

# Nuclear weapons and related security issues in Southeast Asia:

## Understanding regional views and preferences

REPORT BY  
**JEFFREY ORDANIEL**  
**CARL BAKER**



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# NUCLEAR WEAPONS AND RELATED SECURITY ISSUES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: UNDERSTANDING REGIONAL VIEWS AND PREFERENCES

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*By*  
Jeffrey Ordaniel  
Carl Baker

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### About this report

The U.S. Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA) sponsored this study to examine the broader weapons of mass destruction (WMD) environment in Southeast Asia 5–10 years into the future. The study focuses specifically on how the five key U.S. maritime partners in Southeast Asia—Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Vietnam—perceive China's expanding nuclear weapon and missile capabilities, potential U.S.-China nuclear parity and competition, and preferences for U.S. policy related to nuclear arms control and risk reduction measures. This report contains a general summary of the initial drafts of the five commissioned research papers.

The statements made and views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of the Pacific Forum, the project sponsors, or the study participants' respective organizations and affiliations. For questions, please email [maritime@pacforum.org](mailto:maritime@pacforum.org).

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## KEY FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS

### *Summary*

Southeast Asian states have yet to connect China's rapid nuclear weapons expansion to their own national security. Two factors account for this. First, regional countries do not anticipate a future in which Beijing will threaten them with nuclear weapons or engage in a nuclear brinkmanship with Washington in Southeast Asia. Given China's success in achieving territorial and maritime gains without the use of force, and the low likelihood of Beijing using nuclear weapons, Southeast Asian partners would rather focus on security sector capacity-building to increase their ability to withstand low-intensity coercion. Second, regional states generally do not distinguish between and among the Nuclear Weapon States (NWS) – both in terms of capabilities and intentions. They view the presence and potential use of nuclear weapons by any state as threats to regional and global security and prefer that all NWS, including the United States, demonstrate a commitment toward nuclear risk reduction and disarmament.

## KEY FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Sponsored by the U.S. Defense Threat Reduction Agency, this study examines how China's nuclear weapons expansion, along with its rapidly improving conventional weapons and anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities, may shape the strategic considerations of key U.S. partners in Southeast Asia—Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Vietnam. The study also analyzes regional perceptions and responses to emerging U.S.-China nuclear relations and preferences for U.S. policy related to arms control and risk reduction.

In pursuit of the study's research objectives, Pacific Forum commissioned five research papers. The first paper surveyed Southeast Asian views and responses related to two interrelated issues: 1) China's approaching nuclear parity with the United States and 2) preferences regarding U.S. responses to China's nuclear weapons buildup. The second paper examined the regional impact of China's nuclear and missile expansion. The third paper looked at China's A2/AD capabilities and analyzed the potential involvement of nuclear weapons in a future conflict in the region. The fourth paper analyzed the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ) Treaty vis-à-vis U.S. and Chinese operations. The last paper provided an assessment of national and regional concerns related to chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons.

Pacific Forum also convened a workshop in Singapore on February 1-2, 2024, with all research paper authors and selected experts to discuss insights and key findings. The workshop featured a scenario-based exercise to examine potential responses by key U.S. partners in Southeast Asia.

## KEY FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS

**Finding:** Southeast Asian governments have not connected the issue of China's rapidly growing nuclear arsenal with their own national security interests. One reason is that regional countries do not anticipate a future in which Beijing will threaten them with nuclear weapons or engage in a nuclear brinkmanship with Washington in Southeast Asia.

**Recommendation:** The United States should raise the issue of China's rapidly growing nuclear arsenal before ASEAN institutions by highlighting how arms control with Beijing could contribute to ASEAN's own nuclear risk reduction goals.

**Finding:** Regional states view the presence and potential use of nuclear weapons per se as threats to global security and fear the catastrophic impact should they be used. They prefer that all NWS, including the United States, take concrete steps toward nuclear risk reduction and disarmament. Southeast Asian states generally do not distinguish between and among the NWS in terms of intentions and their impact on regional stability. Current multilateral dialogues under the auspices of the ASEAN Regional Forum are limited to discussing non-traditional and transnational security-related issues. Others focus on peaceful uses of nuclear energy. There is no platform for the United States and ASEAN Member States

to discuss nuclear weapons vis-à-vis traditional security issues involving China and Russia.

**Recommendation:** The United States should consider regular multi-track and multilateral consultations on nonproliferation and disarmament to solicit Southeast Asian contributions to related regional and global regimes. Consultations should include a discussion on nuclear weapons vis-à-vis China-related tensions to promote understanding of U.S. policies and ensure that Southeast Asian perspectives and preferences are considered in U.S. defense planning efforts. This would require dialogue mechanisms outside of ASEAN institutions. "Minilateral" discussions involving select Southeast Asian states could be considered as a first step.

**Finding:** There is a prevailing view that Beijing's conventional weapons and its use of tactics short of war are enough for China to achieve its objectives in relation to smaller states in Southeast Asia. There is also little evidence that China plans to use nuclear weapons in any South China Sea or Taiwan conflict scenario.

**Recommendation:** The United States should balance planning and preparing for high-intensity conflicts with China with efforts to support Southeast Asian requirements for withstanding low-intensity coercion by China. Deterrence dialogues with Southeast Asian states should include addressing gray-zone coercion. Any discussion that immediately focuses on nuclear weapons will likely not resonate in Southeast Asia.

**Finding:** Most regional experts agree that the potential nuclear competition between the United States and China will lead to regional instability. Southeast Asian states prefer the U.S. focus on compelling Beijing into an arms control deal in response to China's pursuit of more nuclear weapons.

**Recommendation:** Through ASEAN mechanisms like the ARF and the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting (ADMM) Plus, the United States should rally Southeast

**“...regional countries do not anticipate a future in which Beijing will threaten them with nuclear weapons or engage in a nuclear brinkmanship with Washington in Southeast Asia.”**

Asian support for its call for China to be more transparent with its nuclear weapons buildup and to engage in an arms control negotiation. However, such a call should be framed as advancing ASEAN's own confidence-building and nuclear risk reduction agenda. Socializing U.S. preferences on managing nuclear relations with China through ASEAN would allow the United States to control regional narratives and avoid the perception that the United States is trying to use the discussion to contain China's rise.

**Finding:** Given China's record of successfully using tactics short of war to achieve territorial and maritime gains, and the low likelihood of China using nuclear weapons in Southeast Asia, U.S. regional partners want to see

Washington focus on security sector capacity building as a way to increase their ability to withstand low-intensity maritime coercion. Furthermore, considering China's significant economic relations with the region, local elites are likely to "veto" their countries' policies that could be perceived as hurting businesses.

**Recommendation:** U.S. efforts to counter China's claims in the South China Sea and nuclear weapons expansion should revolve around ways littoral states in the region can better safeguard their legitimate maritime zones, advance their own nonproliferation interests, and withstand coercion (i.e., greater agency). The United States needs to re-frame issues away from U.S.-China competition to avoid triggering the region's sensitivities surrounding nonalignment. An emphasis on fighting high-intensity conflict or nuclear deterrence will likely receive little appreciation in the region. Since U.S. efforts to deepen economic engagements are seen favorably, they should continue, if not accelerate.

**Finding:** Southeast Asian states remain committed to the SEANWFZ Treaty even though the five recognized NWS have yet to sign its Protocol. ASEAN Member States have shown willingness to compromise and address the concerns raised by the NWS, including the United States, as demonstrated by the revised Protocol to SEANWFZ, including revisions to provisions related to navigational rights and freedoms. Experts have warned that SEANWFZ could provide China the legal basis to challenge the presence and transit of U.S. nuclear assets in the zone, while rationalizing the presence of its own nuclear assets.

**Recommendation:** The United States would benefit from signing the SEANWFZ Treaty's Protocol ahead of China. Doing so allows Washington to shape related discourses and regional policies and to limit Chinese interpretations of the Treaty from taking hold. At the very least, the United States should actively signal a willingness to sign the Treaty's Protocol as soon as possible while emphasizing nuclear risk reduction as the shared goal.

**Finding:** There is a diversity of views on the presence of nuclear-armed and nuclear-powered vessels in Southeast Asia. Some countries view both as a threat. Others think that only nuclear-armed vessels are threatening. Only a small minority in the region think that nuclear-powered and/or nuclear-armed vessels are not threatening.

**Recommendation:** The U.S. military should continue to exercise its navigational rights and freedoms in accordance with international law. However, the United States should clarify the stabilizing impact of the presence of U.S. assets in the region, including nuclear-powered vessels. Ensuring Southeast Asian waterways remain free and open is one such impact. The United States should also publicly release data, as a confidence-building measure, on safety precautions to ensure nuclear accidents are avoided, especially on busy routes.

**Finding:** The South China Sea is likely to be China's new SSBN sanctuary (or bastion). It offers three distinct advantages: its sheer size, submarine topography, and the fact that littoral states have minimal anti-submarine warfare capabilities while also lacking maritime domain awareness.

**Recommendation:** In addition to capacity building related to maritime domain awareness, the United States

should establish Track 1, 1.5, and 2 dialogues on nuclear weapon systems and involve Southeast Asian states as a form of confidence building. Southeast Asians need to understand the implications of the South China Sea becoming China's SSBN bastion for their own national security.

**Finding:** If or when China decides to blockade or invade Taiwan, Southeast Asian states will prioritize (if not intently focus on) the safety of their citizens living in Taiwan.

**Recommendation:** NEO should be included in all Taiwan contingency planning. Track 1 discussions with the Philippines are ripe. With others in the region, the United States should trigger NEO discussions by sponsoring strategic dialogues, workshops, and tabletop exercises at the Track 2 level.

**Finding:** China might consider the sheer number of Southeast Asian citizens in Taiwan (approximately 350,000 Indonesians, 240,000 Vietnamese, 160,000 Filipinos, 28,500 Malaysians, 1,800 Singaporeans, and 73,000 Thais) as an opportunity to drive a wedge between individual ASEAN Member States and between ASEAN and the United States.

**Recommendation:** The United States should coordinate with its allies and partners to plan and ensure they take leadership roles in conducting NEO in the event of a contingency. While regional states may be reluctant to ask the United States to facilitate or assist in repatriating their citizens, other allies and partners could do so with U.S. support.

**Finding:** There is very little concern in the region that a state actor could deliberately use WMD against another state. Instead, concerns revolve around the threat of biological terrorism brought about by violent extremist networks and other non-state actors potentially developing and obtaining biological/chemical weapons and their means of distribution.

**Recommendation:** The United States, through DTRA, should continue existing capacity-building initiatives in the region related to building and developing chemical/biological security, safety, and surveillance capabilities.

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# **NUCLEAR WEAPONS AND RELATED SECURITY ISSUES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: *UNDERSTANDING REGIONAL VIEWS AND PREFERENCES***

Pacific Forum commissioned five research papers. The first paper surveyed Southeast Asian views and responses related to two interrelated issues: 1) China's approaching nuclear parity with the United States and 2) preferences regarding U.S. responses to China's nuclear weapons buildup. The second paper examined the regional impact of China's nuclear and missile expansion. The third paper looked at China's A2/AD capabilities and analyzed the potential involvement of nuclear weapons in a future conflict in the region. The fourth paper analyzed the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ) Treaty vis-à-vis U.S. and Chinese operations. The last paper provided an assessment of national and regional concerns related to chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons.

Pacific Forum also convened a workshop in Singapore on February 1-2, 2024, with all research paper authors and selected experts to discuss insights and key findings. The workshop featured a scenario-based exercise to examine potential responses by key U.S. partners in Southeast Asia.

## INTRODUCTION

In 2021, the United States formally expressed concern about the rapid growth of China’s nuclear arsenal at the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum (ARF). That year, the DoD’s Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China noted that the People’s Liberation Army’s (PLA) nuclear warhead stockpile was already in the low 200s and growing. According to the most recent DoD report and other studies, that number has since more than doubled to between 438 and 500 for delivery by increasingly sophisticated land-based and sea-based ballistic missiles, as well as bomber aircraft. If the PLA continues at this pace, China could approach nuclear parity with, if not superiority over, the United States by 2035. Yet no Southeast Asian government has formally responded to the U.S. statement at the ARF nor to numerous reports related to China’s nuclear weapon and missile buildup. In addition, there remains a gap in the broader literature about how these developments, coupled with the PLA’s rapidly improving conventional weapons and anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities, may shape the strategic considerations of key U.S. partners in Southeast Asia in the years ahead.

assets in the second island chain. There is little concern that China plans to use nuclear weapons in any South China Sea or Taiwan conflict scenario. A scenario-based exercise conducted as part of this study reinforced this finding.

