

LOOKING BEYOND THE RHETORIC REACTIONS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA TO AUKUS

Dr. Collin KOH

Research fellow at RSIS, Singapore



ABSTRACT

This paper surveys the reactions amongst ASEAN member states following the announcement of AUKUS. By “reactions”, this paper argues, one needs to look beyond the obvious rhetoric – such as those evinced by Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur immediately after the deal was publicized. Beyond rhetoric, “reactions” also encompass the less apparent policy actions which may subtly reflect the sentiments of ASEAN capitals to AUKUS. Such policy actions as the aforementioned elevation of ASEAN-Australia relations to one of comprehensive security partnership are arguably more decisive than mere open press statements or random remarks by ASEAN political elites and policy planners. Of course, this paper would not stop at surveying those reactions but attempts to underline the strategic rationale. It argues that Southeast Asian perceptions towards evolving geopolitical uncertainties in the region, including concerns over the rise and growing assertiveness of China, could have shaped sentiments towards AUKUS, manifested not only in words but through more tangible, albeit less obvious, policy actions.

CONTENT

Introduction	2
AUKUS in a Nutshell	3
Deciphering Southeast Asian Reactions	5
Conclusion: The Big “Why”?	13

INTRODUCTION

The fallout in diplomatic and security relations between Australia and France over the Australia-United States-United Kingdom trilateral security partnership (AUKUS)¹ continues to persist since September 2021 when the deal was surprisingly announced. However, the regional fallout did not – save for the exception of China and Russia.² Yet Southeast Asia has gone somewhat quiet. The initial chorus of criticisms from Indonesia and Malaysia, which were by far the most vocal, did not last long. By the end of 2021, there was no further follow-up public comments on AUKUS amongst member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). In fact, throughout the region, Beijing and Moscow are the only capitals that have kept their criticisms of AUKUS alive in their official communications.

What could best explain the quick sputtering out of reactions in Southeast Asia to AUKUS? To be sure, there is no one singular response from the 10-member institution to this arrangement, but disparate reactions from various ASEAN capitals. And not all ASEAN member states have openly responded to AUKUS – some might have elected to do so in private through backchannel diplomacy with their Australian, American and British counterparts. The lack of a united ASEAN response to AUKUS is palpable but not entirely unexpected. ASEAN is nothing more than a collection of 10 different member states each with its national interests to safeguard. While ASEAN as an institution provides a ready platform for interstate dialogue between Southeast Asian nations and with their extra-regional dialogue partners – which include all three signatories of AUKUS³ – it does not provide for a common set of defense and security guidelines akin to, for instance, the European Union’s Common Security and Defense Policy. Essentially individual ASEAN member states while professing to uphold ASEAN centrality, have in practice implemented their national approaches to regional issues based on extant national interests, which may not necessarily align with the oft-mentioned need to preserve intramural cohesion and unity.

But if there is a need to identify a singular ASEAN reaction – or at least a barometer of sentiments amongst the 10 member states – to AUKUS one does not need to look far beyond late October 2021. Leading up to the ASEAN-Australia Summit in late October, during which ties between the regional bloc and Canberra were upgraded to one of comprehensive strategic partnership⁴ – which ought to be seen as scarcely any form of rebuke at AUKUS. Instead, one may argue this elevation of relationship is more like a reward of sorts, a kind of affirmation of Australia’s strategic importance in the eyes of ASEAN governments.

1. *Joint Leaders Statement on AUKUS*, The White House, United States of America, 15 September 2021. See: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/09/15/joint-leaders-statement-on-aukus/>.

2. See for instance, “AUKUS deal endangers international security order: Chinese, Russian representatives,” *Xinhua*, 27 November 2021; and “Russia, China seriously concerned over creation of AUKUS pact – joint statement,” *TASS*, 4 February 2022.

3. The United Kingdom formally becomes the ninth dialogue partner to ASEAN in August 2021. Prior to that, ASEAN dialogue partners comprise Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, Russia, South Korea and the United States. *UK becomes ASEAN Dialogue Partner*, Foreign Commonwealth & Development Office, 6 August 2021. See: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-becomes-asean-dialogue-partner>.

4. *Chairman’s Statement of the 1st ASEAN-Australia Summit*, 27 October 2021, ASEAN Secretariat. See: <https://asean.org/chairmans-statement-of-the-1st-asean-australia-summit/>.

Defense and security engagements between ASEAN member states and the key players of AUKUS, namely, Australia and the United States, continue to prosper without a noticeable glitch. The United Kingdom looks set to join the fray as it steps up its defense and security engagements in the region, not least of course with the months-long deployment of a pair of offshore patrol vessels in 2022.

