of the Republic of Indonesia at the General Debate of the First Preparatory Committee Meeting, For the 2026 Review Conference of the Parties to The Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons”, [Reaching Critical Will](#), 1 August 2023.

⁸⁰ “Treaty of Rarotonga”, [United Nations](#).

⁸¹ “Statement on Australia's Nuclear-powered Submarines Program”, [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia](#), 17 September 2021.

Indonesian Deputy Foreign Minister Mahendra Siregar declared that Australia's nuclear submarine would have a destabilizing impact on the region and provoke further arms race.⁸²

It is interesting that the response to AUKUS has differed greatly among ASEAN member states and has been a subject of controversy.⁸³ Malaysia shares Jakarta's views and stressed the need for all parties not to escalate the nuclear arms race in the Indo-Pacific.⁸⁴ Singapore has remained neutral and hopes that the deal will contribute to peace and stability in the region.⁸⁵ Cambodia, a key partner of China in ASEAN, has not blatantly rejected the nuclear submarine deal and "expects" that AUKUS will not "fuel unhealthy rivalries and further escalate tensions" in the region.⁸⁶ Meanwhile, the closest partner of the United States in the region, Thailand, has not provided any statement in this matter. The Lao PDR, Brunei, Vietnam, and Myanmar, also chose to abstain from making any statement.⁸⁷ Among ASEAN states, only the Philippines has supported the agreement, describing AUKUS as a positive addition to the regional security architecture.⁸⁸

The perceived threat from AUKUS drove more tensions with the Chinese government. China's Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin called out the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia, saying they "completely disregard the concerns of the international communities and are walking further and further down the path of error and danger".⁸⁹ However, China received probably less support than expected from ASEAN member states, which may show that US power projection is not perceived in the Indo-Pacific region as negatively as thought in Beijing. As Indonesia and Malaysia have been the only two countries proactive in stressing the risk linked to sharing NNP technology, the deployment of US submarines in Australian waters and nuclear technology sharing may not be universally viewed as posing as much threat as China would have expected.

These diplomatic endeavours over AUKUS could explain why Beijing was the first P5 country to consider signing the SEANWFZ protocol. Apart from raising the profile of proliferation risks, signing the protocol would serve Beijing's political interest by improving its relations with ASEAN states. The Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson asserted this in March 2023, stating that AUKUS "undercuts ASEAN countries' effort to establish SEANWFZ and seriously undermines the ASEAN-centred regional cooperation architecture in East Asia".⁹⁰

⁸² David Engel, "AUKUS and Australia-Indonesia relations: 2+2 clever by half", [The Strategist](#), 7 October 2021.

⁸³ Derek Grossman, "Why China Should Worry About Asia's Reaction to AUKUS", [RAND Corporation](#), 15 April 2023.

⁸⁴ "Enhanced Trilateral Security Partnership Between Australia, United Kingdom and the United States of America (AUKUS)", [Ministry of Foreign Affairs Malaysia](#), 14 March 2023.

⁸⁵ "PM Lee speaks with PM Scott Morrison about Australia's new trilateral partnership with US, UK", [Channel News Asia](#), 16 September 2021.

⁸⁶ "Press Release: Outcomes of the Phone Conversation between His Excellency PRAK Sokhonn, Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of the Kingdom of Cambodia, with Senator the Hon Marise Payne, Minister for Foreign Affairs and Minister for Women of Australia", [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Cambodia](#), 8 October 2021.

⁸⁷ Mingjiang Li, "ASEAN's responses to AUKUS: implications for strategic realignments in the Indo-Pacific", [China International Strategy Review](#), 27 November 2022.

⁸⁸ "Aukus gets the Philippines' backing – despite warnings from Indonesia, Malaysia about defence partnership", [South China Morning Post](#), 21 September 2021.

⁸⁹ Amy Hawkins, "China says Aukus submarines deal embarks on 'path of error and danger'", [The Guardian](#), 14 March 2023.

⁹⁰ Hoang Thi Ha, "Why China Supports the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone", [Fulcrum](#), 14 June 2023.

Despite Jakarta's stated opinion that AUKUS could add to the regional military build-up and undermine non-proliferation efforts in Southeast Asia, in a recent interview in May 2023, Indonesian President Joko Widodo publicly referred to AUKUS parties as partners and not a threat to ASEAN's objective of maintaining peace and stability in the region.⁹¹ As a supporting statement, Indonesian Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto claimed that Indonesia understands and respects the need for Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States to establish the trilateral security pact as it respects the fact that a country is allowed to protect itself should their national interests be threatened.⁹²

There are two possible explanations for Indonesia's change of perspective. First, Canberra's effort to provide security reassurance to Indonesia seemed to have been successful. It was shown during the visit of Australian Foreign Minister Marisa Payne to Jakarta in November 2021 and met with Indonesian Foreign Minister, Retno Marsudi, to discuss security matters revolving around AUKUS.⁹³ In November 2023, Australian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Richard Marles visited Jakarta and reaffirmed that *"Australia is committed to working with our regional partners in support of a peaceful, secure, and prosperous Indo-Pacific region, with ASEAN at its centre"*.⁹⁴

In order to build trust and lessen international security concerns, Australia continuously reports to the Director General of the IAEA on the project. In May 2023, the IAEA published a report on NNP with a focus on AUKUS and Australia's commitments towards global non-proliferation and disarmament.⁹⁵ Through this report, the Director General reiterated its confidence in Australia and in the fact that the submarine deal will be managed under strict implementation of the Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement. The increased transparency regarding the submarine deal and the confirmation of Australia's goodwill in the IAEA report has been received positively in Indonesia. During the IAEA Board of Governors in September 2023, however, Indonesia noted the significant development of NNP and indicated that it will be continuously following the progress regarding the safeguards statutory mandate by the IAEA.⁹⁶ This statement shows that communication on greater transparency around security and the implementation of global norms tends to reassure Indonesia on the safe use of NNP and the fact that the IAEA is actively playing the role of a guarantor in this nuclear technology transfer.