Second, regional states generally do not distinguish between and among the Nuclear Weapon States (NWS). They view the presence and potential use of nuclear weapons by any state as threats to regional and global security. Regional states fear the catastrophic potential of weapons use and prefer that all NWS, including the United States, demonstrate a commitment toward nuclear risk reduction and disarmament.

There is no consensus view in Southeast Asia on the rationale behind China’s current efforts to expand its nuclear arsenal. Some believe Beijing is not aiming to achieve parity with Washington. Some think the goal is to reach a number “just enough” to deter potential U.S. intervention in a future conflict within China’s periphery. Others argue that parity is China’s goal. Still, others believe that its goal is superiority.

Despite the lack of agreement on the rationale for China’s buildup, a majority of regional experts agree that nuclear competition between the United States and China

## *“There is little concern that China plans to use nuclear weapons in any South China Sea or Taiwan conflict scenario.”*

To fill that gap, the U.S. Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA) sponsored this study to examine the broader weapons of mass destruction (WMD) environment in Southeast Asia 5–10 years into the future. The study focuses specifically on how the five key U.S. maritime partners in Southeast Asia—Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Vietnam—perceive China’s expanding nuclear weapon and missile capabilities, potential U.S.–China nuclear parity and competition, and preferences for U.S. policy related to nuclear arms control and risk reduction measures. The study also touches on Southeast Asian concerns related to biological and chemical weapons.

## FINDINGS SUMMARY

Policymakers in the region are aware of China’s rapidly growing nuclear arsenal and its delivery systems. However, most have not connected the issue to their own national security. Two factors account for this. First, regional countries do not anticipate a future in which Beijing will threaten them with nuclear weapons or engage in a nuclear brinkmanship with Washington in Southeast Asia. The prevailing view in Southeast Asia is that Beijing’s conventional weapons and its use of tactics short of war are enough for China to achieve its objectives in relation to smaller states in Southeast Asia. Moreover, should there be an outright military conflict between the United States and China, Southeast Asian experts consider the latter’s conventional capabilities adequate for dealing with U.S. command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C4ISR) capabilities in the first island chain and key U.S. military

would lead to regional instability. It is no surprise, therefore, that Southeast Asian states would prefer that the United States focus on compelling Beijing to enter into an arms control deal. Further, there is general agreement that strengthening regional states’ ability to withstand Chinese military, economic, and political coercion was an important aspect of U.S. security involvement in the region. On the first point, regional states are interested in seeing more confidence-building measures, such as an arms control negotiation and NWS’ accession to the Protocol to the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ) Treaty to avoid an arms race that could impact Southeast Asia and divide ASEAN. On the second point, given China’s record of successfully using tactics short of war to achieve territorial and maritime gains, and the low likelihood of Beijing using nuclear weapons, most in Southeast Asia would rather focus on security sector capacity building (e.g., acquisitions of Coast Guard vessels, better infrastructure for greater maritime domain awareness, and better intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities) as a way to increase their ability to withstand low-intensity maritime coercion. Also, as workshop participants noted, given China’s massive economic leverage in Southeast Asia, with the business community often acting as a veto-wielding player in foreign policymaking, U.S. economic engagement would facilitate significant regional security dividends.

Meanwhile, Southeast Asian states remain committed to the SEANWFZ Treaty as a confidence-building and risk-reduction measure even though the five recognized NWS have yet to sign its Protocol. There is, therefore, a concern that deterring the introduction of nuclear weapons into the region is becoming more

challenging, especially considering the emerging great power competition. This has led to a renewed interest in persuading the five NWS to accede to the Treaty's Protocol. ASEAN Member States have shown willingness to compromise and address the concerns raised by the NWS. The United States would benefit from either signing the SEANWFZ Treaty's Protocol ahead of China or having U.S. officials actively signal a willingness to do so while emphasizing nuclear risk reduction as the shared goal.

## METHODOLOGY

In pursuit of the study's research objectives, Pacific Forum commissioned research papers to generate relevant insights on key issues. Olli Suorsa examined China's A2/AD capabilities vis-à-vis the South China Sea and compared them with those of the United States and select Southeast Asian states. He also assessed the potential involvement of nuclear weapons in conflict scenarios in the South China Sea and Taiwan.

Collin Koh analyzed the implications of China's nuclear and missile expansion to future crisis situations in or relevant to Southeast Asia. Karla Pabelina explored the implications of SEANWFZ on the operations of the U.S. and Chinese militaries in Southeast Asian waters as well as on the broader relationship between each of the two powers and the region. Julius Trajano provided an assessment of national and regional concerns related to chemical, biological, and radiological weapons.

Finally, Hoo Chiew Ping and Jeffrey Ordaniel conducted an informal survey of policy elites from Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Vietnam to better understand how policymakers and thought leaders in the region view two related issues: 1) China approaching nuclear parity with the United States and 2) regional preferences and expectations regarding U.S. responses to China's nuclear weapons buildup. While not scientific, the anonymous survey that generated 113 responses from academics, opinion leaders, and both current and retired military and government officials from Indonesia (23 respondents), the Philippines (28), Vietnam (25), Malaysia (21), and Singapore (16) supplemented individual interviews to better understand the main factors contributing to regional perceptions on nuclear-related issues. A major goal of the survey was to reveal how the region's broad strategic environment and individual states' own security considerations would change if and when China approached nuclear parity with the United States.

In addition to the commissioned research, Pacific Forum convened a workshop in Singapore on February 1–2, 2024 to discuss key findings and clarify operationally relevant insights and actionable recommendations. Research paper authors and selected experts were invited to the workshop, which also featured a scenario-based exercise to explore the potential WMD dimension of a crisis scenario in the region and the potential responses of key U.S. partners in Southeast Asia.

## ANALYSIS

Southeast Asian states see risks associated with nuclear weapons as a byproduct of great power competition that has very little connection to the welfare and safety of the general public in Southeast Asia. Concerns related to WMD remain a low priority for the region. China's growing nuclear arsenal therefore is not perceived with alarm and does not generate a sense of urgency among Southeast Asian policymakers. Instead, China's more assertive behavior in operationalizing its claims to maritime zones and offshore territories in the South China Sea, the PLA's increasing conventional weapon and A2/AD capabilities, and the overwhelming economic dominance are the biggest concerns shaping the broader security architecture in Southeast Asia. The following sections detail the key insights generated from the commissioned research, workshop, and scenario-based exercise.

## U.S.-CHINA NUCLEAR COMPETITION: VIEWS FROM SOUTHEAST ASIA

Security discourses in Southeast Asia often revolve around a common view that nuclear weapons are inherently dangerous and a threat to international security, regardless of which party possesses them, and that NWS should take concrete steps to strengthen nonproliferation regimes and make tangible progress on disarmament. This consensus is reflected in regional support for the Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) and the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). The joint statement by ASEAN Foreign Ministers on disarmament and non-proliferation in February 2022 encouraged NWS to continue efforts to prevent nuclear war, avoid an arms race, "steer clear of military confrontations, enhance stability and predictability, and foster mutual understanding and confidence."<sup>1</sup> But ASEAN's most recent statements, reviewed by Julius Trajano, also indicate that they view continued efforts by NWS to modernize and expand their existing nuclear arsenal as contrary to previous disarmament commitments. ASEAN Member States do not distinguish between individual NWS. They also do not see a distinction between NWS' individual efforts to expand and modernize their arsenal. Trajano noted that all ASEAN states continue to advocate for the complete elimination of nuclear weapons as the sole means to ensure prevention against their utilization and the threat they pose. For Southeast Asian states, that "threat" relates to transnational security, such as public health, socioeconomic well-being, the environment, and sustainable development—themes that have direct relevance to the safety, lives, and livelihood of their citizens.

Southeast Asians generally do not distinguish between and among the NWS in their call for nuclear disarmament. As noted, in 2021, the United States brought attention to the rapid growth of China's nuclear arsenal at the ARF.<sup>2</sup> However, it did not generate a response from ASEAN Member States. Instead, the ARF Chairman

<sup>1</sup> Association of Southeast Asian Nations, *ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Statement on Disarmament and Non-Proliferation* (February 2022). <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/ASEAN-Foreign-Ministers-Statement-on-Disarmament-and-Non-Proliferation.pdf>. Accessed March 13, 2024.

<sup>2</sup> Reuters, *Blinken expresses U.S. concern about China's growing nuclear arsenal* (August 7, 2021). <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/blinker-expresses-us-concern-about-chinas-growing-nuclear-arsenal-2021-08-06/>. Accessed March 7, 2024.

statement stressed that international and regional cooperative efforts in the areas of nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament should lead to “the elimination, and non-proliferation, of weapons of mass destruction.”

To better understand how policymakers and thought leaders in the region view China’s nuclear weapons development, the study conducted an “elite opinion survey” between November 2023 and January 2024. Key findings from the survey revealed Southeast Asian elites’ views on three key issues: 1) the impact of potential U.S.-China nuclear competition on regional security and stability; 2) likely responses; and 3) aspirations for effective risk reduction and arms control measures.

On the first issue, the interplay between China’s rapid nuclear weapons buildup and the potential U.S. response is expected to negatively impact their national security and regional stability. The survey indicated that a potential U.S.-China nuclear parity was expected to drive China to behave more aggressively and be less likely to compromise with Southeast Asian states on disputes in the South China Sea. It should be noted that a plurality of survey respondents also believe that parity would result in decreased U.S. credibility. Nuclear competition between the two superpowers is also expected to weaken existing disarmament and arms control mechanisms such as the NPT, the TPNW, and the SEANWFZ Treaty and increase the pressure for regional states to choose a side.

On the second issue, the asymmetry in conventional military capability between China and Southeast Asian states and the region’s economic dependence on Beijing means that China’s nuclear weapons buildup *per se* is not seen as a threat. Moreover, given China’s successes in advancing its territorial and maritime interests in the region even without provoking a war, many do not see a future in which Beijing would threaten a Southeast Asian state with nuclear weapons. Other than numerous U.S. statements warning Beijing of consequences, it remains unclear what Washington is willing to do to frustrate China’s efforts.

Rather, it is the resulting tension with the United States, uncertainty regarding the U.S. response, and the weakening of existing disarmament and arms control mechanisms that are seen as most concerning. In short, Beijing’s nuclear weapons buildup is not seen in isolation from other issues but rather almost always linked to the U.S. response. Interviews with selected strategic thinkers in the region highlight the uncertainty regarding the U.S. response, which could add to greater regional instability. Two standout counteracting arguments were: 1) domestic pressures within the United States to avoid a U.S.-China war more broadly, and nuclear exchange more specifically, would push U.S. policymakers to accommodate Beijing’s security preferences even at the expense of Southeast Asian states; 2) the defense establishment in the United States would be more likely to pursue a hardline policy toward China, eliminating any chances of an effective arms control discussion. Either of those would receive mixed responses

in Southeast Asia, with the Philippines, Singapore, and Vietnam preferring a bigger balancing role for the United States by strengthening their ability to withstand Chinese military, economic, and political coercion.

On the third issue, survey respondents believe that nuclear arms control talks are unlikely in the near-to-medium term. Those who think otherwise stated that arms control would only happen if China had already achieved parity or near parity with the United States or if other states, including Russia and India, agreed to participate in the talks. Most respondents believed that a potential U.S. willingness to decrease its own arsenal is unlikely to encourage arms control discussions with China. For some in the region, China’s refusal to discuss arms control is understandable, given the gap between U.S. and Chinese arsenals and China’s no-first-use policy.