This paper surveys the reactions amongst ASEAN member states following the announcement of AUKUS. By “reactions”, this paper argues, one needs to look beyond the obvious rhetoric – such as those evinced by Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur immediately after the deal was publicized. Beyond rhetoric, “reactions” also encompass the less apparent policy actions which may subtly reflect the sentiments of ASEAN capitals to AUKUS. Such policy actions as the aforementioned elevation of ASEAN-Australia relations to one of comprehensive security partnership are arguably more decisive than mere open press statements or random remarks by ASEAN political elites and policy planners. Of course, this paper would not stop at surveying those reactions but attempts to underline the strategic rationale. It argues that Southeast Asian perceptions towards evolving geopolitical uncertainties in the region, including concerns over the rise and growing assertiveness of China, could have shaped sentiments towards AUKUS, manifested not only in words but through more tangible, albeit less obvious, policy actions.

AUKUS IN A NUTSHELL

For the uninitiated, AUKUS is a trilateral security partnership between Australia, the UK and U.S. that was announced in September 2021. The region is not unfamiliar with “mini-lateral” security partnerships, such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (or more commonly known as Quad). But AUKUS represents a wholly different animal altogether. It is unprecedented compared to Quad – in particular having a more prominent military dimension. It appears to also be designed as not just a complement but solution to the deficiencies of Quad. The latter has a rather chequered history. It was first established in 2007 between Australia, India, Japan and the U.S. to represent a coalition of regional democracies in what was then broadly perceived as a response to China’s growing diplomatic, economic and military clout. It held its first military drill, Exercise Malabar, which included Singapore as a fifth exercise partner that same year. However, following disquiet from Beijing, the Quad went into oblivion, and Exercise Malabar returned to its original bilateral format between India and the U.S.

Quad thus remained as a dormant coalition until 2017 – not long after Donald Trump became president and Washington’s Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) which followed soon after Japan’s own similarly-named Indo-Pacific concept conceived then under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to give it a fresh lease of life. Dialogues between the four Quad member states were revived and Exercise Malabar eventually returned to its full quadrilateral participation in 2020 with Australia’s re-entry – soon after the fatal clash between Indian and Chinese forces in the Galwan Valley in June that year. New Delhi no doubt played an

important role in reinvigorating Quad. Its border standoff with Beijing might have given it sufficient strategic rationale to rethink its earlier reticence about this coalition. And as the border standoff persists and Sino-Indian ties continue to be at all-time low, Quad was given more space to expand its remit. Rather than being seen commonly as a “hard security” framework, Quad has since moved into the “softer” aspects of regional security. The COVID-19 scourge allowed Quad to fashion itself as a prospective provider of vaccines as a common public good, leveraging on India’s major global pharmaceutical producer role. It also dabbled in infrastructure development. These moves were apparently aimed at countering China’s push to position itself as a major provider of COVID-19 vaccines and infrastructure development – through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) especially – in the developing world.

However, Quad has inherent limitations in the scope of initiatives it could pursue. “Soft security” aspects such as health security revolving around the provision of COVID-19 vaccines and other pandemic aid could well be a lowest common denominator between the four member states. Infrastructure development cooperation may build on what has already been done by some of the Quad countries, for example Japan’s push for “high-quality” infrastructure development which plausibly seeks to contrast with China’s BRI that was long perceived by some to be predatory in nature and aimed at creating “debt traps” for the unsuspecting developing countries that are in need of aid. The sole “limiter” towards looking beyond this set of common denominator would be India, which has maintained a long-avowed foreign policy of non-alignment and non-alliance. Its role in helping inject new impetus into Quad notwithstanding, New Delhi would have been wary about being seen as a member of a de facto military alliance of sorts – a prospect which was flagged in recent years as Beijing for instance has put forth a public narrative of Quad potentially transmogrifying into an “Indo-Pacific NATO”⁵ – a charge that was vehemently rejected by some of the member states such as Washington.

The “Indo-Pacific NATO” narrative propagated by Beijing, and to a lesser extent Moscow, would not have gone unnoticed by regional governments. One may argue that Quad was also one of the primary drivers behind ASEAN’s push for AOIP in the first place. But the clear limitations in the scope of cooperation between member states, rather than regional sentiments, may have been a key motivation behind the decision to establish AUKUS. Compared to Quad that appears to emphasize the “soft security” aspects, AUKUS provides a timely complement to plug the hole on “hard security”. Much inordinate amount of attention has been placed on the nuclear-powered attack submarine (SSN) deal for Australia. This is no doubt a centrepiece of AUKUS, but far from being the only initiative. Besides the SSN project, which resulted in Australia’s cancellation of the submarine deal with France, AUKUS also envisages cooperation in the realm of cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence, quantum technologies, and additional undersea capabilities. These were described as “initial efforts”, implying AUKUS could presage an expanded set of initiatives that go beyond to enhance “joint capabilities and interoperability” between the Australian, UK and U.S. militaries. In fact, not long after AUKUS was announced, there

