

**ASIA-PACIFIC LEADERSHIP NETWORK**

FOR NUCLEAR NON-PROLIFERATION AND DISARMAMENT

INDONESIA AND AUKUS: STEADY PRAGMATISM AT WORK

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In Southeast Asia, particularly Indonesia, the launch of the trilateral security pact known as AUKUS two years ago was not met with great fanfare. While the leaders of Australia, the UK, and the United States celebrated their partnership, the Indonesian government swiftly signalled its lack of enthusiasm. The Indonesian [Foreign Ministry](#) viewed Canberra's decision to pursue nuclear-powered submarines as part of AUKUS "cautiously," and expressed deep concern "over the continuing arms race and power projection in the region."

The overall impression was that AUKUS would destabilise the region, which was already experiencing heightened strategic tension courtesy of the United States and China. Australia, a signatory of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia, was now taking steps that could elicit stronger countermeasures in undersea warfare from Beijing and its allies. Indonesia was neither forewarned nor prepared for this development. As former presidential adviser Dewi Fortuna Anwar [pointed out](#) at the time, "every country has the right to increase its defense equipment capacity," but the issue for Jakarta was the lack of transparency.

Questions were also raised concerning Australia's commitments under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). As one Indonesian scholar pondered, could (or would) Canberra [make the jump](#) from nuclear-propelled to nuclear-armed? The Indonesian Foreign Ministry wasted no time [ensuring that nuclear naval propulsion](#) (without naming any specific state or AUKUS) was on the agenda at the 10th Review Conference of the NPT in New York last August. [According to one diplomat](#), AUKUS would "test the limits of an already fragile non-proliferation regime." It also revealed a potential loophole: the NPT does not explicitly prohibit the use of nuclear material for military purposes.

And what about the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)? The rise of non-ASEAN security mechanisms like AUKUS and the Quad left Indonesia and the Southeast Asian body feeling sidelined in their own region. ASEAN might be aware of its limitations, but as Evan Laksmana [pointed out](#), "being made publicly redundant is not easy to stomach." On a more constructive note, former Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa [saw the pact as](#) "a reminder for ASEAN of the cost of its dithering and

indecision on the complex and fast-evolving geopolitical environment,” while former Navy Chief Marsetio [declared that](#) “Indonesia, as well as ASEAN, should have a stronger stance and demeanor” amidst an Indo-Pacific Cold War. Scholar Ristian Atriandi Supriyanto [went even further](#), stating that AUKUS serves as a wake-up call for Southeast Asia to offer its own solutions to counter China’s aggressive behaviour.

Indonesia and AUKUS two years later

Two years on, some things have changed while others have remained the same. In March of this year, the AUKUS leaders [unveiled the details of a phased approach](#): Australia will receive secondhand American submarines in the early 2030s, followed by new British-made ones arriving in late 2030s. However, mindful of the regional concerns expressed in 2021, Canberra’s leaders made an extra effort to brief Southeast Asian counterparts on the AUKUS update and the Australian [Defence Strategic Review](#) ahead of time.

The nature of the debate has also shifted. Indonesia’s leaders appear to show begrudging acceptance of the coming technological developments. Pillar 2 of AUKUS, which concerns advancements in cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, quantum technology and other undersea capabilities, [could potentially benefit Indonesia’s defences](#). Nevertheless, anxieties remain about what AUKUS signifies for the future of regional security.

This is primarily due to the fact that AUKUS forces Southeast Asia to confront unspoken fears of potential conflict over Taiwan. Nuclear-powered submarines are designed for long-endurance, high-speed, and stealth operations. It is evident that Canberra does not intend to deploy these vessels in the seas immediately to its north. Consequently, Jakarta faces a critical question: should Australian submarines be allowed to transit through Indonesian waters en route to war? Would such a move violate Indonesia’s principle to remain nonaligned in the event of conflict? As Tubagus Hasanuddin, a senior member of the ruling Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) and of the parliamentary committee overseeing foreign affairs, defence, and intelligence, [stated](#), “Indonesia’s standpoint is clear that [our archipelagic sea lanes] cannot be used for activities related to war or preparation of war or non-peaceful activities.” That said, the answer largely depends on how [Indonesia would want to interpret freedom of navigation](#) under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in such a contingency.

While the stakes of Indo-Pacific security appear to be rising, it is worth remembering that for Indonesia, economic concerns and post-Covid recovery remain front and centre. With a general election scheduled for February next year, the outgoing president, Joko Widodo, will be focused on securing his legacy, marked by infrastructure upgrades and the ambitious relocation of the capital. AUKUS also does not seem to have had a detrimental impact on security ties with Jakarta. Indonesia continues to deepen its defence relationship with the US, [recently hosting the second iteration of annual military exercise Super Garuda Shield](#). Furthermore, Australia and Indonesia are set to finalise an upgraded Defence Cooperation Agreement later this year. In short,

Indonesia’s foreign policy is marked by steady pragmatism, guided by lofty yet important principles of peace, non-proliferation, and nonalignment. And in the case of AUKUS, over the past two years, we’ve seen exactly that.

The opinions articulated above represent the views of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network or any of its members.

This commentary is also published on the [APLN website](#).

ABOUT APLN

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