Nevertheless, arms control discussions and agreements between Washington and Beijing would still be seen as most favorable in promoting greater regional peace and stability. The survey revealed that an overwhelming number of regional experts want their governments to call on China and the United States to begin nuclear arms

*“Other than statements warning Beijing of consequences, it remains unclear what Washington is willing to do to frustrate China’s efforts.”*

control negotiations, with most of them also expressing a preference for ASEAN to publicly advocate for negotiations. Moreover, in addition to their preference for the United States to help them strengthen their ability to withstand Chinese pressure, many also want the United States to prioritize a good-faith call for an arms control discussion with China that is not driven by a “strategic competition” narrative. This is their preferred response to China’s nuclear weapons buildup and they are not supportive of any move that would lead to an arms race.

Given the survey results, Washington’s framing of its relations with Beijing as a strategic competition could be counterproductive to the goal of rallying international support for a U.S.-China arms control negotiation. Regional experts noted that framing the current situation as strategic competition legitimizes the claim that Beijing’s nuclear weapons buildup is a response to the U.S. effort to contain a rival power. This leads to the conclusion by some that the United States is not sincere in its call for nuclear risk reduction. Therefore, the United States should embrace non-nuclear weapons states’ participation in the broader security architecture to better shape future narratives for an inclusive global nuclear order.

For the full results of the survey, please refer to Appendix I.

## CHINA'S MISSILE DEVELOPMENT AND NUCLEAR WEAPONS EXPANSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE SOUTH CHINA SEA AND TAIWAN

Collin Koh reviewed several Chinese language texts to understand the PLA's strategic thinking vis-à-vis U.S. involvement in a regional conflict and the rationale behind China's missile development and nuclear weapons buildup. He found that Beijing's military planners likely have a two-pronged objective—first, paralyze U.S. C4ISR capabilities in the first island chain (notably Taiwan, Okinawa, Kyushu, Northern Luzon, and Palawan) and, second, destroy key U.S. military assets in the second island chain (notably Guam and other islands eastward of the Japanese archipelago). The former is aimed at degrading U.S. combat power at the onset of hostilities and the latter at hindering reinforcements. Both could be accomplished by the PLA's ballistic and cruise missiles, fired from multiple platforms. Koh further argues that PLA military planners are looking at China's expanding ballistic missile submarine (SSBN) capabilities to deter Washington's appetite for escalation.

Koh's paper underscores geography as an important factor in China's strategic thinking. He notes that Admiral Liu Huaqing, chief architect of China's modern naval strategy, outlined the rationale behind the operational concepts of "near-seas" [近海], which generally comprises the Bohai Gulf, the Yellow Sea, the East China Sea and the South China Sea; "middle-seas" [中海], which comprises the vast Philippine Sea and the Sulu-Celebes Seas; and "far-seas" [中远海], which refers to waters beyond Guam and the second island chain. China's near-seas are all semi-enclosed and, therefore, easily choked off by enemy forces in wartime. The East China Sea and the Yellow Sea are too shallow and surrounded by capable U.S. allies. Hence, China would likely be reliant on land-based and air-based systems to defend the near-seas. U.S. forces in Okinawa, Kyushu, Palawan, and Northern Luzon are already within reach of the PLA's striking power.

***"... the South China Sea carries a strategic-military significance, providing circumstantial evidence to argue that the sea is likely to be China's new SSBN sanctuary (or bastion)."***

The middle-seas are regarded as a natural eastward prolongation of the near-seas. PLA operations in the middle-seas would be aimed at: 1) securing the rear of the first island chain, ensuring that Chinese operations would not be "choked," and 2) constraining U.S. military operations in the second island chain, thereby complicating U.S. plans for reinforcements originating from the far-seas, including Hawaii, Alaska, and the continental United States. For instance, the basing of U.S. Navy strike forces, especially nuclear submarines, in Guam allows rapid response to contingencies in the first island chain within five days. For that, the PLA's land-based DF-21D and DF-

26, with a range able to reach Guam, would play a critical role. According to Koh, DF-21D and DF-26 have "proper concealment, dispersal and mobility" while being protected by air defense coverage well within mainland Chinese territory.

In the event of a U.S.-China conflict in the South China Sea or over Taiwan, the Philippine Sea would be a focal arena from which to isolate U.S. forces already in the first and second island chains and deter or neutralize military reinforcements coming from Guam and the far-seas. The PLA seeks to accomplish this by dominating the near-seas through its rapidly developing arsenals of ballistic and cruise missiles, multi-role jet fighters, naval surface and subsurface forces, and C4ISR, including cyber capabilities. China's land-based missile-armed bombers and ballistic and cruise missiles that are cheaper to build in mass quantity could overwhelm U.S. and allied missile defenses.

Koh notes that the South China Sea carries a strategic-military significance, providing circumstantial evidence to argue that the sea is likely to be China's new SSBN sanctuary (or bastion). The South China Sea offers three distinct advantages: size, submarine topography, and the littoral states surrounding it. First, the sea covers approximately 3,500,000 square kilometers, allowing maneuverable space for the Chinese SSBNs. Second, the South China Sea naturally forms a deep basin—the depth increases in the seaward direction, with some of the patches measured to be as deep as 4,000 meters. Chinese SSBNs would have ample hiding spots, even if the maximum operating depth was 300–400 meters. Finally, U.S. allies and partners in Southeast Asia surrounding the South China Sea are not necessarily well-equipped for Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW). In Northeast Asia, Chinese SSBNs will likely face robust ASW capabilities from Japan and the Republic of Korea, two U.S. treaty allies.

Since the 2008 public revelation that Sanya (in Hainan) was home to the Chinese SSBNs, multiple maritime and aerial close encounters between the Chinese and U.S. forces in the area have been recorded.<sup>3</sup> These encounters could be attributed to the significant presence of the Chinese SSBN force and associated infrastructure.

The Type-094 Jin-class SSBN, the Changzheng-18, was one of the three naval vessels commissioned into PLA Navy service in Hainan back in April 2021. Type-094 can carry JL-2 SLBM believed to have a maximum range of over 7,000 kilometers. From the middle of the South China Sea, the JL-2 could hypothetically put more targets within range, including New Delhi and Guam. To effectively target the west coast of continental United States, however, the SSBN would have to be deployed outside this bastion by launching the JL-2 in the open waters of the Western Pacific.

Overall, the PLA's sea-based deterrent provides China with more credible second-strike nuclear capabilities and in-theater dominance in conventional warfare.

<sup>3</sup> Jackie Northam, *China's Underground Submarine Base Scrutinized* (NPR, May 9, 2008).

<https://www.npr.org/2008/05/09/90309537/chinas-underground-submarine-base-scrutinized>. Accessed March 15, 2024.

## **INCREASINGLY FORMIDABLE CHINESE A2/AD CAPABILITIES**

The South China Sea has become one of the PLA's main operational areas. For some workshop participants, a U.S.-China confrontation in the South China Sea could result from one of three scenarios: 1) U.S. defense of the Philippines in case of an armed attack against any of the latter's forces in the Spratlys and the Scarborough Shoal, 2) a bilateral confrontation over navigational rights and freedoms, or 3) as an offshoot of a conflict over Taiwan. Control of the South China Sea would be critical for Beijing and Washington in any of those conflicts.

The PLA has created a formidable conventional A2/AD capability—integrating sensors, shooters, and communications—designed to deter and repel U.S. intervention in its peripheries. The most significant breakthrough in China's A2/AD effort was the massive artificial island-building program between 2013 and 2018. China reclaimed land and constructed seven military bases in the Spratly Island Group. The three largest artificial islands—Fiery Cross Reef, Subi Reef, and Mischief Reef—are equipped with three-kilometer-long runways, aircraft shelters, underground storage for weapons and fuel, and significant early-warning search and track radars and antiship and anti-air missile emplacements. Those three runways in the Spratlys can support up to 72 tactical fighter-size aircraft (or a full People's Liberation Army Air Force [PLAAF] Air Brigade) and up to 10 special mission or bomber aircraft.

These developments have become a serious long-term challenge for the United States and the littoral states of Southeast Asia. For the United States, maintaining access to China's "near-seas," including the South China Sea, in times of conflict is no longer assured, according to Olli Suorsa. The A2/AD challenge becomes increasingly more formidable the closer one gets to China's southern coastline. Moreover, regaining access, once lost, would be enormously costly.

Suorsa's study divides the PLA's A2/AD capabilities into three categories: 1) sensing and targeting, 2) strike, and 3) support. Together, these categories form the PLA's A2/AD kill chain or what U.S. experts found in Chinese documents referred to as "informatized warfare."<sup>4</sup> "Kill chain" is a colloquial term for a military concept that refers to the sequential steps required to successfully deliver an attack and destroy a target. Interruption of the sequential steps by enemy forces could result in failure to destroy a target. The goal is to achieve information superiority and carry out its kill chain faster than what an adversary could break. For details on Suorsa's analysis of the three categories of the PLA's A2/AD capabilities, please see Appendix II..

## **MAKING SENSE OF THE SOUTHEAST ASIA NUCLEAR WEAPON-FREE ZONE TREATY AND OTHER REGIONAL WMD NORMS**

Karla Pabelina's paper outlines some of the concerns China and the United States have regarding SEANWFZ and past efforts to overcome them. Pabelina also describes how accession and non-accession to the Treaty's Protocol determine the two strategic competitors' operations in Southeast Asian waters.

China's initial reluctance to accede to the SEANWFZ Treaty's Protocol stemmed from its concern that the treaty could jeopardize its territorial sovereignty and maritime claims in the South China Sea. This concern was addressed through consultations between ASEAN Member States and China. Both sides agreed to a modified protocol, which includes a declaration that accession will not affect claimed sovereignty and sovereign rights over territories, exclusive economic zones (EEZ), and the continental shelf. In 1999, China announced its intent to be the first NWS to accede to the SEANWFZ Treaty's Protocol. Twenty-four years later, in March 2023, then-Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang said Beijing was "willing to take the lead" in signing the protocol to help safeguard regional security and stability, in an apparent effort to promote the narrative that the Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) agreement jeopardizes the treaty.<sup>5</sup>

U.S. concerns revolve around the potential conflict between SEANWFZ and the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). While the United States has yet to ratify UNCLOS, it views the treaty as the codified version of longstanding customary international law and practices related to navigational rights and freedoms. Pabelina notes, for instance, that the inclusion of the EEZ and continental shelf in the geographical limits of the SEANWFZ was inconsistent with the "high seas freedoms" as articulated in Part VII of UNCLOS. Other U.S. concerns include "uncertainty over the scope of the treaty and the protocol obligations," the "precise nature of the legally binding negative security assurances," the "ambiguity of language concerning the permissibility of port calls which carry nuclear weapons," and the "procedural rights of protocol parties to be represented before the various executive bodies set up by the treaty to ensure its implementation."<sup>6</sup>

By 2012, most of the NWS' concerns had been addressed. NWS and SEANWFZ State Parties agreed to:

- Limit NWS' obligations only to Article 3.3 of the Treaty that bans dumping of radioactive wastes in the zone, which addresses concerns about potential restrictions to high seas freedoms already enjoyed in the EEZ and continental shelf under UNCLOS.
- Remove the words "within the zone" vis-à-vis NWS' commitment to not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against SEANWFZ State Parties, essentially aligning SEANWFZ with other nuclear weapon-free zone treaties, which prohibit the use or threat to use

<sup>4</sup> Burke, Edmund J., Kristen Guinness, Cortez A. Cooper III, and Mark Cozad, *People's Liberation Army Operational Concepts*. (RAND Corporation, 2020). [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RRA394-1.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA394-1.html). Accessed February 6, 2024.

<sup>5</sup> Maria Siow, *China support for Asean nuclear weapon-free zone 'counter-intuitive' if other states do not sign pact* (South China Morning Post, April 6, 2023). <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3216105/china-support-asean-nuclear-weapon-free-zone-counter-intuitive-if-other-states-do-not-sign-pact>. Accessed March 1, 2024.

<sup>6</sup> Bilveer Singh, *ASEAN, The Southeast Asia Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone and the Challenge of Denuclearisation in Southeast Asia: Problems and Prospects* (Canberra Papers on Strategy and Defence No. 138, 2000, p.14).

nuclear weapons only against the territories of the zonal countries.

- Recognize the prerogative of SEANWFZ State Parties to arrange port visits and transit by foreign ships/aircraft, which allows NWS to continue with their own arrangements with ASEAN Member States regarding transits and port visits.
- Agree to a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between China and SEANWFZ State Parties stating that the Treaty shall not affect their territories, EEZ, and Continental Shelf, which allows Beijing and other South China Sea claimants to keep their claims over disputed land features and maritime zones.