5. *State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi Meets the Press*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 7 March 2022. See: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202203/t20220308_10649559.html.

was talk about London planning the deployment of nuclear submarines to the region, with Australia reportedly being a prospective base for such purpose.⁶ In addition, Australia plans to beef up its long-range offensive strike capabilities, notably the purchase of Tomahawk land attack cruise missiles from the U.S. under AUKUS auspices.⁷

Back to the SSN programme, the first initiative under AUKUS, the three member states in November 2021 inked the Exchange of Naval Nuclear Propulsion Information Agreement to allow Australia access to American and British naval nuclear propulsion information, which would support the 18-months long study of those requirements for eventual induction of the submarines.⁸ While the SSNs would require a considerably long gestation period to finally enter service, around no earlier than 2040 perhaps, it is more likely that the other initiatives under AUKUS would have continued apace, including cyber defense collaboration and, building on pre-existing bilateral alliances (that between Australia and the U.S., and between UK and the U.S.), tighter interoperability between their militaries that could be seen as preparation for future high-end armed conflict in the region possibly involving China.

DECIPHERING SOUTHEAST ASIAN REACTIONS

As highlighted earlier, there is scarcely any united ASEAN position evinced towards AUKUS. In fact, one may argue that the regional bloc already has a ready-made response, which is none other than the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP)⁹ that was promulgated in 2019 as a collective bloc-wide response to evolving geopolitical dynamics surrounding the Indo-Pacific discourse, not least of all the then Trump Administration's introduction of FOIP. AOIP was formulated relatively quickly compared to past ASEAN ventures which often characteristically took a longer time to manifest and concretize. An initiative driven by Indonesia, AOIP is nothing more than a set of principles that ASEAN member states pledge to adhere closely to, even if it falls short of including any form of action plan that maps out the steps they have to adopt collectively. In other words, while AOIP is unprecedented in terms of the speed at which it was conceived of and eventually promulgated, in essence this document should not be seen as any different from other typical ASEAN official declarations and treaties which amount to nothing more than sets of principles sketched out in often broad and vague terms.

6. Larisa Brown, "Britain's nuclear submarines to use Australia as base for Indo-Pacific presence," *The Times*, 20 September 2021.

7. This would render AUKUS an effective joint long-range land attack capability if required, since all three member militaries by then would be common users of the Tomahawk. *Joint Media Statement: Australia to pursue nuclear-powered submarines through new trilateral enhanced security partnership*, Department of Defence, Australian Government, 16 September 2021. See: <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/minister/peter-dutton/statements/joint-media-statement-australia-pursue-nuclear-powered-submarines>.

8. *Australia signs exchange of naval nuclear propulsion information sharing agreement*, Department of Defence, Australian Government, 22 November 2021. See: <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/minister/peter-dutton/media-releases/australia-signs-exchange-naval-nuclear-propulsion-information>.

9. *ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific*, 23 June 2019, ASEAN Secretariat. See: <https://asean.org/speechandstatement/asean-outlook-on-the-indo-pacific/>.

If an explicit, united ASEAN response to AUKUS is found wanting in no small part due to the very diverse make-up of the 10-member bloc, then the onus falls upon individual countries in the region. The post-AUKUS responses in Southeast Asia can be categorized into three distinct camps; on the one end, there is open endorsement or support, and on the other extreme end, outright criticism of the partnership. The minority of ASEAN member states which ever commented publicly on AUKUS would fall within either camp. But the majority of their ASEAN counterparts can actually be found somewhere in between these two extreme camps – providing some sort of an ambivalent response perhaps. It would be helpful to survey these three distinct camps.

Endorsement Camp

Singapore is consistently the most supportive of AUKUS amongst ASEAN countries, based on what its political elites openly remarked. For example, Singapore’s foreign minister Vivian Balakrishnan said shortly after AUKUS was announced, that “the fact that we have a longstanding and constructive relationship with large reservoirs of trust and alignment is very helpful because it means we are not unduly anxious about these new developments.”¹⁰ Singapore’s endorsement of AUKUS stems from its pre-existing defense and security relationships with all three member states of the arrangement. Notably of all, Australia and the UK are part of the Five Powers Defence Arrangement (FPDA) that has been in existence since 1971. The U.S. has been the primary security partner of Singapore, what some may describe to be “an alliance in anything but name”. These relationships contributed to the level of familiarity and comfort Singapore has towards Australia, the UK and U.S. which helped mitigate any possible misconceptions towards AUKUS. As Balakrishnan’s defense counterpart Ng Eng Hen said in a parliament session in early October 2021, “multilateral security groupings in any geographic region has [*sic*] been a fact of life, as countries seek to secure their own strategic interests.”¹¹ Both Balakrishnan and Ng put forth a qualifier though, when they added that such groupings ought to contribute constructively to regional peace and stability.¹² This qualifier should not be seen as anything more than a generic reminder to any regional groupings, rather than an indication of disapproval. During the ASEAN-U.S. virtual summit in late October 2021, Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong lauded U.S. President Joseph Biden’s assurance that AUKUS would support ASEAN centrality and contribute to regional peace and stability¹³ – another tangible indicator of endorsement for the pact.