Secondly, the increasing activity of Beijing's vessels in the North Natuna Sea has caused strong security concerns in Indonesia. In early 2023, the Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) was seen patrolling in the Indonesian EEZ of the Natuna Sea. Moreover, China deployed its CCG 5901, the world's largest coast guard ship, in the Natuna Sea near Indonesia's Tuna Block gas field, which can be interpreted as a strong signal to Jakarta over its sea territorial claim.⁹⁷ Indonesia responded to this action with the deployment of a warship, maritime patrol plane, and drone

⁹¹ Emma Connors, "Jokowi softens stance on AUKUS, the Quad", [Financial Review](#), 9 May 2023.

⁹² Kate Lamb, "Indonesia's defence minister says 'understands, respect' AUKUS pact", [Reuters](#), 22 November 2021.

⁹³ "Menlu Australia Kunjungi RI Redam Kecemasan ASEAN soal AUKUS", [Sekretariat Nasional ASEAN-Indonesia](#), 10 November 2021.

⁹⁴ "Deputy Prime Minister to travel to Indonesia", [Ministry of Defence of Australia](#), 16 November 2023.

⁹⁵ "Nuclear naval propulsion: Australia", [IAEA](#), 31 May 2023.

⁹⁶ "Statement by H.E. Dr. iur. Damos D. Agusman Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary/Permanent Representative of the Republic of Indonesia Head of Delegation of the Republic of Indonesia At the 67th General Conference of the International Atomic Energy Agency", [IAEA](#), 29 September 2023.

⁹⁷ John Mcbeth, "Indonesia moving to keep China at bay in Natuna Sea", [Asia Times](#), 23 January 2023.

to monitor the Chinese vessel. Indonesia's ship tracking data shows that CCG 5901 has been sailing particularly close to Indonesia's Tuna Block gas field, an oil field where Beijing urged Jakarta to stop conducting test drilling in 2021.⁹⁸ As the sovereignty of Indonesian North Natuna Sea is non-negotiable, deterring Chinese illegal claims is an essential part of Indonesia's national interest. Although Indonesia has not expressed this explicitly, the watering down of its criticism against the submarine deal is probably driven by the hope to ensure that the United States and Australia could be relied on as partners in case China decided to go forward with its aggressive behaviour.

Conclusion

As one of the most influential countries in ASEAN, Indonesia has always made sure to actively use its firm position against nuclear weapons through diplomacy and public pronouncements in both regional and global contexts. Its past nuclear ambition has never been rekindled since the end of the Sukarno era and the country only supports the full use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, which is in line with the important political and economic agenda associated with the building of the first nuclear power plant in the country.

Regarding disarmament, Indonesia is known for its continuous support to a world free of nuclear weapons. It has played an active role in promoting regional instruments such as the SEANWFZ Treaty, and a number of international instruments including the NPT, the CTBT, IAEA Safeguards Agreement and, more recently, the TPNW. The country has been using a variety of diplomatic channels to show its commitment and to gain more international support, including in its long-standing effort of bringing the NWS to sign the protocol of the Bangkok Treaty.

In recent years, the ever-changing nature of the global disarmament architecture has led Indonesia to step up its involvement. Moreover, the evolving security dynamics in the Indo-Pacific region requires Indonesia to adjust its position in the midst of great power rivalry. The expanding military presence of the US and China in the region, particularly, is seen by Indonesia as an emerging threat, which could lead to further arms race in the Indo-Pacific. Indeed, the acquisition by Australia of nuclear-powered submarines could drive Beijing to produce more advanced nuclear-armed submarines in the future,⁹⁹ spiralling the already heightened tension even further. In this context, Jakarta has remained solid on its foreign policy goals of maintaining neutrality.

That being said, Jakarta's national interest over the sovereignty of the North Natuna Sea has pushed Indonesia to assert itself, rendering the option to stay fully neutral and take the middle ground stand more complicated. The continuous tension in Natuna could explain the shift of Indonesia's reaction towards AUKUS – from questioning the security implication of the deal to calling it “a partner”, to quote President Joke Widow, for ASEAN. The idea that the deployment of US submarines in the region could eventually contribute to security in the

⁹⁸ “Indonesia deploys warship to monitor China coast guard vessel”, [Al Jazeera](#), 14 January 2023.

⁹⁹ Greg Torode, “Inside Asia's arms race: China near 'breakthroughs' with nuclear-armed submarines, report says”, [Reuters](#), 9 October 2023.

region and to deterring China's illegal intentions may have become more mainstream within the Indonesian government.

The recent 2024 presidential election in Indonesia will determine the country's stance on economic, political, and security interests that could shape the evolving regional security dynamics of the Indo-Pacific. The elected President, Prabowo Subianto, a former lieutenant-general during Suharto's regime with close links with the armed forces, publicly supports AUKUS and declared that he would direct Indonesia to continue defending its maritime rights over Natuna, while also still maintaining good relationship with Washington and Beijing.¹⁰⁰ Nevertheless, Indonesia's firm stance on nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation is not likely to change, as the country has proved its commitments time and again for a world without nuclear weapons.

¹⁰⁰ Joshua Kurlantzick, "Indonesia's Presidential Election: The Old Guard Faces the New", [Council on Foreign Relations](#), 12 January 2024.