China's potential accession to the SEANWFZ Protocol will have profound implications for the United States. Other experts have argued that China's SEANWFZ accession supports Beijing's nuclear doctrine and broader national security interests. For instance, Hoang Thi Ha of the Institute for Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) in Singapore asserts that "given its expansive claims in the South China Sea, Beijing could justify the presence and operations of its SSBNs" in the entirety of the nine-dash line as falling well within its sovereignty and jurisdiction. This would allow Chinese leaders to define the geographical scope of SEANWFZ "in a flexible and selective manner."<sup>7</sup> SEANWFZ could provide China the legal basis to challenge the presence and transit of U.S. nuclear assets in the zone while rationalizing the presence of its own nuclear assets.

#### OTHER NATIONAL AND REGIONAL WMD CONCERNS

Biological and chemical weapons are not major concerns for Southeast Asian governments. During the workshop, participants were skeptical that state actors would deliberately employ biological agents against their adversaries given the uncontrollable nature of contagious diseases. Julius Trajan's research contends that most countries in the region consider naturally occurring diseases the primary threat. However, the region's biological risk landscape also includes accidental leaks from research laboratories and deliberate release of biological weapons by non-state actors. The former emanates from a growing number of high-containment laboratories, and the growing biological science and biotechnology industries across Southeast Asia. The latter results from the persistent presence of violent extremist groups and terrorist networks in maritime Southeast Asia.

#### SCENARIO-BASED EXERCISE: SOUTHEAST ASIA AND THE BLOCKADE OF TAIWAN

The second day of the workshop focused on a tabletop exercise scenario involving a potential Chinese blockade of Taiwan. Set in early 2028, the scenario presented China, already in possession of 1,000 operational nuclear warheads, implementing an effective blockade of Taiwan. The scenario indicated that U.S. intelligence issued a warning that an invasion was becoming more likely, with

U.S. leaders vowing to defend the self-governing island. For full details about the scenario provided to the participants, see Appendix III.

The exercise confirmed the divide in Southeast Asia on approaches to China-related security issues. On the one hand, most in the region continued to embrace their longstanding nonaligned principle—even when the scenario clearly presented an aggressor. Nonalignment in Southeast Asia is underpinned by the idea that moral judgment is impossible and that siding with one power over the other jeopardizes their own security interests. For instance, some participants "fought" the scenario revolving around the trigger for China's decision to implement a blockade and to invade. One objection centered on how the scenario held China as solely responsible for the crisis. Some participants argued that China's decision to blockade or invade Taiwan could be a result of multiple factors, including the United States' own actions and policies. They insisted that Southeast Asian responses could also be shaped by what transpired in the run-up to the crisis.

Southeast Asians' stubborn embrace of nonalignment could also be seen in their positions vis-à-vis non-combatant evacuations (NEO). Philippine participants assumed that, as the closest ASEAN country to Taiwan, it would be a major staging ground for a regional NEO. They envisioned the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) sites in Northern Luzon to be important points for humanitarian corridors. However, other parties expressed concern that the Philippines, as a U.S.-treaty ally, could become a belligerent in the conflict. One possible

***"SEANWFZ could provide China the legal basis to challenge the presence and transit of U.S. nuclear assets in the zone while rationalizing the presence of its own nuclear assets."***

alternative was discussing the evacuation of citizens directly with Beijing. All parties, except the Philippines, expressed willingness to talk to China regarding NEO, including the idea of flying out their citizens through Mainland China.

Indonesian nonalignment became apparent as participants argued that their country's archipelagic waters and territorial seas would be declared off-limits to all belligerents. They admitted Indonesia does not possess the necessary A2/AD capabilities to enforce such a declaration. Operationalizing such a declaration could be limited to conducting military exercises in major chokepoints and archipelagic sea lanes (ASL). The declaration was described by Indonesian participants as Jakarta's signaling of neutrality. Indonesian nonalignment also determined their discussions on NEOs. An Indonesian participant argued that China might see the sheer number of Southeast Asian citizens in Taiwan (approximately 350,000 Indonesians, 240,000 Vietnamese, 160,000 Filipinos, 28,500 Malaysians, 1,800 Singaporeans, and 73,000 Thais) as an opportunity to drive a wedge between individual ASEAN Member States and the United States and even possibly between ASEAN and the United States. Noting that it would be difficult for Jakarta to remain neutral if China attacked a humanitarian

<sup>7</sup> Hoang Thi Ha, *Why China Supports the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone* (ISEAS Perspective June 2023). <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2023-45-why-china-supports-the-southeast-asia-nuclear-weapon-free-zone-by-hoang-thi-ha/>. Accessed March 1, 2024.

corridor resulting in Indonesian casualties, they argued Beijing would be expected to make an effort to ensure ASEAN Member States do not consider Northern Luzon, especially EDCA sites, as NEO staging grounds.

The Vietnamese, Singaporean, and Malaysian participants remained focused on ensuring the welfare of their citizens in Taiwan and cushioning their economies.

Singaporean participants noted that their government would “implicitly” allow passage of U.S. warships and submarines through the Singapore and Malacca Straits. They cautioned the United States about asking Singapore to explicitly take an anti-China position.

During the exercise, Philippine participants were resigned to the idea that if China invaded Taiwan, the Philippines would most likely be involved given its geographic proximity and its alliance with the United States. One participant argued that a successful invasion of Taiwan would necessitate attacking nearby EDCA bases or, worse, invading and occupying Northern Luzon, to secure the Luzon Strait and weaken U.S. intervention. The 1951 U.S.-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty would also oblige Manila to cooperate with the United States. A major Philippine response, therefore, would involve preventing Chinese forces from landing and persuading the United States to fulfill its treaty obligations, if and when needed, to protect its sovereignty and territorial integrity.

All participants agreed that ASEAN-based treaties (both the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, or TAC, and the SEANWFZ) were not relevant to the crisis. These instruments would not be enforceable given the lack of military capabilities by the individual countries. ASEAN Member States would have little capacity to prevent the presence of SSBNs or other nuclear-armed vessels in the region. While it is likely that there would be some attempt to discourage passage through archipelagic sea lanes, there was a presumption that NWS could operate with impunity in the region. ASEAN itself would prove to be infirm in meaningfully contributing toward solving the ongoing crisis. Instead, there was a lengthy discussion on the importance of ASEAN being more relevant in preventing conflicts than in responding to one. Several participants also felt that the Philippines’ strong commitment to hosting U.S. forces and others’ persistent embrace of nonalignment would lead to an ASEAN break-up.

Note: Research papers will be published as *Issues & Insights* publications in the Fall of 2024.



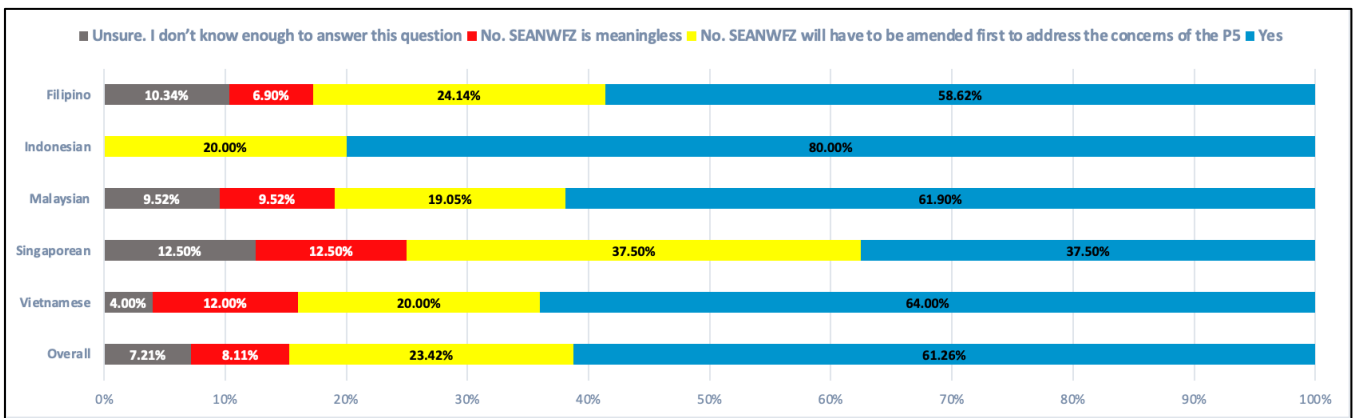
## APPENDIX I: SURVEY RESULTS

### POLICY ELITES' PERSPECTIVES ON NUCLEAR SECURITY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

#### PART I: KEY NUCLEAR SECURITY ISSUES RELEVANT TO SOUTHEAST ASIA

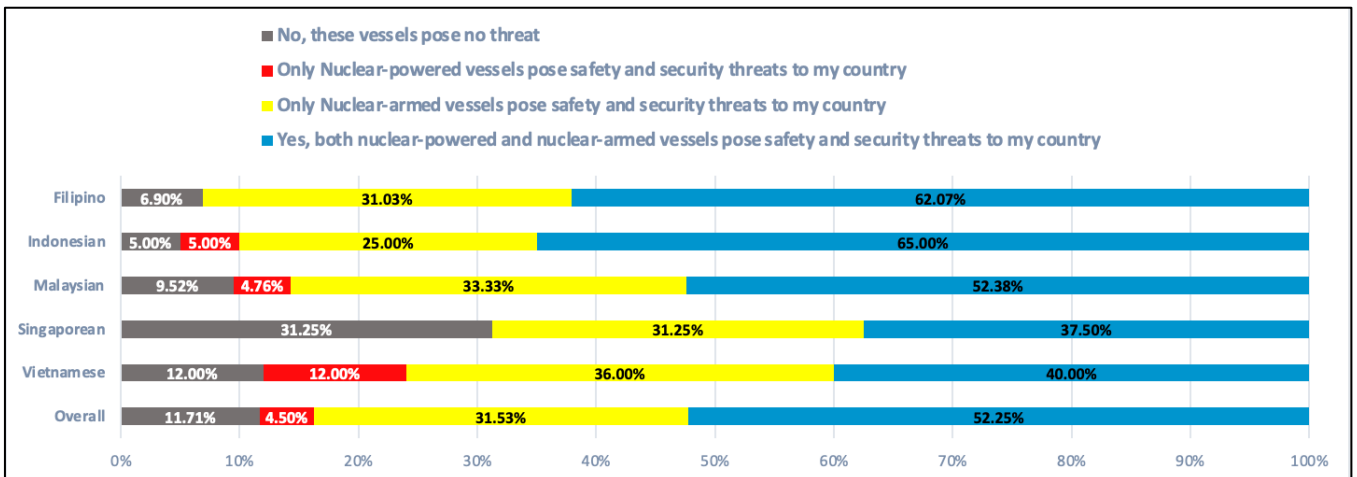
Q1. The Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ) Treaty remains the only platform for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Member States to engage in a dialogue with the P5 Nuclear Weapon States regarding nuclear weapons-related concerns in the region. But the SEANWFZ Treaty also remains the only treaty of its kind with no P5 member signing on because of concerns related to potential restrictions to navigational rights and freedoms. Do you believe that your country and ASEAN should continue to advocate for those five nuclear weapon states (which include the United States and China) to sign the SEANWFZ Treaty and its Protocols?

- Yes.
- No. SEANWFZ is meaningless.
- No. SEANWFZ will have to be amended first to address the concerns of the P5.
- Unsure. I don't know enough to answer this question.