10. Transcript of Minister for Foreign Affairs Dr Vivian Balakrishnan’s Doorstop with Singapore Media via Zoom at the 76th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, on 25 September 2021, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Singapore. See: <https://www.mfa.gov.sg/Newsroom/Press-Statements-Transcripts-and-Photos/2021/09/20210926-76th-UNGA-doorstop>.

11. Written Reply by Minister for Defence Dr Ng Eng Hen to Parliamentary Question on Assessment on the Australia-UK-US Pact, Ministry of Defence, Singapore, 4 October 2021. See: https://www.mindef.gov.sg/web/portal/mindef/news-and-events/latest-releases/article-detail/2021/October/04oct21_pq2.

12. Ibid, and Transcript of Minister for Foreign Affairs Dr Vivian Balakrishnan’s Doorstop with Singapore Media via Zoom at the 76th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, on 25 September 2021.

13. Justin Ong, “US pledge that Aukus will reinforce Asean peace, stability a welcome one: PM Lee,” *The Straits Times*, 26 October 2021.

The Philippines can also generally be said to be supportive, insofar that it is important to underline the fractures within the country's complex decision-making bureaucracy which renders the impression of some inconsistencies. In his phone conversation with Australian defence minister Peter Dutton soon after AUKUS was announced, Philippine Secretary of National Defense Delfin Lorenzana acknowledged Canberra's "right to improve its submarine defense capability."¹⁴ This might be seen as an initial endorsement, which was later reinforced by the first most elaborate official communique from the Philippine Government, which was decidedly positive in tone. Essentially, the statement by Philippine Foreign Affairs Secretary Teodoro Locsin Jr. underlined challenges to the regional balance of power that justifies the relevance of AUKUS. He expounded elaborately on this point:¹⁵

ASEAN member states, singly and collectively, do not possess the military wherewithal to maintain peace and security in Southeast Asia, discourage the sudden creation of crises therein, and avoid disproportionate and hasty responses by rival great powers. Preventive diplomacy and the rule of law do not stand alone in the maintenance of peace and security. *There is an imbalance in the forces available to the ASEAN member states, with the main balancer more than half a world away. The enhancement of a near abroad ally's ability to project power should restore and keep the balance rather than destabilize it.* Despite advances in military science, time and distance, and the concomitant stopping power of water, remain major constants in determining security capacity to respond appropriately to threats. Proximity breeds brevity in response time; thereby enhancing an ASEAN near friend and ally's military capacity to respond in timely and commensurate fashion to a threat to the region or a challenge to the status quo. This requires enhancing Australia's ability, added to that of its main military ally, to achieve that calibration. On the other hand, distance breeds delay in responding to an incident or series of incidents that bode a significant shift in the power equation advantageous to one great power but highly disadvantageous to the other power distant from the troubled scene. It is unlikely and uncharacteristic for the disadvantaged power in this case to acquiesce rather than respond to the sudden imbalance with less than a disproportionately stronger response before the imbalance hardens into geopolitical fait accompli. In that regard, *we believe that the fresh enhancement of Australia's military capacity through this trilateral security partnership would be beneficial in the long term even to the other side if only for the additional time it affords all protagonists for reflection before reacting.* [emphasis added by author]

Manila's positive reception to AUKUS drew China's ire. *Global Times*, a jingoistic, nationalist tabloid affiliated to the ruling Chinese Communist Party, for instance branded the Southeast Asian country as "ignorant" for supporting AUKUS.¹⁶ Assuming this reflects the innermost sentiments of Beijing, this should not have come across as surprising – the Philippines since 2016 under the incumbent Rodrigo Duterte Administration had all along been friendly to China. Hence, the Filipino endorsement of AUKUS would have been regarded by Beijing as an affront to this relationship. The Philippine president, known for his mercurial nature, came out belatedly after both his Cabinet ministers Lorenzana and Locsin had already spoken, to express "concern about a regional nuclear arms race" in

14. Phone Call between Secretary Delfin N. Lorenzana and Minister Peter Dutton, Minister for Defence of Australia, Department of National Defense, Republic of the Philippines, 17 September 2021. See: <https://www.dnd.gov.ph/>.

15. Statement of Foreign Affairs Teodoro L. Locsin, Jr. on the Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) Enhanced Trilateral Security Partnership, Department of Foreign Affairs, Republic of the Philippines, 19 September 2021. See: <https://dfa.gov.ph/dfa-news/statements-and-advisoriesupdate/29484-statement-of-foreign-affairs-teodoro-l-locsin-jr-on-the-australia-united-kingdom-united-states-aukus-enhanced-trilateral-security-partnership>.

