

The Potential Threat of Iran's Nuclear Conflict to Nuclear Proliferation in Southeast Asia

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Abstract

This study examines the potential impact of Iran's nuclear program on the perceptions of security in Southeast Asia, highlighting how Iran's resilience under international pressure could influence ASEAN nations. Using the diffusion of norms theory, the paper identifies Iran's actions as a precedent that may inspire similar pursuits in the region, threatening regional stability. It further explores Indonesia's strategic role in addressing this challenge through diplomatic initiatives, proactive leadership in ASEAN frameworks, and the development of peaceful nuclear technology. Strengthened collaboration with international bodies such as the IAEA and robust regional policies are essential to ensure nuclear development remains focused on peaceful purposes. Indonesia's leadership in advocating non-proliferation, fostering regional cooperation, and mediating conflicts is critical to maintaining Southeast Asia as a nuclear-weapon-free zone. The findings underline the need for comprehensive strategies to mitigate proliferation risks while enhancing regional security and stability.

1. Introduction

In the context of global geopolitics, Iran's nuclear technology development has emerged as a highly sensitive and controversial issue. Since the inception of its nuclear program in the 1950s, Iran has consistently advanced its nuclear capabilities, including uranium enrichment, to high levels of up to 60% (CNN Indonesia, 2024). This has raised concerns and drawn significant pressure from the United States and other Western countries, which perceive this development as a potential threat to regional and global security. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has also actively sought to ensure Iran's compliance with international regulations governing the peaceful use of nuclear energy. However, Iran remains resolute, continuing its nuclear program, which has become a symbol of national strength and independence.

The United States, as one of the most vocal opponents of Iran's nuclear program, has imposed a variety of economic and diplomatic sanctions to halt its progress. Nevertheless, these measures have not been entirely successful in deterring Iran, which has, in turn, strengthened its position on both regional and international fronts. This situation has created apprehensions among several countries, including those in Southeast Asia, that Iran's success in pursuing its nuclear program despite considerable pressure could set a precedent for other nations in the region to follow suit. As a country with significant diplomatic influence within ASEAN and a strong commitment to nuclear non-proliferation, Indonesia views these developments as a potential threat to regional stability. Indonesia has long advocated for a nuclear-free Southeast Asia through various international and regional forums. These efforts include the signing and ratifying of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the promotion of the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ).

However, should a Southeast Asian nation begin to develop its nuclear program under the pretext of security or national independence inspired by Iran's actions, Indonesia's diplomatic efforts could face significant challenges. Such developments could erode Indonesia's credibility as a staunch advocate of non-proliferation and diminish its diplomatic influence on the international stage. This issue is further compounded by initiatives such as AUKUS, which incorporates nuclear-powered technology for military purposes.

To address this scenario, Indonesia must enhance its role in multilateral diplomacy, collaborating with other ASEAN nations to reinforce the regional non-proliferation regime. Additionally, Indonesia must strengthen its national capacity for early detection and rapid response to nuclear proliferation threats. Cooperation with the IAEA and major global powers is also crucial to ensure that Southeast Asia remains free from the threat of nuclear weapons. Overall, the tensions between Iran and Western countries over its nuclear program serve as an early warning for Indonesia and Southeast Asian nations. Failure to manage nuclear proliferation in this region would not only threaten regional security but also undermine Indonesia's position as a committed advocate for global peace and stability. Consequently, Indonesia must continue to pursue robust non-proliferation diplomacy while fostering regional cooperation to address these challenges effectively.

This study offers a novel perspective by exploring how Iran's success in sustaining its nuclear program might set a precedent for Southeast Asian nations, particularly in the context of nuclear technology development under the guise of national independence. Furthermore, the study evaluates Indonesia's diplomatic role in maintaining its credibility as a primary advocate for nuclear non-proliferation amidst global challenges such as AUKUS and the potential escalation of nuclear ambitions in the region. Through an interdisciplinary approach combining geopolitical analysis, international security, and multilateral policy studies, this research also proposes strengthening early detection and rapid response mechanisms in Southeast Asia, leveraging collaboration with the IAEA and major global powers to safeguard regional stability and support the implementation of SEANWFZ.