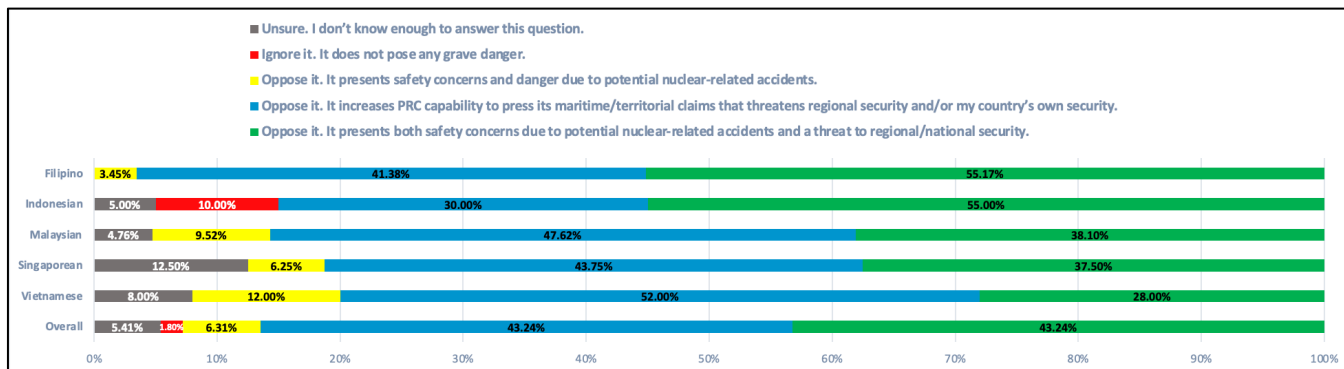
Q2. Do you think the presence of nuclear-powered and/or nuclear-armed vessels in Southeast Asian waters poses safety and security threats to your country?

- Yes, both nuclear-powered and nuclear-armed vessels pose safety and security threats to my country.
- Only nuclear-powered vessels pose safety and security threats to my country.
- Only nuclear-armed vessels pose safety and security threats to my country.
- No, these vessels pose no threat.



Q3. There have been reports that China could deploy floating nuclear power plants (FNPPs) to artificial islands it has built in the South China Sea. If China were to deploy FNPPs to the South China Sea, what would you want your government to do?

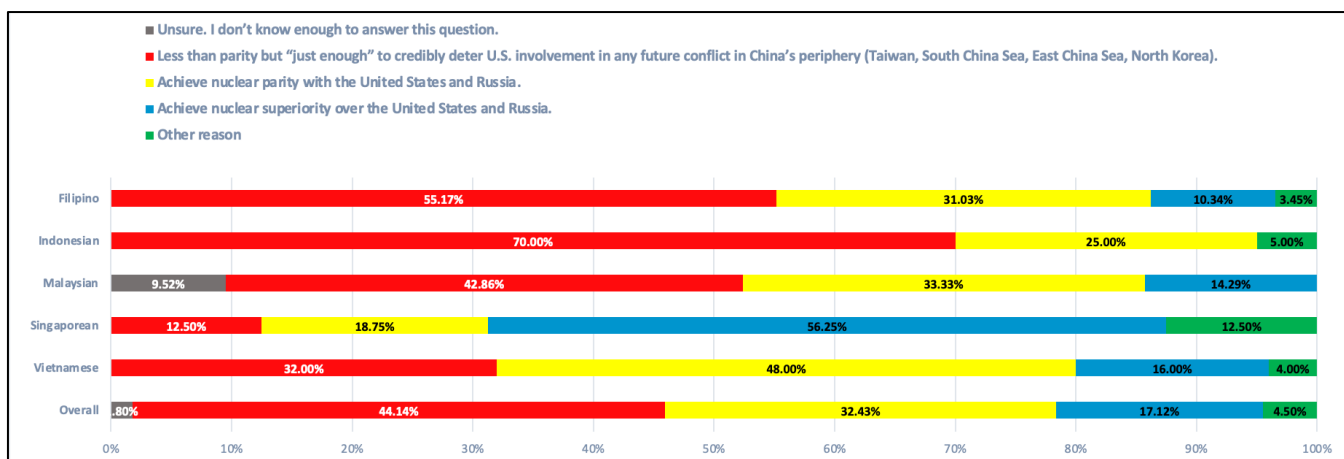
- Oppose it. It increases China’s capability to press its maritime/territorial claims that threaten regional security and/or my country’s own security.
- Oppose it. It presents safety concerns and danger due to potential nuclear-related accidents.
- Oppose it. It presents both safety concerns due to potential nuclear-related accidents and a threat to regional/national security.
- Ignore it. It does not pose any grave danger.
- Unsure. I don’t know enough to answer this question.



PART II: U.S.-CHINA NUCLEAR RELATIONS

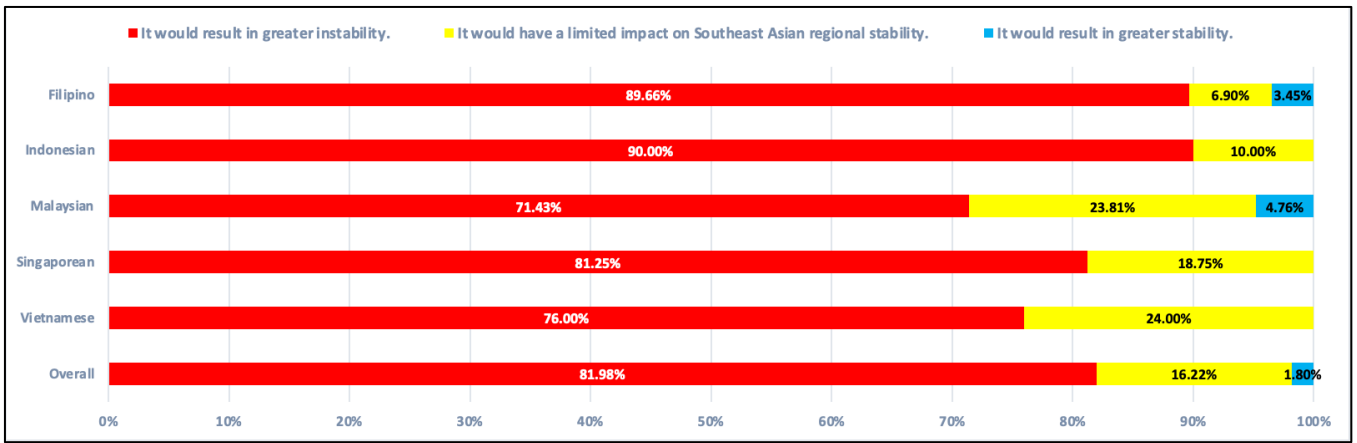
Q4: What do you think is the aim of China’s current expansion of its nuclear weapons arsenal?

- Achieve nuclear superiority over the United States and Russia.
- Achieve nuclear parity with the United States and Russia.
- Less than parity but “just enough” to credibly deter U.S. involvement in any future conflict in China’s periphery (Taiwan, South China Sea, East China Sea, North Korea).
- Unsure. I don’t know enough to answer this question.



Q5: What impact would nuclear arms racing/competition between China and the United States have on Southeast Asia's regional stability?

- It would result in greater stability.
- It would result in greater instability.
- It would have a limited impact on Southeast Asian regional stability.



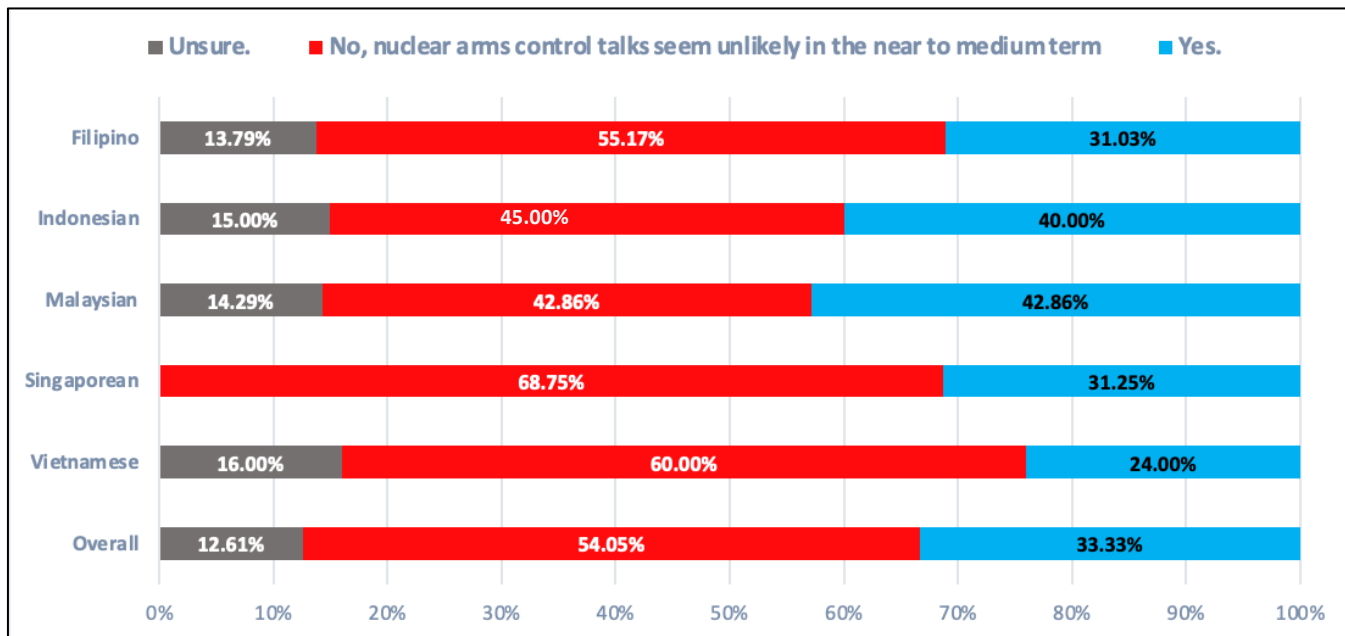
**Q6: [Multiple Choice] How would nuclear parity between China and the United States specifically influence Southeast Asian security? Please choose the THREE most likely outcomes.**

- States would be forced to choose between China and the United States, i.e., choose between economic assistance and security guarantees.
- ASEAN centrality would be weakened.
- It would strengthen ASEAN states' commitment to the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ) Treaty.
- Nuclear deterrence would become a consideration for Southeast Asia.
- Other nuclear disarmament mechanisms such as the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT), and the Treaty on Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) would be more important than ever in Southeast Asia.
- It would diminish the value and importance of current disarmament mechanisms.
- It will prompt some Southeast Asian countries to acquire nuclear technology of their own.



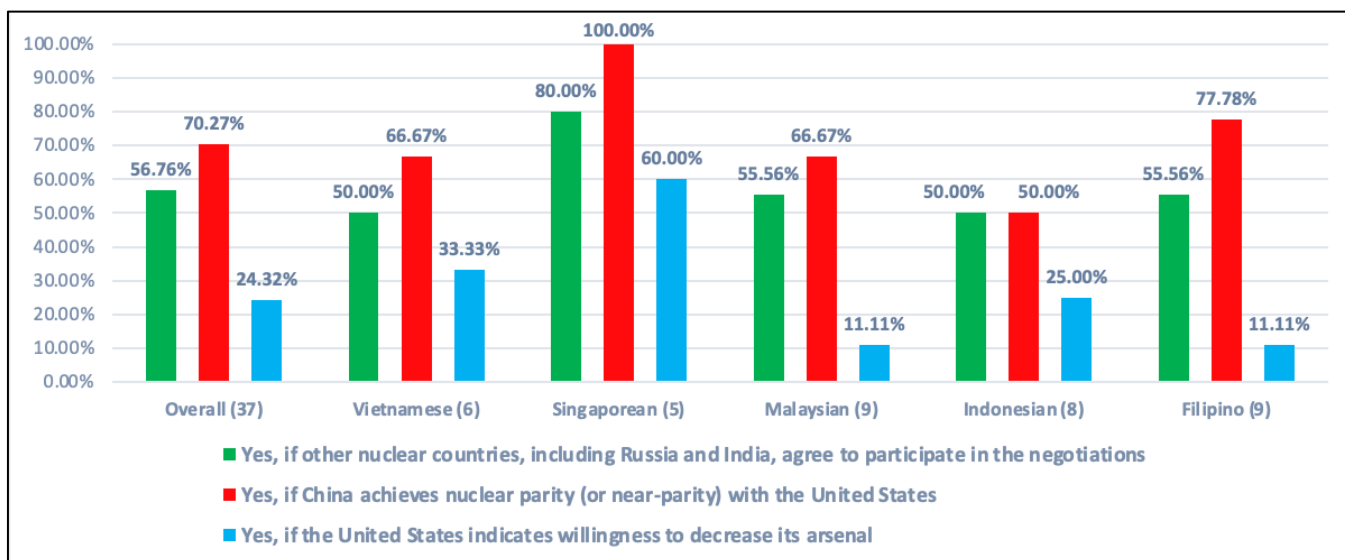
Q7: Would you expect China and the United States to begin nuclear arms control negotiations in the next 5-10 years?