16. Li Kaisheng, "The Philippines ignorant to back AUKUS deal, harming ASEAN," *Global Times*, 22 September 2021.

reference to the AUKUS nuclear submarine deal.¹⁷ One could surmise that Chinese back-channel diplomacy might have worked its magic to push Duterte to make a public comment about AUKUS. Yet soon after this, at a recent ASEAN meeting a senior Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs official basically reiterated Locsin's points and welcomed clarifications by Australia, the UK and U.S. about AUKUS.¹⁸ It would appear that Duterte's comment has had negligible impact whatsoever in adjusting Manila's general stance towards, despite the inconsistency caused. Notably of course, is that the Malacañang did not correct the statements made by Locsin and Lorenzana.

Ambivalent Camp

Countries that fall within the ambivalent camp would constitute the majority of ASEAN member states' (non)response to AUKUS. They include those which did not make any public comments about the partnership. However, for those which did, the reactions were couched in a manner that does not exhibit clear signs of endorsement or opposition. Of interest here is Cambodia, which was during then the next rotating chair of ASEAN. At a phone conversation with his Australian counterpart Marise Payne in early October, Cambodian foreign minister Prak Sokhonn "expected that AUKUS will not fuel unhealthy rivalries and further escalate tension."¹⁹ Phnom Penh's response to AUKUS might have come across as surprising to Southeast Asian watchers who have in the course of the recent decade concluded that Cambodia is strategically more aligned to China than before. After all, Cambodia under the current prime minister Hun Sen has cultivated very close diplomatic, economic and security ties with Beijing, thus opening up access to Chinese aid, investments and access to the latter's vast market for the exports-dependent Cambodian economy. Phnom Penh had spoken up before in support of Beijing over Hong Kong for instance,²⁰ and one might have expected the same for AUKUS. Still, Cambodia's ambivalence is striking in contrast – apparently reflecting the need to balance its lucrative ties with China, and potential benefits to regional interests that AUKUS brings to the table.

Thailand is another ASEAN country that appears to have taken an ambivalent stance towards AUKUS. There was no known official statement in response to the partnership, though Thai Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha could have made a likely veiled reference to AUKUS during his remark to the United Nations General Assembly not long after the deal was announced, in late September 2021:²¹

17. Ruth Abbey Gita-Carlos, "Duterte 'concerned' over AUKUS nuclear submarine deal," *Philippine News Agency*, 28 September 2021.

18. PH Reiterates Concern on Myanmar Crisis, Assesses Implications of AUKUS Trilateral Security Partnership at ASEAN meeting, Department of Foreign Affairs, Republic of the Philippines, 5 October 2021. See: <https://dfa.gov.ph/dfa-news/dfa-releasesupdate/29548-ph-reiterates-concern-on-myanmar-crisis-assesses-implications-of-aukus-trilateral-security-partnership-at-asean-meeting>.

19. Voun Dara, "Sokhonn: Aukus should not fuel rivalries, escalate tension," *Phnom Penh Post*, 9 October 2021.

20. For instance, see *Xinhua* interview with Cambodian deputy prime minister Nor Hamhong. "Interview: National security law essential for HK's prosperity: Cambodian deputy PM," *Xinhua*, 25 May 2020.

21. Statement by H.E. General Prayut Chan-o-cha, Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Thailand at the General Debate of the 76th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, 25 September 2021, New York, the United States of America, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kingdom of Thailand. See: <https://www.mfa.go.th/en/content/generaldebate2021-2>.

Thailand and other Core Group states consider the entry into force of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapon (TPNW) on 22 January 2021 as an encouraging manifestation of the determination of the global community to comply with commitments under the UN Charter in promoting a world that is free from nuclear weapons for succeeding generations. Given this positive development despite current international tensions, the global community should take heart and seek to collectively deepen collaboration in various fields, such as on cyber issues and peaceful applications of nuclear technology. In this connection, Thailand further supports building complementarities between cooperation under the TPNW and the Treaty on the Non - Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT).

Prayut's statement might have reflected Thailand's concerns about nuclear proliferation risks brought about by the AUKUS submarine deal. But unlike Indonesia and Malaysia (which shall be discussed in the next section), Thailand had elected not to make any explicit reference to AUKUS, much less to openly criticize about it. This may well indicate Bangkok's desire to stay out of the crosshairs of the contending geopolitical powers that be, such as China and the U.S., while it may also be interpreted as a very moderate form of tacit support for AUKUS. Its formal security treaty relationship with Washington, as well as long-standing defense and security engagements with all three AUKUS member states could have been the cause of this ambivalence.