2. Method

This research employs a qualitative approach using a comparative case study method to analyze the impact of Iran's nuclear program development on security and stability in Southeast Asia and the diplomatic policy responses of countries in the region. This approach allows for an in-depth examination of the complex dynamics involving the interaction between Iran's nuclear policies and Southeast Asia's regional security. Data collection was conducted through literature review and document analysis. The literature review includes academic journal articles, books, policy reports, and official documents from international organizations. This study employs thematic analysis techniques, which involve identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within the data. This technique was selected for its capability to uncover key themes and relationships within complex contexts. Data triangulation ensures consistency of findings by utilizing various data sources, while member checking involves engaging participants in verifying findings (Moleong, 2011).

This research adopts the Diffusion of Norms Theory, which explains how specific ideas, values, and practices spread across nations, influencing how they formulate and implement policies. This theory, developed by Finnemore and Sikkink, is articulated in their seminal work "International Norm Dynamics and Political Change." The theory posits that international norms can be internalized within domestic political systems through socialization mechanisms. The authors highlight that this diffusion process includes not only the adoption of positive norms, such as human rights and democracy but also the internalization of negative behaviors, including violations of international law.

The Security Dilemma concept is also central to this study. Rooted in realism's perspective on international anarchy, it elucidates how efforts by states to enhance their security paradoxically make them less secure. First introduced by John H. Herz in his book "Political Realism and Political Idealism" (1951), this theory argues that when a state seeks to bolster its security by strengthening its military or weaponry, such actions may be perceived as threats by other states. In response, these states may also enhance their military capabilities, triggering a cycle of mistrust and escalating tensions, even though the original intention was to achieve greater security.

In the context of Iran's nuclear development and its implications for Southeast Asia, Diffusion of Norms Theory is particularly relevant in understanding how Iran's success in sustaining its nuclear program, despite substantial international pressure, could influence the decisions of other nations in the region. For instance, Southeast Asian states might perceive Iran's nuclear program as an effective tool for strengthening national bargaining power and security. This could encourage them to consider similar steps, particularly if they feel threatened by regional powers. Thus, the Diffusion of Norms Theory provides a pertinent analytical framework for exploring how norms related to nuclear development might spread and be adopted in Southeast Asia, challenging long-standing non-proliferation efforts championed by countries like Indonesia.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1. Nuclear Development Plans in Southeast Asia

ASEAN member states have demonstrated their commitment to nuclear non-proliferation, as outlined in the Plan of Action to Strengthen the Implementation of the Treaty on the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (2023–2027). This document details strategic measures to enhance the implementation of the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ) Treaty over the next five years. It includes initiatives to promote accession to various international protocols on nuclear safety and non-proliferation, strengthen cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and encourage the peaceful use of nuclear energy in Southeast Asia. Furthermore, the plan underscores the importance of effective monitoring systems and regional capacity-building through platforms such as the ASEAN Network of Regulatory Bodies on Atomic Energy (ASEANTOM) and the Nuclear Energy Cooperation Sub-Sector Network (NEC-SSN). These efforts aim to ensure that countries in the region remain committed to non-proliferation goals while maintaining regional stability and security against the threat of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD).

However, challenges remain. Most ASEAN countries, including Indonesia, have signed and ratified the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW)—Indonesia completed its ratification in 2023 (DPR RI, 2023). Singapore, however, has not joined the TPNW (ICANW) and has announced plans to develop its nuclear technology, including training 100 nuclear energy experts (CNA, 2024). Given Singapore's limited land area, it cautiously assesses nuclear development (Andrew Palmer, 2010). Singapore's stance aligns with nuclear-armed states such as the United States, Iran, Russia, and North Korea, which also remain outside the TPNW framework.