- Yes.
- No, nuclear arms control talks seem unlikely in the near to medium term.
- Unsure. I don't know enough to answer this question.



If yes... (you can select multiple answers that you think are most likely)

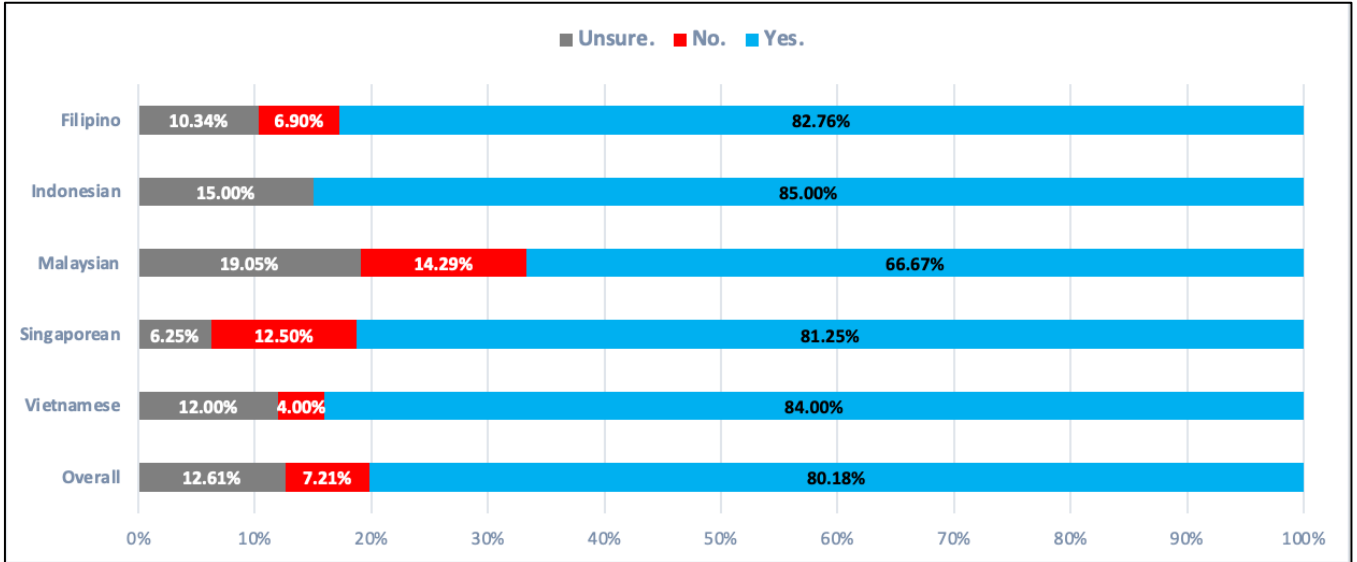
- Yes, if China achieves nuclear parity (or near-parity) with the United States.
- Yes, if the United States indicates a willingness to decrease its arsenal.
- Yes, if other nuclear countries, including Russia and India, agree to participate in the negotiations.



APPENDIX

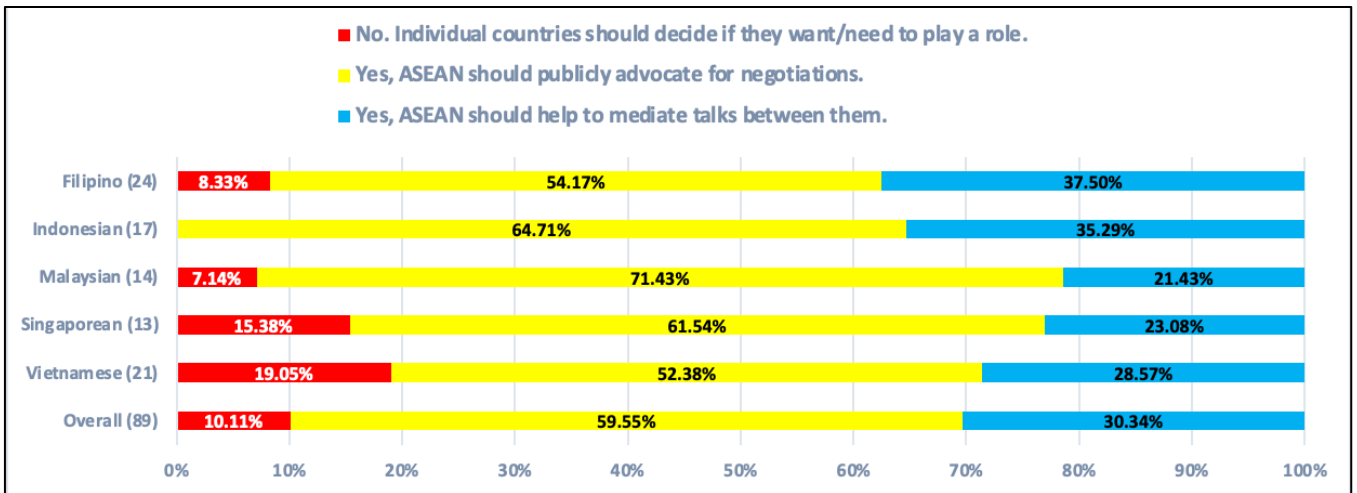
Q8: Should Southeast Asian states call on China and the United States to begin nuclear arms control negotiations?

- Yes.
- No.
- Unsure



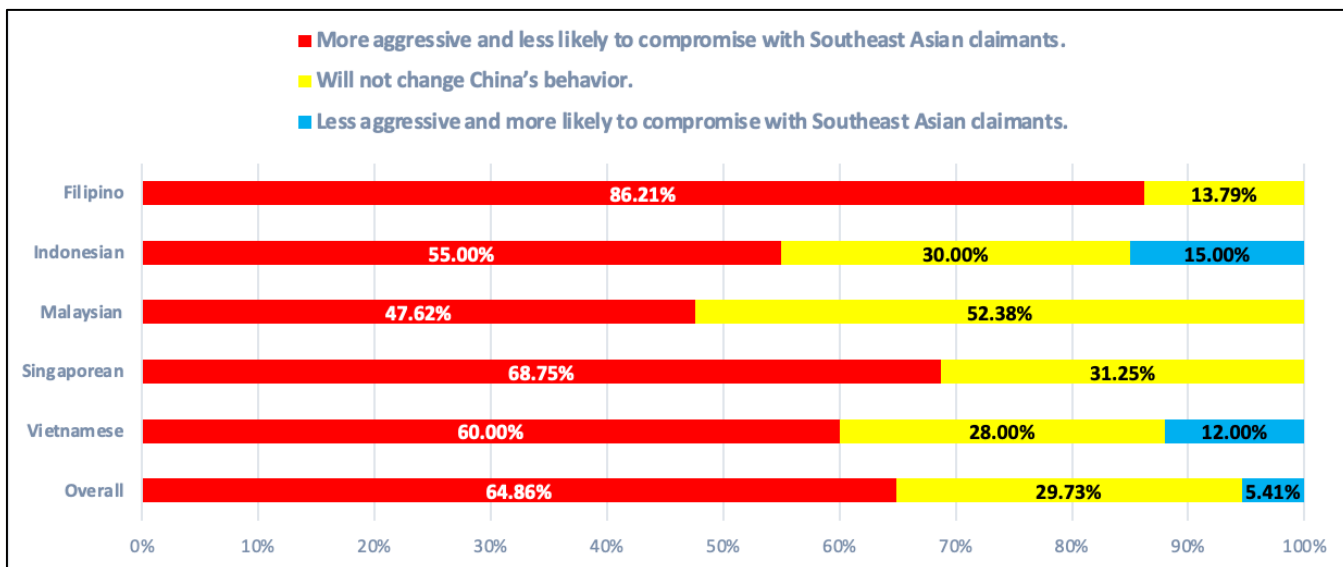
*If yes, do you think ASEAN should play a role in a future U.S.-China nuclear arms control and risk reduction negotiation?*

- Yes, ASEAN should help to mediate talks between them.
- Yes, ASEAN should publicly advocate for negotiations.
- No. Individual countries should decide if they want/need to play a role.



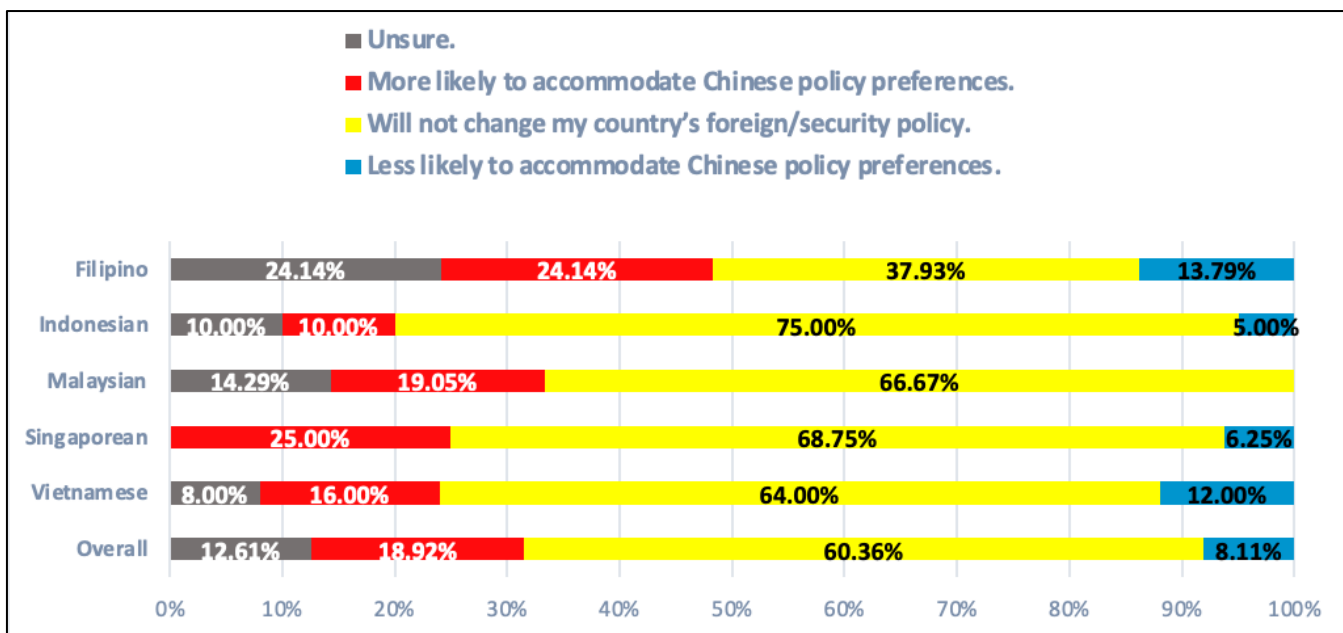
Q9: How would Chinese behavior change in the South China Sea if it achieved nuclear parity with the United States?

- More aggressive and less likely to compromise with Southeast Asian claimants.
- Less aggressive and more likely to compromise with Southeast Asian claimants.
- Will not change China's behavior.



