

# Indonesia's Diplomatic Challenges in Responding to Nuclear-Based Military Modernization Plans in the Indo-Pacific Region

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**Abstract.** The Indo-Pacific region has emerged as a focal point of geopolitical tensions, primarily driven by advancements in nuclear military capabilities. This is particularly evident in the context of the AUKUS partnership, which facilitates the transfer of nuclear-powered submarine technology to Australia. Indonesia, known for its non-nuclear stance and active participation in ASEAN, has diligently worked to promote denuclearization and strengthen regional stability through multilateral diplomatic efforts on platforms such as ASEAN, the IAEA, and the Non-Aligned Movement. This analysis explores the complexities Indonesia faces in its endeavors, emphasizing the role of multilateral diplomatic strategies in addressing the nuances of nuclear-based military modernization. Employing a qualitative methodology focused on document analysis, the study reveals that Indonesia encounters several challenges, including major power rivalries, conflicting interests within ASEAN, and limited diplomatic resources. The article argues that multilateral diplomacy serves as a strategic pathway for Indonesia to advance peace in the Indo-Pacific, although it requires careful navigation of intricate geopolitical dynamics.

**Keywords:** Multilateral Diplomacy, Indo-Pacific, Military Modernization, Denuclearization, ASEAN, IAEA, AUKUS

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## INTRODUCTION

The Indo-Pacific region has emerged as a critical arena in global geopolitics, where interactions among major powers, strategic interests, and economic integration initiatives converge within a multifaceted and rapidly evolving environment (Mazumdar, 2024). Serving as a nexus between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, the Indo-Pacific transcends mere geographical boundaries; it embodies a political landscape marked by strategic tensions and emerging prospects for collaboration in the twenty-first century.

The region holds significant strategic importance for both major and middle powers due to its central role in facilitating global trade routes, abundant maritime resources, and economic opportunities for coastal states. The United States, Japan, India, and Australia collectively known as the Quad have advocated for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy as a countermeasure to China's growing strategic presence in the region. China perceives FOIP as a strategic effort aimed at constraining its influence and development, particularly as this approach is viewed as a direct rejection of Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Li, 2020).

In recent years, the security dynamics of the region have undergone significant transformation with the establishment of the AUKUS trilateral security partnership involving

Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Among its most controversial elements is the plan to transfer nuclear-powered submarine technology to Australia. This initiative not only enhances Australia's military capabilities but also raises substantial concerns regarding nuclear proliferation and the potential escalation of an arms race in the region (Newman & Williams, 2005). Nuclear-powered submarines possess distinct strategic advantages, including extended operational range and endurance, making them symbols of military strength and national pride. During the 1960s and 1970s, the British Royal Navy regarded nuclear submarines as essential instruments for maintaining its status as a dominant maritime power.

Indonesia, recognized as a leading maritime nation in Southeast Asia and an active member of ASEAN, has a vested interest in maintaining regional stability and preventing the escalation of tensions stemming from the advancement of nuclear military capabilities. Historically, Indonesia has made significant contributions to nuclear non-proliferation efforts, a commitment deeply rooted in its proactive and independent foreign policy established during the early years of its independence (Sipahutar, 2020; Siracusa & Warren, 2018). As a founding member of the Non-Aligned Movement in 1961, Indonesia has consistently championed a world free of nuclear weapons, as evidenced by its role in the establishment of the Southeast Asia Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ) through the 1995 Bangkok Treaty (Acharya, 2021).

This dedication is reinforced by Indonesia's historical context as a developing nation navigating Cold War geopolitical tensions, which led it to prioritize multilateral diplomacy as a means of shaping the global security landscape (Athirah, 2025; Maksum et al., 2024). In today's context, emerging challenges such as the AUKUS partnership and China's military modernization compel Indonesia to continue developing adaptive and inclusive diplomatic strategies. The security dynamics of the Indo-Pacific are shaped by multiple factors, including territorial disputes in the South China Sea, the increased military presence of major powers, and advancements in sophisticated military technologies (Sarjito, 2024; Wu, 2021).