In the Philippines, nuclear energy is considered a critical component of the global transition to sustainable energy systems and a means to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 75% by 2030. Following stalled nuclear development efforts in the 1970s and 1980s, the country is reviving its nuclear program to address rising energy demands (Shaina D. Macmac, 2023). On May 21, 2024, the Philippines and the United States formalized an agreement to train Filipinos in constructing and operating nuclear power plants. This cooperation builds on a November 2023 agreement, which paved the way for U.S. investments in the Philippines' nuclear energy sector. The agreement includes scholarships and exchange programs facilitated by the Philippine Department of Energy and the Philippine-American Educational Foundation to develop skilled personnel for clean energy infrastructure. It also established a Southeast Asian Civil Nuclear Industry Working Group based in Manila to connect Philippine partners with U.S. companies. The Philippines, often plagued by power outages and reliant on imported coal for over half its energy generation, hopes this initiative will address its looming energy crisis as the Malampaya gas fields—providing approximately 40% of Luzon's electricity—are depleting (The Economic Times, 2024).

Vietnam has also shown interest in nuclear development as part of its energy diversification strategy. The Communist Party of Vietnam (VCP) has endorsed the peaceful use of nuclear energy despite safety concerns. The government remains committed to its nuclear program, with plans to construct reactors through international collaborations with Russia, Japan, and potentially the United States. While delays have occurred due to safety and capacity challenges, nuclear energy is prioritized to meet growing domestic demand and reduce reliance on electricity imports. Vietnam has reassured the international community of its peaceful nuclear ambitions through adherence to IAEA protocols and the 2008 Atomic Energy Law, which prohibits the development of nuclear weapons. Proactive non-proliferation diplomacy and strong political commitment to nuclear safety standards aim to alleviate regional and global concerns. However,

uncertainties remain regarding the long-term sustainability and proliferation risks associated with Vietnam's nuclear energy program (Tanya Ogilvie-White, 2024).

In June 2024, Russia assisted Vietnam in developing nuclear power plants. The proposal, presented by Alexei Likhachev, head of Russia's state nuclear corporation Rosatom, to Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh during President Vladimir Putin's visit to Hanoi, includes options for high- and low-power nuclear plants, both land-based and floating. While Vietnam canceled its previous nuclear plans in 2016 due to the Fukushima disaster and budget constraints, it is reconsidering cooperation with Russia (Reuters, 2024).

3.2. The History of Iran's Nuclear Program

The development of Iran's nuclear program began in the 1950s with assistance from the United States under the "Atoms for Peace" initiative. In 1967, Iran constructed its first research reactor in Tehran, fueled by uranium supplied by the U.S. However, the Islamic Revolution of 1979 brought an abrupt halt to many nuclear projects and severed international cooperation. In the 1980s, Iran resumed its nuclear program with support from countries such as China and Russia. In 1995, Russia agreed to assist in completing the construction of the Bushehr nuclear reactor, which had been stalled for years. Despite delays, the completion of the Bushehr reactor became a significant symbol of Iran's nuclear ambitions.

Tensions escalated in the early 2000s when it was revealed that Iran had undisclosed uranium enrichment programs. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) discovered that Iran had engaged in uranium enrichment activities and constructed nuclear facilities without reporting them to the IAEA, in violation of its obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). This raised concerns that Iran might be pursuing the development of nuclear weapons. In response, the United Nations Security Council issued a series of resolutions demanding Iran halt its enrichment activities and imposed severe economic sanctions. Iran maintained that its nuclear program was solely for peaceful purposes, including electricity generation and medical research.

Intensive international diplomatic efforts culminated in the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the Iran Nuclear Deal. Under the JCPOA, Iran agreed to impose strict limitations on its nuclear program, such as reducing its enriched uranium stockpile, limiting the number of operational centrifuges, and allowing more rigorous IAEA inspections in exchange for the lifting of most international sanctions. However, in 2018, U.S. President Donald Trump withdrew the United States from the JCPOA and reimposed stringent sanctions on Iran. In response, Iran gradually reduced its compliance with the agreement and resumed higher-level uranium enrichment activities.