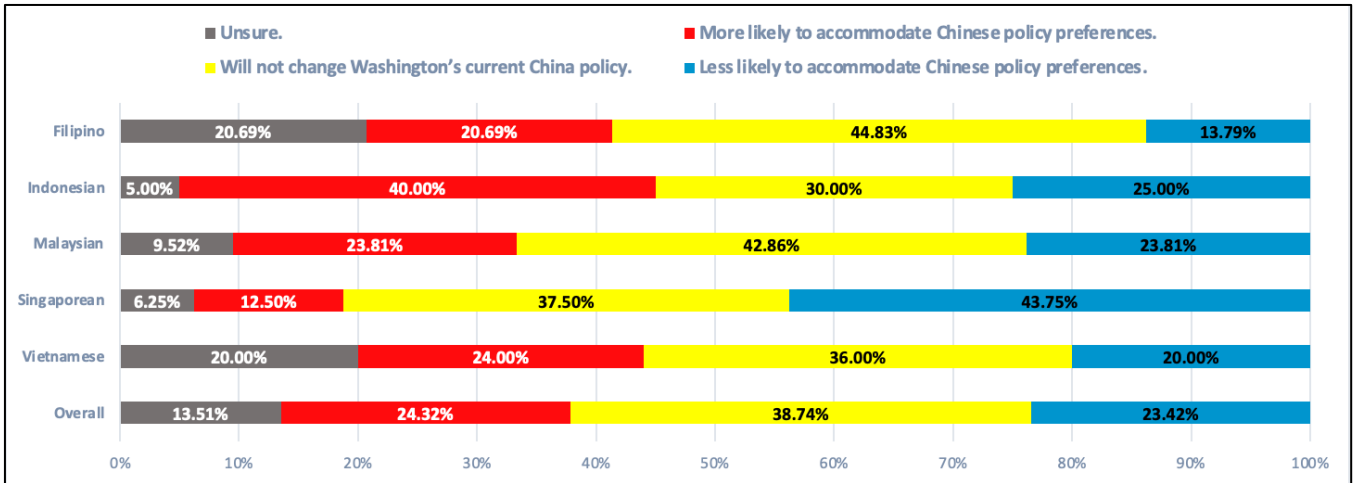
Q10: If China achieved nuclear parity with the United States, is your country more/less likely to accommodate Chinese policy preferences?

- More likely to accommodate Chinese policy preferences.
- Less likely to accommodate Chinese policy preferences.
- Will not change my country's foreign/security policy.
- Unsure.



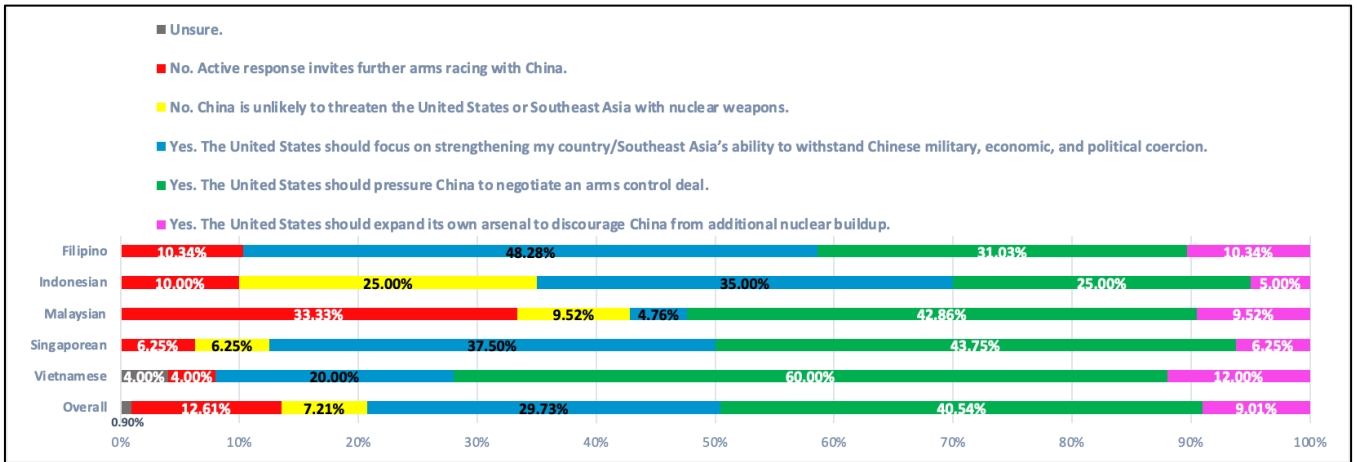
Q11: If China achieved nuclear parity with the United States, do you think Washington is more/less likely to accommodate Chinese security preferences?

- More likely to accommodate Chinese policy preferences.
- Less likely to accommodate Chinese policy preferences.
- Will not change Washington's current China policy.
- Unsure.



**Q12: Do you think the United States should actively respond to China's expansion of its nuclear weapons arsenal?**

- Yes. The United States should expand its own arsenal to discourage China from additional nuclear buildup.
- Yes. The United States should pressure China to negotiate an arms control deal.
- Yes. The United States should focus on strengthening my country/Southeast Asia's ability to withstand Chinese military, economic, and political coercion.
- No. China is unlikely to threaten the United States or Southeast Asia with nuclear weapons.
- No. Active response invites further arms racing with China.
- Unsure.



## APPENDIX II: THREE CATEGORIES OF CHINA'S ANTI-ACCESS/AREA-DENIAL (A2/AD) CAPABILITIES

By Olli Suorsa

### 1. SENSING AND TARGETING

China has constructed a robust network of overlapping and complementary early-warning and targeting systems across the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) Southern Theater Command's area of responsibility.

In the South China Sea, China has installed coastal radar stations that provide a maritime picture up to at least 200 nautical miles and has built several over-the-horizon back-scatter (OTH-B) radar systems with ranges exceeding 2,000 nautical miles covering the entire South China Sea. Those installed on the southern coast of Mainland China and Hainan could already cover most of the South China Sea, all of Taiwan, and more than a third of Vietnamese and Philippine territories.

China has deployed ocean surveillance and reconnaissance satellites (EO/IR, SAR/ISAR), providing early warning and allowing target updates for PLA's missile forces.<sup>1</sup> China has also developed high-altitude long endurance (HALE) and medium-altitude long-endurance (MALE) Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) to operate together with the People's Liberation Army Navy's (PLAN) manned KQ-200 maritime patrol and Anti-Submarine Warfare aircraft, allowing the monitoring of maritime traffic. China's HALE UAVs are capable of flying between 45,000 and 60,000 feet for up to 40 hours, continuously. Suorsa observes that in the South China Sea, specific Chinese UAVs – BZK-005 and WZ-7 – are frequently launched from artificial islands in both the Paracels and the Spratlys, effectively extending the PLA's sensing and targeting capabilities.<sup>2</sup> Underwater, China has constructed a series of listening stations known as the SONUS, allowing the PLA to monitor underwater activity near maritime chokepoints and to detect submarines moving in shallow waters.

### 2. STRIKE

Per data from the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) *Military Balance 2023*, the PLAN's South China Sea Fleet, under the Southern Theater Command (STC) has one operational aircraft carrier, the Shandong, 27-28 amphibious ships, 30 primary surface combatants (i.e., cruisers, guided missile destroyers, and guided missile frigates), and 23 submarines, including six SSBNs, two SSNs, and 15 diesel-electric (SSK) submarines.<sup>3</sup> The 30 primary surface combatants of the PLAN have 1,728 vertical launch tubes (VLS) capable of launching medium- to long-range ship-to-air and long-range subsonic and supersonic anti-ship missiles. The PLAN's Type 055 Renhai-class cruisers can even carry and launch ballistic anti-ship missiles and anti-submarine rockets.<sup>4</sup> The Yulin Naval Base in Hainan Island in the northern part of the South China Sea is home to all of the PLA's nuclear-armed ballistic missile submarines, the six Type 094 SBN boats, each armed with up to twelve JL-2 or soon JL-3 nuclear-tipped submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBM).<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, the STC's airpower is equally formidable. The Command is home to the PLA Air Force's (PLAAF) 8th Bomber Division, which operates H-6K bombers able to carry long-range land-attack and

<sup>1</sup> Ian Easton and Mark A. Stokes, *China's Electronic Intelligence (ELINT) Satellite Developments: Implications for U.S. Air and Naval Operations* (Project 2049 Institute, May 2018). [http://www.project2049.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/china\\_electronic\\_intelligence\\_elint\\_satellite\\_developments\\_easton\\_stokes.pdf](http://www.project2049.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/china_electronic_intelligence_elint_satellite_developments_easton_stokes.pdf). Accessed March 15, 2024.

<sup>2</sup> Olli Pekka Suorsa and Adrian Ang U-Jin, *How China Integrates Drones into PLA Operations Surrounding Taiwan* (The Diplomat, 27 May 2023). <http://www.thediplomat.com/2023/05/how-china-integrates-drones-into-pla-operations-surrounding-taiwan/>. Accessed on March 07, 2024.

<sup>3</sup> The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), *Military Balance 2023* (Routledge, February 2023).

<sup>4</sup> Eric Wertheim, *Type 055 Renhai-class Cruiser: China's Premier Surface Combatant* (Proceedings Vol. 149/3/1,441). <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2023/march/type-055-renhai-class-cruiser-chinas-premier-surface-combatant>. Accessed March 5, 2024.

<sup>5</sup> Maya Carlin, *China's Type 094 Jin-Class Nuclear Missile Submarines Has Only One Mission* (The National Interest, January 24, 2024). <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/chinas-type-094-jin-class-nuclear-missile-submarines-has-only-one-mission-208821>. Accessed March 5, 2024.



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antiship cruise missiles, including the YJ-63<sup>6</sup>, CJ-20<sup>7</sup>, and YJ-12<sup>8</sup>. H-6K bombers can hit targets in any part of the South China Sea and its littoral states when launched from their home bases. When forward deployed to Hainan or Woody Island in the Paracels or the Fiery Cross Reef, Subi Reef, or Mischief Reef in the Spratlys, which all have the required infrastructure to accommodate the aircraft for forward operations, the H-6K bombers' target range expands farther outside the first island chain, to include Guam. The PLA Rocket Forces (PLARF) under the STC could arguably employ DF-21D and DF-26 antiship ballistic missiles (ABSM) and the hypersonic DF-17 missiles to reach high-value targets in any part of the South China Sea and even the second island chain. Even without those assets, the STC is home to DF-15B and DF-16 regiments able to reach enemy assets in the South China Sea.

### 3. SUPPORT

China's A2/AD "kill chain" is supported by robust communications and electronic warfare capabilities. The PLA invests heavily in its space-based communications, navigation, and meteorology capabilities and infrastructure, seeing them as a critical element of modern "informatized warfare." The PLA is actively developing Electronic Warfare (EW) and Attack (EA) capabilities to deny adversaries' space-based surveillance, communications, and navigation. Chinese military planners are keenly aware of U.S. capabilities enabled by space-based technologies. To prevail in future conflicts, China has developed and tested anti-satellite missiles, as well as in-orbit vehicles with directed energy weapons capable of intervening with U.S. satellites. In terms of electronic warfare and attack capabilities, the PLA has tools to jam and spoof GPS and satellite links and is capable of conducting communications jamming, datalink jamming, radar jamming, and electronic attacks. These capabilities range the entire operational spectrum and can be found from the tactical to strategic levels of operations."

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<sup>6</sup> Dennis M. Gormley, Andrew S. Erickson, and Jingdong Yuan, *A Low-Visibility Force Multiplier: Assessing China's Cruise Missile Ambitions* (National Defense University Press for the Center for the Study of Chinese Military Affairs Institute for National Strategic Studies, 2014, 29-30). <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/Books/force-multiplier.pdf>. Accessed March 15, 2024.

<sup>7</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2018* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense 2018, p. 62). <https://media.defense.gov/2018/Aug/16/2001955282/-1/-1/1/2018-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT.PDF>. Accessed March 5, 2024.

<sup>8</sup> Dennis M. Gormley, Andrew S. Erickson, and Jingdong Yuan, *A Low-Visibility Force Multiplier: Assessing China's Cruise Missile Ambitions* (National Defense University Press for the Center for the Study of Chinese Military Affairs Institute for National Strategic Studies, 2014, 51). <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/Books/force-multiplier.pdf>. Accessed March 15, 2024.

## APPENDIX III: SCENARIO-BASED EXERCISE – THE BLOCKADE OF TAIWAN

### THE SETTING

It is 2028. China has approached nuclear parity with the United States as its number of operational nuclear warheads reached 1,000 (the United States has 1,450). Australia has received, earlier than planned, its first two “in-service” nuclear-powered submarines as part of the Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) Trilateral Security Partnership, resulting in heightened political tension with neighbors Indonesia and Malaysia. There is still no Code of Conduct in the South China Sea, with persistent disagreement over geographic scope and allowable operations remaining unresolved. Philippine and Vietnamese energy exploration in their own Continental Shelf falling inside the nine-dash line remains suspended. But as Chinese coercion continues with the increasing presence of maritime militia vessels and China Coast Guard (CCG) ships getting closer to features occupied by the Philippines, Vietnam, and Malaysia, the United States and its allies have also ramped up their efforts to keep the South China Sea accessible. The U.S. Navy has been conducting at least 50 related Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) per year since 2025, while also regularly holding joint patrols, bilaterally and multilaterally, with the Philippines, Japan, the United Kingdom, and Australia. The United States has also already completed the infrastructure on all Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) sites in the Philippines, with the ones in Palawan, facing the South China Sea, and Cagayan, facing Taiwan, now able to host an entire aircraft carrier strike group. Meanwhile, China was the first and, thus far, the only P5 member that has signed the Protocol to the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ) Treaty.