As noted by Waroy (2024), China's naval expansion, alongside India's modernization of its nuclear capabilities, has created a complex strategic landscape. Within this context, ASEAN countries such as Indonesia are challenged to navigate the intricate interactions between national interests and external influences. Indonesia engages in multilateral diplomacy through platforms such as ASEAN, the IAEA, and the Non-Aligned Movement to reinforce its commitment to denuclearization and regional stability, while also managing the geopolitical complexities introduced by AUKUS and the FOIP-BRI rivalry.

## METHODS

This study examines the complexities surrounding Indonesia's diplomatic efforts in addressing nuclear-centered military advancements in the Indo-Pacific region, with a particular emphasis on the role of multilateral diplomatic strategies through international forums. A qualitative methodology is employed, with document analysis serving as the primary research method. Primary data is sourced from official documents issued by the Indonesian government, International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) reports, and diplomatic statements delivered at ASEAN forums. Secondary data includes peer-reviewed academic publications such as *The Pacific Review* and the *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, as well as key scholarly works including ASEAN and Regional Documents were selected based on three criteria: (1) relevance to Indonesia's nuclear diplomacy and broader Indo-Pacific security discourse; (2) credibility of the issuing institution (government, international organization, or peer-reviewed scholarship), and (3) temporal scope, with a focus on materials published to capture both historical continuity and recent developments. The analysis follows thematic methodology to identify recurring patterns and narratives in Indonesia's challenges and diplomatic strategies. The process involved several stages: (1) initial familiarization with the documents; (2) open coding of relevant passages to capture emerging themes; (3) categorization of codes into higher-order themes such as "nuclear non-proliferation," "ASEAN centrality," and "regional trust-building," and (4) refinement of themes through iterative comparison across sources. To enhance reliability, coding

decisions were revisited multiple times, and themes were cross-validated against different types of documents (e.g., government statements vs. academic analyses). The choice of document analysis is grounded in the fact that diplomacy is often conducted and communicated through official statements, treaties, and institutional records, making these documents essential to understanding Indonesia's strategies. While interviews with policymakers or diplomatic actors could have provided additional insider perspectives, this study prioritizes documentary evidence to ensure replicability and transparency in the face of access limitations to high-level officials. The reliance on documents introduces certain limitations. Publicly available materials may omit sensitive deliberations, and interpretation is subject to potential researcher bias. To mitigate this, triangulation was employed by cross-checking themes across different categories of sources (official, organizational, and academic). Nonetheless, the findings are bounded by the availability and completeness of published documents. The analysis is informed by Ruggie's (1992) conceptualization of multilateral diplomacy as policy coordination among three or more states through institutions to achieve common objectives, and Keohane's (1990) argument that such diplomacy is most effective when states share mutual interests and build trust through institutional frameworks such as ASEAN and the IAEA. This theoretical foundation provides a lens through which Indonesia's role as a neutral actor in promoting nuclear arms control and regional stability can be critically assessed.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### The Context of Nuclear-Based Military Modernization in the Indo-Pacific

The Indo-Pacific region has emerged as a critical geopolitical stage for great power rivalry, involving key actors such as the United States, China, and Russia. The modernization of military capabilities centered on nuclear technology as exemplified by the AUKUS partnership has raised serious concerns regarding the escalation of regional tensions and the potential onset of an arms race. Graham (2021) and Saraswati & Indrawati (2025), argues that the AUKUS partnership not only enhances Australia's military capabilities but also provokes reactions from ASEAN member states, particularly Indonesia and Malaysia, who express concerns about its implications for the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ). Additionally, China has significantly advanced its military capabilities, particularly through the development of aircraft carriers and ballistic missile systems, contributing to the growing complexity of regional security dynamics (Lee, 2023). In response, Indonesia, a firm supporter of denuclearization, has adopted multilateral diplomatic strategies to reaffirm its commitment to a nuclear-free zone and to promote inter-state dialogue aimed at regulating nuclear proliferation.