At about the same time, neighboring Vietnam also gave an ambivalent response to AUKUS - more explicit than Thailand's case perhaps. Responding to a question at a regular press conference in late September 2021, the Vietnam Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokeswoman said that "peace, stability, cooperation and development in the region and the world is the common goal of all countries, to which countries have the responsibility to contribute," adding that "the development and use of nuclear energy must serve peaceful purposes and socio-economic development in countries, while ensuring absolute safety for humans and the environment."²² Hanoi's reaction appears to fall well in line with the country's long-avowed post-Cold War foreign policy position premised on non-alignment and non-alliance. However, the tone of this comment can be read as implicitly supportive while cautionary. The first part, on countries having the "responsibility to contribute" could be interpreted in two manners: either urging AUKUS member states (and for that matter other regional parties) to avoid destabilizing regional peace and stability, or that AUKUS is obliged to contribute to regional peace and stability. The second part, about nuclear energy having to serve peaceful purposes, would be more or less in line with the generic "reminders" dispensed by various ASEAN member states including those explicitly supportive of AUKUS, such as the Philippines and Singapore.

Critical Camp

Of all ASEAN countries, Indonesia and Malaysia were the most critical of AUKUS. For Indonesia, this development might have been surprising to say the least. The announcement took place about a week after Indonesia and Australia held a defense and foreign

22. "Countries have responsibility to contribute to regional, global peace: spokesperson," *Vietnam News Agency*, 23 September 2021.

ministerial (2+2) meeting in Jakarta, during which the two countries reiterated their commitment to deepen cooperation under the bilateral Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. It was déjà vu: back in October 1992, Chief of the Australian Army, Lieutenant-General John Grey, was in Jakarta for talks with Indonesian defense officials only a day before Canberra's announcement of the decision to purchase more F-111 Aardvark long-range fighter bombers and gave no hint of the purchase.²³ The Indonesian Foreign Ministry issued a statement a day after AUKUS was announced, though it specifically focused on the nuclear submarine program instead of the entire partnership. It said the country was "deeply concerned over the continuing arms race and power projection in the region" and urged Australia to continue meeting all of its nuclear non-proliferation obligations.²⁴

Jakarta's concerns about AUKUS may also have stemmed from its unease over how such minilateral groupings as Quad and AUKUS could have an impact on ASEAN centrality. It was thanks to Indonesia's stewardship in deriving ASEAN's own outlook on the Indo-Pacific, and safe to say that Jakarta would be wary of regional attempts that could pose challenges to AOIP. In his address to the first ASEAN-Australia Summit in October 2021, President Joko Widodo remarked that ASEAN has confidence in the power of cooperation and dialogue in resolving differences, adding that "with the power... there will be no regional peace and stability without ASEAN."²⁵ The Indonesian president's remarks, seen in the context of AUKUS, may possibly reflect such unease. However, while the Indonesian civilian leadership had been vocal against AUKUS, it appeared that the defense establishment is not entirely on the same page. Indonesian defense minister Lieutenant General (Retd) Prabowo Subianto commented on AUKUS during the 17th IISS Manama Dialogue in November 2021:

Well, officially, our position is that, of course, Southeast Asia should remain nuclear-free. The fear, of course, among Southeast Asian nations is that this will spark an arms race; this will spark more countries seeking nuclear submarines. And we know that now the technology is there, I think many other countries can very soon have nuclear submarines – I would say Japan, India, and many, many other countries. So, that is the concern. *But as I said, the emphasis of every country is to protect their national interests. If they feel threatened, if they feel that they have an existential threat, they will do whatever they can to protect themselves. And this is what I mean, that we understand that, and we respect them.* And therefore, for us, it makes us even more anxious to maintain dialogue, to maintain relationship, to mediate between these great powers. *But as I said, every country will do what they can to protect their national interests. If they feel threatened, we would fully understand what they will do.*²⁶ [emphasis added by author]

Prabowo's remark appears to be a deviation from his civilian counterparts, which seems to hint at a sense of resignation – after all, it would have been inappropriate to directly question another country's defense acquisition programme without expecting that this

23. "Ray's bomber bombshell sparks diplomatic row," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 October 1992.

24. *Statement on Australia's Nuclear-powered Submarines Program*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Indonesia, 17 September 2021. See: https://kemlu.go.id/portal/en/read/2937/siaran_pers/statement-on-australias-nuclear-powered-submarines-program.

25. "ASEAN, Australia Urged to Continue Building Trust," Cabinet Secretariat of the Republic of Indonesia, 27 October 2021. See: <https://setkab.go.id/en/asean-australia-urged-to-continue-building-trust/>.

26. *Opening Address – Lieutenant General (Retd) Prabowo Subianto, Minister of Defense, Indonesia, at the 17th Regional Security Summit, The IISS Manama Dialogue*, International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), 19 November 2021. See: <https://www.iiss.org/events/manama-dialogue/manama-dialogue-2021>.

may set a precedent for others to question one's own programmes in the future. In any case, it is clear that while Jakarta appeared openly critical of AUKUS, the country's defense establishment is ready to accommodate this.