This impasse continues, with international concerns about Iran's potential pursuit of nuclear weapons remaining high. Repeated negotiations have aimed to restore Iran's adherence to the JCPOA or to achieve alternative diplomatic solutions, but no conclusive agreement has been reached. Iran continues to assert that its nuclear program serves peaceful purposes, yet skepticism and mistrust persist within the international community. The history of Iran's nuclear program underscores the complex tension between a nation's right to develop nuclear technology for peaceful purposes and global concerns about nuclear weapons proliferation (IAEA).

3.3. Potential Threats of Nuclear Proliferation in Southeast Asia

Iran's development and persistence in maintaining its nuclear program, despite intense international pressure, highlight its potential for success in influencing security perceptions in Southeast Asia. According to the diffusion of norms theory proposed by Finnemore and Sikkink, the norms and practices adopted by one state can disseminate and shape the policies of other nations. Iran's ability to withstand international opposition while advancing its nuclear ambitions could set a precedent for Southeast Asian countries to consider similar pathways.

The ASEAN region demonstrates its commitment to nuclear non-proliferation through initiatives like the Plan of Action to Strengthen the Implementation of the Treaty on the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (2023–2027). Despite this, several potential threats require attention. Most ASEAN member states, including Indonesia, signed and ratified the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW)

in 2023. However, Singapore remains outside the TPNW and plans to advance its nuclear technology. This situation could signal other countries in the region that exceptions are possible, especially given Singapore's alignment with the United States. From a realist perspective, this raises the potential threat of Singapore escalating its nuclear development, possibly for military purposes, which could prompt other Southeast Asian nations to follow suit to balance power, disregarding existing agreements.

Realism in international relations emphasizes that states act primarily to protect their national interests, particularly their security and sovereignty. Certain ASEAN countries might view nuclear weapons development as enhancing national security within this context. For instance, the Philippines sees nuclear energy as a solution to its growing energy needs. Its collaboration with the United States demonstrates the seriousness of its nuclear energy aspirations. Similarly, Vietnam aims to diversify its energy sources through nuclear power, with Russia offering significant support. The support provided by major powers such as Russia to Vietnam and the United States to the Philippines could foster competitive dynamics that might trigger an arms race in Southeast Asia. The involvement of these two major powers in supporting nuclear development in different countries could pressure other regional states to enhance their nuclear capabilities to maintain a balance of power. This scenario poses risks to regional stability and increases the potential for nuclear proliferation in Southeast Asia.

The diffusion of norms theory is relevant in this context, as it considers the influence of Iran's nuclear trajectory. Initially backed by the United States, Iran's nuclear program has evolved amidst conflict and opposition, with Iran persisting in its development while asserting peaceful intentions. This example could inspire ASEAN states to consider nuclear technology development, especially if they perceive its utility in bolstering national security or enhancing their bargaining positions, often described as deterrence. Former Indonesian Ambassador to Iran, Dian Wirengjurit, highlighted in his book *Iran: Nuklir, Sanksi, Militer dan Diplomasi* that the U.S. must carefully consider attacking Iran due to its nuclear capabilities. Realism underscores that these decisions are driven by states' needs to safeguard their national security amid complex regional dynamics. Thus, the potential threats of nuclear proliferation in Southeast Asia demand special attention and closer international cooperation to ensure the region remains free of nuclear weapons threats.

3.4. Indonesia's Diplomatic Policies

Indonesia plays a pivotal role in maintaining stability and security in Southeast Asia. As a nation with significant diplomatic influence within ASEAN, Indonesia has demonstrated a strong commitment to nuclear non-proliferation. However, in light of evolving global and regional dynamics, including the impact of Iran's nuclear development and the support extended by Russia and the United States to regional states, Indonesia must consider adopting more adaptive and proactive diplomatic policies.