These developments are further influenced by strategic considerations, including the increasing military presence in the South China Sea and the Pacific Ocean. China has significantly expanded its naval capabilities, including the deployment of submarines equipped with nuclear-capable ballistic missiles, posing substantial challenges to regional stability (Kristensen & McKinzie, 2015). Meanwhile, the planned deployment of nuclear-powered submarines by Australia under the AUKUS agreement although not armed with nuclear warheads has triggered critical scrutiny regarding compliance with SEANWFZ principles, which prohibit the use of nuclear technology for military purposes within ASEAN territories. Tensions have been further heightened by the ambiguity demonstrated by AUKUS member states regarding IAEA oversight of such technologies, fostering skepticism among non-nuclear states, including Indonesia (Weatherbee, 2022).

Moreover, the modernization of nuclear military capabilities in the Indo-Pacific extends beyond AUKUS and China. Countries such as India are advancing their nuclear arsenals, including the development of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and nuclear-powered submarines, thus introducing additional complexities to the regional security landscape (Ghoshal, 2024). Although India is not a party to SEANWFZ, its nuclear capabilities in the Indian Ocean significantly influence threat perceptions across the Indo-Pacific, prompting Indonesia to intensify its multilateral diplomatic efforts to prevent further escalation. In this context, Indonesia actively

engages in platforms such as ASEAN and the IAEA to advocate for nuclear arms control and to foster inclusive regional dialogue.

### **Indonesia's Multilateral Diplomacy in Responding to Nuclear-Based Military Modernization**

Indonesia occupies a critical position in reinforcing regional norms through ASEAN, and its multilateral diplomatic initiatives addressing nuclear military modernization underscore its commitment to denuclearization and the cultivation of regional stability. Within IAEA forums, Indonesia has consistently emphasized the need for stringent oversight regarding nuclear technology transfers including those associated with the AUKUS collaboration to ensure compliance with the Non-Proliferation Treaty (International Atomic Energy Agency, 2022). Moreover, through ASEAN, Indonesia has actively promoted discourse aimed at strengthening the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ) as a regional standard prohibiting the use of nuclear technology for military purposes. These initiatives also advocate for the peaceful application of nuclear technologies in fields such as energy and health, aligning with the developmental aspirations of many Global South countries (Acharya, 2021).

The effectiveness of Indonesia's multilateral diplomacy depends on its ability to build consensus among ASEAN member states and dialogue partners. However, internal divergences within ASEAN present notable obstacles. For example, Vietnam and the Philippines have strengthened their security ties with the United States, potentially undermining ASEAN's collective stance on AUKUS (Weatherbee, 2022). Additionally, as noted by Lee (2023), certain ASEAN members, including Singapore, display a tendency to support the U.S. military presence in the region, which contrasts with the more critical positions adopted by Indonesia and Malaysia regarding the AUKUS agreement. Indonesia has sought to broaden cross-regional dialogue by engaging countries beyond ASEAN, including Japan and South Korea, both of which share a vested interest in maintaining Indo-Pacific stability. Indonesia has repeatedly advocated for the establishment of regional consultation mechanisms through the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) to address nuclear security issues (Haacke, 2009). This strategy enables Indonesia to extend its diplomatic influence while navigating the complexities of balancing the diverse priorities of its partners such as Japan's security alliance with the United States and South Korea's primary focus on nuclear threats from North Korea.

Indonesia's diplomatic initiatives reflect a careful balancing act between security considerations and the pursuit of sustainable development. By promoting the non-military application of nuclear technologies, Indonesia aims to demonstrate that denuclearization efforts need not hinder technological progress; rather, such efforts can direct innovation toward global human advancement (International Atomic Energy Agency, 2022). Within this framework, Indonesia positions itself as a bridge between security concerns and development imperatives, enhancing its credibility in global forums particularly among developing nations facing energy dilemmas. Nonetheless, the implementation of Indonesia's multilateral diplomacy faces significant challenges, including the need for deeper collaboration with the IAEA to ensure compliance with nuclear safety protocols.

A major impediment lies in the absence of a transparent verification framework for monitoring state commitments to denuclearization, particularly with respect to sensitive technologies such as nuclear-powered submarine reactors. Indonesia must continue to advocate for the enhancement of IAEA monitoring protocols while cultivating constructive diplomatic relations with AUKUS member states to avoid direct confrontation. Indonesia draws on its historical engagement with the Non-Aligned Movement to garner support from Global South countries, many of which share its normative stance on the importance of a nuclear weapon-free world (Hunt, 2023). This strategy allows Indonesia to extend its reach beyond the Indo-Pacific region and reinforce its solidarity with other developing nations in counterbalancing the disproportionate influence of great powers in global governance discussions.

