



***BRIDGING DEFENSE DISCOURSES:  
WHY ASEAN SHOULD START TALKING  
ABOUT DETERRENCE***

BY ERICK NIELSON C. JAVIER

*Erick Nielson Javier ([ericknielson.javier@ndcp.edu.ph](mailto:ericknielson.javier@ndcp.edu.ph)) is a Defense Research Officer in the Research and Special Studies Division of the National Defense College of the Philippines. Previously, he served as a Defense Analyst in the Office of Strategic Studies and Strategy Management, Armed Forces of the Philippines from 2015-2021. Mr Javier completed his Master of Arts in Political Science, Major in Global Politics at the Ateneo de Manila University in 2017. He also received a Bachelor of Arts in Economics from the same university in 2009. He is currently a member of the Young Leaders Program of Pacific Forum International, based in Honolulu, Hawaii, USA. He has also contributed articles for The Diplomat and the Australian Strategic Policy Institute's The Strategist. His research interests include geopolitics, geoeconomics, great power competition, revolutions in military affairs, and the future of warfare. His work experience includes strategic studies research on defense economics, scenario building and military wargaming. He also participates in Track 1.5 and Track 2 diplomatic engagements with Philippine military partners and institutions.*

Recent developments in the global and regional environment have revitalized discussions on the need for strong and credible deterrence. The recently concluded workshop on [Anticipating the Next Chapter in US Nuclear Deterrence Strategy](#), hosted by the [Center for Global Security Research](#), is therefore very timely and relevant. The two-day event featured intensive discussions on the challenges of enhancing US and extended nuclear deterrence: from having to deal with the realities of the war in Ukraine and the latent threat of Russian nuclear escalation; the

growing military power of China [including in nuclear arms](#); the competing pressures to modernize the US nuclear arsenal while at the same time complying with arms control and multilateral disarmament commitments, as well as keeping costs reasonable.

It is interesting to contrast this workshop with other defense events I have attended from the Southeast Asian region, particularly those hosted under the umbrella of the [Network of ASEAN Defence and Security Institutions \(NADI\)](#). Notably, a quick perusal of the chairman's reports of NADI would indicate that ASEAN states are largely concerned with non-traditional security concerns, such as health security, cybersecurity and countering violent extremism. A [brief history of ASEAN](#) would show that its appreciation of security was always more internal and development-oriented, both within and between member states, with a focus of preserving stability through its particular brand of "quiet diplomacy". As its security agenda broadened, ASEAN has tried to involve outside powers via a variety of platforms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). Indeed, since the 2000s, ASEAN has attempted its own brand of regional security that aimed to [enmesh major powers into a web of sustained exchanges](#) and relationships that should eventually lead to peaceful integration and conflict resolution. But events since 2020 have called into question the efficacy of ASEAN's approach.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which should have been an ideal opportunity for the ASEAN security architecture to bring together disparate countries, [ultimately found ASEAN wanting](#). China's actions during the pandemic, where it offered masks and vaccines to embattled ASEAN member states while at the same time continued to press its illegal and unlawful claims in the South China Sea against these same states, have ultimately shown the limits of the "ASEAN way" of security provision. There is, in essence, a limitation in the security discourse within ASEAN.

There is growing recognition within ASEAN of the need to evolve their defense discourse to include more "hard power" security concerns. However, this recognition has not necessarily led to a "meeting of the minds" between ASEAN and the US. In fact, even as the Chinese threat makes itself felt in the South

China Sea, it would appear that the bigger concern for ASEAN as a whole, including by members most threatened by China, [is the threat of great power conflict itself](#), which they would rather avoid if possible, especially if it risks a nuclear conflict on ASEAN soil or waters nearby. The dilemma presented thus is: given concerns over the possibility of a nuclear war and general eschewing of deterrence, ASEAN states are at risk of *fait accompli* and may be susceptible to capitulating to China “in the name of peace”. This may indeed be part of the Chinese strategy; it was discussed in the ninth session of the workshop that risk calculations and perceptions are being influenced by China and Russia to make the US and other states see the risk picture they want, with the hope that it would convince the other parties to concede.

The tenth and final session of the workshop delved into the challenges of maintaining policy continuity for the US nuclear strategy. Domestic support from the US policymakers and the general public are critical elements to sustain the credibility of US nuclear deterrence. The same considerations that affect US opinions would well apply to the US’ allies and partners in Southeast Asia. The challenge to engage Southeast Asia on questions of deterrence is even higher, as the majority of the ASEAN member states have already casted doubt on the logic of nuclear deterrence and the utility of nuclear weapons for strategic stability.

However, for ASEAN “not be forced to choose between the great powers”, it must step up its understanding and discourse regarding defense and deterrence. It must be able to hold its ground on issues of primordial concern for the member’s national interests. This is not to say that the non-traditional focus of the ASEAN-led fora is unwarranted; indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic has proved the importance of health security. Cybersecurity is a perennial security threat even if it is not as catastrophic as kinetic force, and violent extremism continues to loom large in the background. But this does not mean that ASEAN’s defense institutions should continue to ignore developments such as those discussed in this workshop. The likelihood of nuclear conflict, or even that of a large-scale conventional conflict, can no

longer be safely discounted. Nor can such conflicts be confined to some faraway region outside of ASEAN’s concern; Taiwan, seen as a likely flashpoint between the United States and China, is just 155 miles away from the north of the Philippines. The South China Sea disputes are currently being waged via gray zone operations, but the artificial islands that China erected upon several of the features could well become nuclear targets, especially [those which house nuclear-capable H-6 series bombers](#).

The concerns discussed in the workshop may seem distant to Southeast Asian states, and the proposed methods for addressing the threats identified would normally be anathema, especially to the values and ways espoused by ASEAN. But whether ASEAN likes it or not, it is necessary to engage with discourses like these to be able to avoid possible escalation and truthfully move towards conflict resolution. Transparency of states’ threat perceptions and defense policies feature an important element for risk reduction.

Moving forward, there is a need for ASEAN to proactively engage other think-tanks and open up to the discourse on deterrence in addition to its preexisting engagement programs. Given the obvious and understandable sensitivity of such topics, track II platforms such as NADI would be a place to start. It is important that ASEAN gets more comfortable talking about these issues. If ASEAN truly wishes to be central in the regional security order, then it must be prepared to speak *all* the languages of security, including deterrence.

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