In fact, there is a precedent over such developments. Back in the late 1980s, Australia's decision to acquire F-111 Aardvark provoked no small amount of disquiet in Indonesia, since this platform was optimized as a long-range deep-strike bomber that found service in only Australia and the U.S., and during those times it would have been considered a highly potent offensive platform, and perceived as a breakthrough capability especially by militarily weaker neighbouring countries such as Indonesia. In late 1992, following Canberra's decision to double its F-111 fleet from 22 to 40 airframes, then Indonesian ambassador to Australia Sabam Siagian said that, while Jakarta was not alarmed by the decision, he questioned whether the expansion of the F-111 fleet was necessary in the post-Cold War strategic climate then and warned that such a move could "raise possible scepticism (in Asia) of Australia's seriousness in security cooperation."²⁷ Soon after, then Indonesian armed forces chief General Try Sutrisno said that "it is not necessary to question the purchase of military aircraft and weapons by Australia," adding that additional F-111s would not pose a threat to Australia's neighbors but could be seen as part of the country's defense strategy.²⁸ This schism between the civilian and military establishments in Indonesia appears to be a longstanding one. To that effect, the F-111 debuted at an Australia-Indonesia joint military exercise later in 1993,²⁹ a sign that Indonesia accepted Australia's newfound capability and was willing to accommodate it, so long it did not impact defense and security engagements.

Fast forward to the remaining months of 2021 following the AUKUS announcement, notwithstanding Jakarta's criticism, the two countries went about with a flurry of defense and security engagement activities. In late October, Indonesia and Australia conducted their largest-ever joint military training exercise Wirra Jaya in the latter's Northern Territory.³⁰ In the same month, the two navies conducted AUSINDO CORPAT 2021, a five-day coordinated maritime security patrol along their shared maritime boundaries.³¹ The following month, the Australian and Indonesian militaries conducted Exercise Nusa Bhakti AUSINDO 21, which focused on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.³² From late October to early November, the two navies held their biennial high-end warfighting exercise New Horizon off Surabaya, Indonesia.³³ Finally, the two countries topped off their defense and security engagements in 2021 with the eighth bilateral meeting of the Australia-Indonesia Ministerial Council on Law and Security. If Indonesia had been miffed by AUKUS, it would

27. Bradley Perrett, "Australia F-111 buy stirs internal, Asian disquiet," *Reuters*, 16 October 1992.

28. "Indonesia says Australia F-111 purchase no threat," *Reuters*, 18 October 1992.

29. "Indonesia and Australia conduct joint military exercise north of Darwin," *BBC Monitoring Service: Asia-Pacific*, 13 August 1993.

30. "Australian and Indonesian troops undertake combat training for Exercise Wirra Jaya in the Northern Territory," *ABC News*, 21 October 2021.

31. Lieutenant Gordon Carr-Gregg, "Fisheries patrol strengthens relationship," Department of Defence, Australian Government, 28 October 2021.

32. Captain Annie Richardson, "Exercise planning for disaster relief," Department of Defence, Australian Government, 29 November 2021.

33. Sub Lieutenant Nicholas Cunningham, "Anzac strengthens partnership with Indonesia," Department of Defence, Australian Government, 12 November 2021.

not have proceeded with these activities. Notably, compared to the F-111 saga back then, Indonesia's response to AUKUS can be said to be milder.

Malaysia might not have been motivated by the same factors when it criticized AUKUS soon following its announcement. The official communique issued by Kuala Lumpur specifically dealt with the AUKUS as a whole instead of the nuclear submarine deal itself, unlike the case of Indonesia, and highlighted concerns that the partnership "could lead to the escalation of arms race in the region," and that it "could also potentially spark tension among the world superpowers, and aggravate aggression between them in the region, particularly in the South China Sea."³⁴ AUKUS also brought about a little firestorm in Malaysia's domestic politics. After Malaysian defense minister Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Tun Hussein said he would consult Beijing on AUKUS, he was met with a galvanized opposition questioning the rationale for this decision. Faced with the backlash, he was compelled to clarify that he merely wanted "to get China's stand on AUKUS and what possible response they might have, not to get any instructions from them," emphasizing that the Malaysian Government only wished "to get China's views, not to get their instructions. This would enable Malaysia and other countries in the region to take proactive measures."³⁵