## **Challenges to Indonesia's Diplomacy**

Indonesia faces a multitude of challenges in executing its multilateral diplomatic agenda. The intensifying rivalry among great powers in the Indo-Pacific has produced a polarizing environment that hinders the achievement of multilateral consensus. Lee (2023) observes that China emphasizes national sovereignty in nuclear arms control, whereas the United States prioritizes security alliances, as reflected in the AUKUS framework. Indonesia must skillfully navigate these tensions to preserve its role as a neutral regional mediator. Intra-ASEAN incoherence presents a further challenge. Although SEANWFZ has been ratified by all ASEAN member states through the Bangkok Treaty, its implementation is impeded by divergent strategic interests. Indonesia and Malaysia have voiced strong concerns regarding AUKUS, citing its potential to undermine the integrity of the nuclear-weapon-free zone in Southeast Asia, while Singapore and the Philippines appear more supportive of U.S. military presence in the region (Simon, 1991). Another key constraint lies in Indonesia's limited diplomatic resources. Despite active participation in international platforms such as the IAEA and the NPT, Indonesia's capacity to shape global agendas remains modest relative to major powers. The IAEA's 2022 report notes that countries like Indonesia particularly those in the developing world often rely on multilateral coalitions to amplify their influence, a process that entails extensive negotiation and strategic concession. Moreover, technical and verification challenges related to SEANWFZ significantly affect the effectiveness of Indonesia's diplomatic efforts. While the zone establishes a legal commitment to nuclear weapons exclusion, the mechanisms for monitoring and verifying compliance particularly concerning nuclear-powered submarines under the AUKUS deal remain inadequate. Indonesia is urged to push for the strengthening of supplementary protocols within the IAEA framework to ensure enforceability, though such efforts frequently face resistance from dominant nuclear-armed states (Weatherbee, 2022).

## **Indonesia's Strategy, Impact, and Prospects in Multilateral Diplomacy**

Indonesia has employed a range of strategies to navigate the inherent complexities of its multilateral diplomacy. First, it has strengthened ASEAN's role as a diplomatic platform through the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the East Asia Summit (EAS), facilitating discussions on nuclear security and denuclearization with the participation of major powers such as the United States, China, and Russia (Acharya, 2021). Second, Indonesia actively engages in global institutions such as the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), forging alliances with non-nuclear states particularly those within the Non-Aligned Movement to reinforce its position in advocating for nuclear arms control. Third, Indonesia has enhanced its public diplomacy through seminars, conferences, and scholarly publications, shaping international perceptions of the importance of the Southeast Asia Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ) and building broader support for the denuclearization agenda (Weatherbee, 2022).

Indonesia has also initiated informal talks with AUKUS member states to advocate compliance with IAEA standards related to nuclear-powered submarines, though such initiatives often encounter diplomatic constraints. At the 2022 Review Conference of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), Indonesia called for greater transparency in nuclear technology transfers while reaffirming its commitment to the peaceful uses of nuclear energy, particularly in the fields of energy production and healthcare (International Atomic Energy Agency, 2022). This dual-track approach illustrates Indonesia's ability to maintain a critical stance on nuclear-based military modernization while continuing to promote dialogue and collaboration. Indonesia's multilateral diplomacy has significantly elevated its role as a key actor in the Indo-Pacific region. These initiatives not only reinforce Indonesia's commitment to the SEANWFZ and the NPT but also position the country as a neutral mediator amidst intensifying geopolitical rivalries.

By strategically leveraging platforms such as ASEAN and the IAEA, Indonesia has created opportunities to engage in sensitive discussions such as those concerning AUKUS despite enduring pressures from major powers like the United States and China (Apriliana, 2024).