In addressing the challenges of nuclear proliferation in the region, Indonesia should prioritize the development of its nuclear technology. This development should focus on peaceful purposes, such as nuclear power generation. By advancing nuclear technology for energy purposes, Indonesia could enhance its regional and international bargaining position. This initiative could also serve as a diplomatic tool to encourage other regional nations to adopt similar policies, ensuring nuclear technology is used solely for peaceful purposes. To ensure the safe development of nuclear technology, Indonesia must strengthen collaboration with international bodies like the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and countries with advanced nuclear expertise. Such partnerships are essential to ensure that Indonesia's nuclear advancements comply with international safety and security standards. Moreover, these collaborations could provide technical and financial support for developing a robust nuclear infrastructure.

At the regional level, Indonesia could lead initiatives to bolster the ASEAN Network of Regulatory Bodies on Atomic Energy (ASEANTOM) and the Nuclear Energy Cooperation Sub-Sector Network (NEC-SSN). Through these platforms, ASEAN member states could exchange knowledge and experiences while jointly addressing challenges associated with nuclear technology development. Indonesia could also advocate for stricter ASEAN policies on nuclear safety and non-proliferation to ensure that regional nuclear development is strictly for peaceful purposes.

In addition to pursuing peaceful nuclear technology development, Indonesia should remain proactive in non-proliferation diplomacy. This includes advocating for the importance of nuclear non-proliferation in international and regional forums. Indonesia could encourage countries that have not signed or ratified

the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) to do so. For instance, Indonesia could leverage its diplomatic influence to urge nations like Singapore to join the TPNW. Indonesia could also act as a mediator in conflicts related to nuclear proliferation. For example, Indonesia might facilitate dialogue between regional states experiencing tensions over nuclear issues. Through such diplomatic efforts, Indonesia could help foster a conducive environment for nuclear non-proliferation and the peaceful use of nuclear technology in Southeast Asia.

Indonesia could solidify its position as a key player in Southeast Asia's non-proliferation efforts by responsibly developing nuclear technology for peaceful purposes and enhancing international and regional cooperation. These measures would improve regional security and stability and strengthen Indonesia's diplomatic leverage on the global stage. Therefore, responsible nuclear technology development and proactive non-proliferation diplomacy are crucial strategies for Indonesia to address the challenges posed by nuclear proliferation in the region.

4. Conclusion

This study reveals that Iran's nuclear program development poses a potential threat to security perceptions in Southeast Asia. Countries in the region view Iran's success in maintaining its nuclear program despite international pressures as a possible challenge to regional stability. Based on the theory of diffusion of norms, Iran's resilience in facing global pressure could influence ASEAN countries to consider similar measures, particularly if they perceive nuclear capabilities as beneficial for enhancing their security and bargaining power.

As a nation with significant diplomatic influence in ASEAN, Indonesia must adopt more adaptive and proactive diplomatic policies. Developing nuclear technology for peaceful purposes, such as nuclear power generation, could enhance Indonesia's bargaining position internationally and regionally. Furthermore, Indonesia should strengthen its collaboration with international bodies like the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and countries with expertise in nuclear technology to ensure that its nuclear development complies with global safety and security standards. At the regional level, Indonesia could lead initiatives to strengthen the ASEAN Network of Regulatory Bodies on Atomic Energy (ASEANTOM) and the Nuclear Energy Cooperation Sub-Sector Network (NEC-SSN). Additionally, Indonesia could advocate for ASEAN to adopt stricter nuclear safety and non-proliferation policies. Proactive engagement in non-proliferation diplomacy, including advocating for its importance in international and regional forums, remains essential. Indonesia should also act as a mediator in conflicts related to nuclear proliferation within the region.

Through comprehensive and adaptive strategies, Indonesia can reaffirm its commitment to nuclear non-proliferation, safeguard regional stability and security, and enhance its bargaining power in international diplomacy. These measures will ensure that Southeast Asia remains free from nuclear weapon threats and is better equipped to address future challenges in nuclear proliferation effectively.

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