### THE PRELUDE

January 16, 2028. A winner is about to be proclaimed in a close presidential election that some elements in Taiwan, aided by People’s Republic of China (PRC) disinformation campaigns, called “rigged.” In the past, Beijing has been critical of leading presidential candidates in Taiwan, accusing them of being avowed “splittists” and condemning their refusal to return to the “1992 Consensus.” During the campaign, all candidates repeated the traditional line that “Taiwan does not need to declare independence because it is already independent.” They all insisted that they were running to become the president of Taiwan and that the “sovereign will” of the Taiwanese people must be respected. Meanwhile, China is accusing Washington of “supporting the so-called Taiwanese independence” as many U.S. politicians express support for Taiwan’s democracy and a willingness “to come to Taiwan’s defense in the event of an unprovoked attack.”

China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a series of public statements indicating that Beijing’s patience is running out, warning of the use of force “against actions by Taiwan for independence” and to counter “meddling” by foreign powers. U.S. intelligence has issued a warning that an invasion is becoming more likely by the day. This conclusion is reinforced by the intelligence services of Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea, all indicating that China has decided to invade the island. Intercepted communications between senior Chinese officials indicate that China will see the presidential election proclamation as tantamount to a *de facto* declaration of independence, which will justify China’s use of force. China’s propaganda efforts, apart from portraying the election as rigged, also focused on how the “CIA orchestrated the results to permanently separate Taiwan from China.” The United States vowed it would defend Taiwan, despite some political leaders in Washington raising concerns that China already has achieved near parity with the United States on the nuclear front and that cooler heads should prevail to avoid a catastrophic nuclear exchange.

The Pentagon has ordered two aircraft carriers and their supporting ships to the vicinity of Taiwan. One of the carriers, the *USS Gerald Ford*, is in the South China Sea, *en route* to an EDCA Base in Cagayan, pending Philippine decision on hosting the strike group. The other, *USS Carl Vinson*, currently in Darwin, Australia, for a series of exercises, is about to leave port to deploy to the Taiwan Strait but is awaiting final orders on which route to take, given previous Indonesian and Malaysian statements that their waters will be off limits to all belligerents and all activities in preparation for war. Australia said it would deploy its first two “in-service” nuclear-powered submarines near Taiwan. But doing so quickly means passing through Indonesian Archipelagic Sea-Lanes (ASL). The UK’s *HMS Queen Elizabeth* is in Singapore after concluding a scheduled naval exercise with the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) in the Indian Ocean. The UK has signaled that the *Elizabeth* will stay in the region to assist U.S. efforts when requested. In Japan, the prime minister declared a national state of emergency and invoked the right to collective self-defense. The latter permitted the Self-Defense Force (SDF) to jointly operate with U.S. forces to respond to a contingency and allowed U.S. forces to use SDF bases and civilian airports in Okinawa and Kyushu. The Philippines has received an official request to host one of the Carrier Strike Groups – the *Gerald Ford* in Naval Base Camilo Osias in Santa

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Ana, Cagayan, which generated fierce opposition from the governor of Cagayan Province. The United States previously requested that more U.S. military equipment and aircraft be pre-positioned in all EDCA bases. They are hours away as the Philippine National Security Council makes its final decision. Several U.S. defense officials broached the idea of invoking Article V of the U.S.-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty, if/when the United States decides to engage in combat.

### THE INCIDENT: MOVE 1

As Taiwan proclaims its election winners, Beijing deploys a flotilla of 20 guided-missile destroyers from the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) and 30 vessels from CCG around the Taiwan Strait and the southern parts of the East China Sea to "protect Taiwan from corruption and interference by foreign forces." On the same day, six of the newly commissioned Type 096 nuclear ballistic missile submarines (SSBN), armed with JL-3 SLBMs, were reported to have left their home port of Hainan, and are suspected to be scattered throughout the South China Sea and the Luzon Strait. One of them was reported to have entered Indonesian archipelagic waters off Natuna but disappeared as it dived deeper underwater. China's three aircraft carriers and their support vessels have positioned themselves in strategic locations—in the Philippine Sea, near Guam, off the coast of Pratas, and in the middle of the Bashi Channel, reinforcing China's Anti-Access/Area-Denial (A2AD) capability.

Meanwhile, a large number of People's Liberation Army (PLA) amphibious combat units accompanied by more than 50 destroyers and 30 Coast Guard vessels have surrounded Taiwan, forming an unmistakable blockade. The stated purpose: inspect all vessels to ensure no weapons of any kind and illegal contrabands not explicitly approved by China's Ministry of Commerce are brought into the island. Merchant vessels entering and leaving ports in Taiwan are being re-routed to designated Mainland ports if they could not be inspected at sea. China's Ministry of Commerce announced that the action is a "domestic matter" and of no concern to the international community, insisting that "trade with China through ports in Taiwan will be back to normal as soon as the domestic threat is dealt with."

### SOUTHEAST ASIAN RESPONSES

Given these developments, the global media has turned its attention to the countries in Southeast Asia awaiting their response to both the requests from the United States and statements by China. The ASEAN Chair has called for all parties to recognize their commitment to peaceful resolution of disputes as signatories of the Treaty on Amity and Cooperation. The Chair has also called for the establishment of an ASEAN Troika to deal with the situation. Separately, the SEANWFZ Commission has met at the request of multiple Member States and its Executive Committee has directed the establishment of a fact-finding mission to evaluate potential violations of the Bangkok Treaty.

Meanwhile, *Asia Times* published an article by a pair of prominent regional analysts that summarizes past policy positions and related statements by individual countries related to the current situation in Southeast Asia. They note that Philippine President Marcos has previously stated that "the Philippines will not allow the use of its bases for any offensive action. These will only be used to help the Philippines if it needs help. If there is no one attacking us, they do not have to worry because we are not going to attack them. What we are only doing is continuing to bolster our territory and our Republic's defenses." Nevertheless, given outstanding requests from Washington and the potential invocation of Article V of the U.S.-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty if/when the United States and China went to war over Taiwan, Manila is reportedly weighing its options.

In the past, Indonesian officials have emphasized their longstanding position that their archipelagic sea lanes cannot be used for activities related to war or preparation for war or non-peaceful activities. Several Indonesian political leaders have emphasized that ASEAN mechanisms be used to de-escalate, insisting that all parties fully respect the SEANFZ and ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in their military operations in Southeast Asian waters. The Foreign Ministry has issued a call for all parties to exercise restraint while the President ponders a response to the crisis.

While Malaysia has expressed serious concerns regarding reports of the PRC invasion of Taiwan, Malaysia wants all parties to fully respect and comply with its existing national regime in relation to the operation of nuclear-powered and nuclear-armed vessels in its waters. Malaysia has also underscored the importance of preserving the Southeast Asian region as a nuclear-weapon-free zone, in line with the Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) Declaration and SEANFZ.

Given that an outright conflict over Taiwan would significantly impact Vietnam's export-driven economy, the Vietnamese government has frequently expressed concern regarding the potential economic consequences of armed conflict in the region. The analysts asserted that Vietnam was currently scrambling

to identify alternative routes for commercial vessels bound for and departing Vietnamese ports. Its Foreign Ministry has issued a statement “calling for all relevant parties to exercise restraint, not to exacerbate tensions in the Taiwan Strait” while emphasizing that Hanoi adheres to its “One-China Principle.”

Singapore has regularly stated its position that it is opposed to both “Taiwanese independence” and “any unilateral attempts to change the status quo.” Nevertheless, it was pointed out that Singapore has a longstanding joint military training program with Taiwan, dubbed Project Starlight, established in the 1970s. The military ties were reaffirmed and expanded under the National Defense Exchange and Security Agreement signed in October 2019. China has stated that it wants these ties suspended. Like the Philippines, Singapore has also been requested by the United States to play a role, albeit indirectly, in a potential U.S. response to the anticipated invasion of Taiwan by China. Access to Singapore’s shipyards and refueling facilities with JP-5 fuel, is critical for the U.S. Navy to keep its air wings in the fight. But U.S. ships and aircraft in Singaporean facilities can be targeted by China.

Questions:

1. What three things worry you the most in this situation? Be as specific as possible.
2. In descending order of priority, what are your government’s three goals in this situation?
3. What are the three immediate military steps your government takes to respond?
4. What three things do you think the United States/China/Taiwan will say or do?
5. What three things do you prefer the United States/China/Taiwan to say or do?
6. What do you not want the United States to say or do?

#### **THE INCIDENT: MOVE 2 (FOR PLENARY DISCUSSION ONLY)**

The PLA lands tanks, artillery, and troops in Taiwan after five hours of repelling Taiwanese resistance at sea. PLA forces now control 25% of the island. U.S. reinforcements have already begun mobilizing from their bases in Okinawa and Northern Luzon. Beijing issued a statement saying any party that directly or indirectly interferes in China’s “domestic affairs” will be a legitimate target. China specifically reiterated its calls to Japan, the Philippines, Singapore, and others in the region: U.S. military presence would make their territories legitimate targets in China’s “act of self-defense as allowed under the UN Charter.” Hours later, to mitigate a likely U.S. intervention, the PLA attacked Lal-lo Airbase, an EDCA base in Cagayan, with four conventional-armed DF-21C missiles, destroying pre-positioned U.S. aircraft and disabling the runway. China also torpedoed the JS Mashū, a Japanese replenishment vessel traversing the East China Sea *en route* to the Taiwan Strait to join the U.S. forces. Hours later, Beijing announced that, to implement SEANFZ, the PLA will no longer allow the entry of nuclear-powered and nuclear-armed vessels in the South China Sea and the Malacca Strait. Any such vessel will be turned away, effectively expanding the blockade of Taiwan to include the entirety of the South China Sea. The Foreign Ministry in Beijing also supported the positions of Malaysia and Indonesia that Innocent Passage and ASL Passage are reserved only for peaceful purposes per the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.

Questions:

1. The United States is requesting your country’s support in responding to China’s invasion of Taiwan. What should your country do in response?
2. Do the developments above change your responses to Move 1 questions?

## ABOUT THE PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATORS

**Dr. Jeffrey Ordaniel** is non-resident Adjunct Senior Fellow and Director for Maritime Security at the Pacific Forum. Concurrently, he is also Associate Professor of International Security Studies at Tokyo International University (TIU) in Japan. He holds a Ph.D. in International Relations and specializes in the study of offshore territorial and maritime entitlement disputes in Asia. His teaching and research revolve around maritime security and ocean governance, ASEAN regionalism, and broadly, U.S. alliances and engagements in the Indo-Pacific. From 2016 to 2019, he was based in Honolulu and was the holder of the endowed Admiral Joe Vasey Fellowship at the Pacific Forum. Dr. Ordaniel convenes the annual track 1.5 South China Sea Dialogue. His current research on maritime security in Asia is funded by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS), 2020-2024.

**Carl Baker** is Executive Director at Pacific Forum in Honolulu, Hawaii. He serves as coeditor of Comparative Connections. He is a member of the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific (CSCAP) and engaged in promoting security cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region as a participant in several CSCAP Study Groups. Current focus areas include preventive diplomacy, multilateral security architecture, nonproliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and nuclear security. Previously, he was on the faculty at the Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies and an adjunct professor at Hawaii Pacific University. Publications include articles and book chapters on U.S. alliances and political developments in South Korea and the Philippines. A retired U.S. Air Force officer, he has extensive experience in Korea, having served as an international political-military affairs officer for the UN Military Armistice Commission and as a political and economic intelligence analyst for U.S. Forces Korea. He has also lived for extended periods and served in a variety of military staff assignments in Japan, the Philippines, and Guam.

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