Moreover, Indonesia's active participation in the Non-Aligned Movement has consolidated solidarity among Global South nations, amplifying the collective voice of developing countries on nuclear non-proliferation issues (Nesadurai, 2023). The success of Indonesia's diplomatic efforts will depend on multiple factors. First, the ability to balance competing interests within ASEAN through dialogue and compromise is critical in forging a unified regional stance. Furthermore, gaining support from the broader international community especially from non-nuclear states is essential for strengthening global norms surrounding denuclearization. Enhancing Indonesia's diplomatic and technical capacity will also play a crucial role in addressing complex issues such as nuclear verification mechanisms. Indonesia's leadership in the G20 and ASEAN presents a timely opportunity to advance a global security agenda centered on denuclearization, thereby reinforcing its role as a credible and neutral mediator (Lee, 2023).

Additionally, Indonesia has the potential to expand its diplomatic strategy by engaging non-state actors, including civil society organizations and academic institutions, to build broader support for denuclearization initiatives. Collaboration with think tanks and international research institutes could substantially improve Indonesia's capacity to formulate more effective diplomatic and technical strategies, particularly in the realm of nuclear oversight. This approach also offers the potential to raise global awareness of the significance of SEANWFZ through digital diplomacy initiatives, including social media campaigns, which have emerged as powerful instruments for shaping global narratives. Looking ahead, Indonesia must continue refining its diplomatic approach to effectively navigate the evolving geopolitical landscape. By strategically leveraging multilateral platforms and bolstering national capacity, Indonesia is well-positioned to sustain its leadership in advancing peace and stability across the Indo-Pacific region. Its agility in addressing challenges such as geopolitical polarization and regional power asymmetries will significantly determine its influence on the global security architecture solidifying its position as a reliable advocate for a world free of nuclear weapons.

## CONCLUSION

Indonesia's multilateral diplomatic initiatives in addressing nuclear-oriented military advancements in the Indo-Pacific region reflect a deep commitment to promoting regional stability and advancing denuclearization. By actively participating in platforms such as ASEAN, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and the Non-Aligned Movement, Indonesia has positioned itself as a neutral entity facilitating dialogue and collaboration amid intensifying rivalries between major powers such as the United States and China. These initiatives not only reinforce the principles of the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ) and the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) but also elevate Indonesia's status as a pivotal regional leader on global security issues. The effectiveness of this diplomatic approach is evident in Indonesia's capacity to foster dialogue within international forums, although significant implementation challenges persist. Nonetheless, barriers such as geopolitical polarization, conflicting interests within ASEAN, limited diplomatic resources, and technical challenges related to verification continue to impede the full effectiveness of Indonesia's initiatives. The strategic rivalry between the United States and China each promoting the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), respectively has created a complex geopolitical landscape in which Indonesia must carefully navigate to avoid perceptions of alignment with either side. Furthermore, divergent positions among ASEAN member states, such as Indonesia's critical stance on AUKUS in contrast to Singapore's more accommodating approach, underscore the urgent need for more intensive efforts to forge regional consensus. The complexity of monitoring nuclear technologies further necessitates the enhancement of Indonesia's diplomatic and technical capabilities. To address these challenges, Indonesia must consolidate multilateral coalitions through ASEAN, the IAEA, and the Non-Aligned Movement, while also advancing its public diplomacy and strengthening its technical expertise. Indonesia's leadership in the G20 and ASEAN presents significant opportunities to further the denuclearization agenda within the broader framework of global security, while simultaneously reinforcing its role as a neutral mediator. Through a strategy that is both resolute and adaptable,

Indonesia is well-positioned to sustain its influential role in advancing peace and denuclearization in the Indo-Pacific region. This study illustrates that multilateral diplomacy constitutes a strategic maneuver for Indonesia; however, its effectiveness is highly contingent upon Indonesia's ability to navigate complex geopolitical dynamics and to build consensus among diverse stakeholders.

## SUGGESTION

In formulating its future strategies, Indonesia has the opportunity to strengthen this methodology by engaging non-state actors, including civil society organizations and academic institutions, thereby amplifying advocacy for denuclearization. By implementing these measures, Indonesia can maintain regional stability while solidifying its position as a prominent figure in multilateral diplomacy on the international stage.

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