

Beyond Energy Security: America's US\$1.5 Billion Bid to Reinforce Influence in Southeast Asia

The United States has announced a US\$1.5 billion energy financing package for Southeast Asia, positioning itself as a long-term strategic energy partner for the region amid growing geopolitical uncertainty. The initiative, unveiled during the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Manila, includes support for energy infrastructure, liquefied natural gas (LNG), electricity grid modernization, and cooperation on small modular nuclear reactors (SMRs). Washington argues that these investments will help strengthen Southeast Asia's energy security as demand continues to rise.

However, the timing of the initiative suggests that the package is driven not only by economic considerations but also by broader geopolitical objectives. The recent Iran war and the possibility of disruptions or a blockade of the Strait of Hormuz have highlighted Southeast Asia's vulnerability to global energy supply shocks. By expanding its role in the region's energy sector, the United States seeks to reassure ASEAN countries that it remains a reliable and dependable partner capable of supporting regional stability during times of crisis. Maintaining the political confidence and strategic trust of Southeast Asian governments has become increasingly important as competition between major powers intensifies.

The initiative also reflects Washington's efforts to prevent the further expansion of China's influence across Southeast Asia. China has established a strong presence through large-scale infrastructure financing, power grid development, and Belt and Road Initiative projects. By offering alternative financing, advanced energy technologies, and access to American LNG, the US aims to provide ASEAN with additional strategic choices while reducing dependence on Chinese-backed infrastructure.

Thailand–Cambodia Border Dispute: A Humanitarian Crisis Rooted in a Long-Standing Territorial Conflict

More than 20,000 Cambodians remain displaced along the Thailand–Cambodia border following armed clashes in 2025, according to UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Cambodia, Tom Andrews. Although both governments agreed to a ceasefire in December 2025, tensions persist as each side continues to accuse the other of violating the agreement. Andrews called on both countries to ensure the safe return of displaced civilians, stressing that international law guarantees the right of conflict-displaced people to return to their homes.

The humanitarian crisis reflects a much deeper problem: the long-standing territorial dispute between Thailand and Cambodia. For decades, overlapping claims over sections of their shared border have periodically triggered military confrontations, diplomatic tensions, and nationalist rhetoric. The 2025 fighting, which displaced approximately 650,000 Cambodian civilians at its peak, was another manifestation of this unresolved dispute rather than an isolated incident. While Thailand maintains that its forces have merely reclaimed sovereign territory, Cambodia argues that military actions have prevented thousands of civilians from returning to their homes.

Beyond the border conflict, Andrews also expressed concern over Cambodia's ongoing human rights challenges, including the expansion of online scam centres, political intimidation, and restrictions on opposition figures such as Kem Sokha. However, the continued displacement of border communities highlights how unresolved territorial disputes can generate long-term humanitarian consequences despite formal ceasefire agreements.

ASEAN Regional Forum Calls for Nuclear Disarmament Amid Growing Global Security Uncertainty

The 33rd ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in Manila reaffirmed its commitment to global nuclear disarmament by urging all nuclear-weapon states to fulfill their obligations under

Article VI of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). The forum emphasized that the complete elimination of nuclear weapons remains the only guarantee that they will never be used again. Participants also expressed serious concern over North Korea's continued nuclear and ballistic missile programs, calling for the resumption of peaceful dialogue on the Korean Peninsula. In addition, the meeting addressed security issues in the South China Sea, Myanmar, and the Middle East, while welcoming the United Kingdom as the ARF's 28th participant.

Despite ASEAN's principled commitment to a nuclear-free world, the current international security environment highlights the difficulties of achieving meaningful denuclearization. Nuclear-armed powers continue to modernize their arsenals while relying on nuclear deterrence as a central element of national security. In practice, these capabilities are often perceived by other states as instruments of strategic influence or coercion, creating skepticism about whether the existing non-proliferation regime is applied consistently.

The persistence of nuclear arsenals among major powers weakens confidence that complete disarmament is achievable in the near future. As global politics becomes increasingly unstable—with major-power rivalry, regional conflicts, and weakening trust in international institutions—some governments may conclude that acquiring an independent deterrent is the most effective way to ensure national survival. Others, however, argue that wider nuclear proliferation would increase the risks of arms races, miscalculation, and nuclear conflict. This tension illustrates the enduring gap between the normative aspiration of a nuclear-free world and the strategic realities shaping contemporary international politics.

Indonesia's Constitutional Court Orders Free Meal Program Removed from Education Budget

Indonesia's Constitutional Court has ruled that funding for President Prabowo Subianto's Free Nutritious Meals Program can no longer be sourced from the national education budget, stating that the policy does not qualify as an educational expenditure under the Constitution. The Court ordered that the separation become fully effective by 2028, while encouraging the government to begin restructuring the 2027 state budget. The decision follows a petition arguing that allocating education funds to the program violated the constitutional requirement that at least 20 percent of the national budget be dedicated to education.

The ruling represents a significant setback for one of President Prabowo's flagship campaign promises. During the 2024 presidential election, the nationwide free meal program was promoted as a central policy to improve child nutrition and human capital. However, since its implementation in 2025, the initiative has faced growing criticism over its enormous fiscal burden, governance failures, corruption allegations involving the National Nutrition Agency (BGN), and several cases of mass food poisoning. Public support has also declined sharply, according to recent opinion polls.

Many Indonesian economists, education experts, and public policy analysts have argued that the program was implemented too hastily without sufficient feasibility studies, institutional preparation, or long-term fiscal planning. Critics contend that the government prioritized fulfilling a high-profile political promise over developing a well-tested and sustainable policy framework. Some observers have further suggested that the program has strengthened the political interests of groups supporting the administration—including coalition parties, business actors, and military-linked networks—through procurement and implementation opportunities. While supporters continue to view the initiative as an investment in Indonesia's future, the Constitutional Court's decision underscores the importance of ensuring that major social programs remain consistent with constitutional principles, sound governance, and transparent public budgeting.