Even after this saga was over, Kuala Lumpur continued to raise concerns about AUKUS. At the East Asia Summit in late October 2021, Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri Yaakob reiterated the country's concerns about the pact.³⁶ Earlier the same month, the foreign ministers of Malaysia and Indonesia met and AUKUS was smacked right in the middle of the agenda. "We agree on the latest issue in the region regarding a country near our territory that is purchasing new nuclear-powered submarines," Malaysian foreign minister Saifuddin Abdullah remarked at a joint press conference following his meeting with Indonesian counterpart Retno Marsudi, adding that "even though that country doesn't have the capacity for nuclear weapons, we are worried and concerned."³⁷ Retno commented that Indonesia and Malaysia "do not want the current dynamic to lead to arms race and power projection. This situation will not be beneficial to anyone."³⁸

Still, Malaysia's rhetoric notwithstanding, like the case of Indonesia there was no evident impact on its defense and security engagements with Australia. In early November 2021, at the meeting between both countries' foreign ministers, Malaysia and Australia agreed to work closely on cybersecurity.³⁹ Later the same month, the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (or Malaysia Coast Guard) conducted Operation Redback XVI with the Australian Border Force.⁴⁰ If the Malaysians were suspicious of the Australians, they would not have decided to promote closer cooperation in such sensitive sectors as

34. *Announcement by Australia, United Kingdom and the United States on enhanced trilateral security partnership – AUKUS*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Federation of Malaysia, 19 September 2021. See: <https://www.kln.gov.my/>.

35. Rizalman Hammim, "We only want to know China's stand on AUKUS, said Hishammuddin," *New Straits Times*, 25 September 2021.

36. "PM Ismail Sabri expresses Malaysia's concerns over AUKUS at the East Asia Summit," *Bernama*, 27 October 2021.

37. "Indonesia, Malaysia concerned over AUKUS nuclear subs plan," *Reuters*, 18 October 2021.

38. "Indonesia, Malaysia share concerns on potential arms race in region," *Antara*, 19 October 2021.

39. "M'sia, Australia to work closely on cybersecurity," *The Star*, 7 November 2021.

40. *Joint border protection operation with Malaysia to protect our region's maritime borders*, Department of Home Affairs, Australian Government, 23 November 2021. See: <https://minister.homeaffairs.gov.au/KarenAndrews/Pages/joint-border-protection-operation-with-malaysia-to-protect-maritime-borders.aspx>.

cybersecurity. Clearly, like Indonesia, Malaysia enjoys a level of comfort with traditional military partners such as Australia and the U.S. in particular, which goes a long way in building a reservoir of confidence and trust that helps ameliorate extant concerns about AUKUS.

CONCLUSION: THE BIG “WHY”?

This paper surveyed the post-AUKUS reactions from various ASEAN member states and underlined three distinct camps of responses. Of particular interest would be Indonesia and Malaysia, which had been the most vocal in criticizing AUKUS. But a deeper examination of this “critical camp” reveals more nuances than what had been widely reported thus far, which focused almost exclusively on the rhetoric than actual policy actions undertaken by these countries that would have otherwise provided much more accurate gauge of sentiments. Clearly, rhetoric aside, policy actions undertaken by Indonesia and Malaysia indicated that AUKUS has had no noticeable impact on their bilateral defense and security relationships with Australia – and for that matter, extending this to the UK and U.S.

The question that begs to be addressed here is, why? In rounding up concluding thoughts here this paper offers some plausible factors for consideration. One needs to be mindful of the prevailing economic and strategic context confronting Southeast Asia at that moment in time when AUKUS was announced. It was the later months of 2021, and Southeast Asian countries were still focusing on containing COVID-19, pushing post-pandemic recovery, and for some, to begin paving the ground towards transition from pandemic to endemic “new normal”. Historical antecedents provide useful context: first of all, Southeast Asian governments are traditionally most focused on socioeconomic development and for some, under-investment in defense capacities has been a perennial challenge. During past economic and financial crises, such as notably the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997-98, basically a number of Southeast Asian governments elected to put defense acquisition programmes on the backburner as they emphasized recovery. COVID-19 is a much bigger crisis of an unprecedented scale – thereby compelling Southeast Asian countries to shift more focus on pandemic containment and economic recovery, tapping scarce resources to beef up public healthcare and social security, even if this comes at the expense of putting defense acquisition programmes on the backburner just like in the past crises.

At the same time, it needs highlighting that while COVID-19 has become a preoccupation, the evolving geopolitical environment in the region has created a parallel sense of uncertainty across Southeast Asia. Even when national self-help – in this case, the beefing up of national defense and security capacities – would have been a much preferred route to undertake, the fact is that all these while especially since the post-Cold War 1990s, Southeast Asia has also largely relied on extra-regional military presence to provide counterweight to would-be regional hegemony. For decades, such military presence as the one provided by Washington has fostered a strategic environment conducive for Southeast Asian countries to pursue socioeconomic development, without having to spend excessively on defense.

COVID-19 did not bring about a new phenomenon of Southeast Asian countries turning to extra-regional military presence; rather, it builds on pre-existing state of affairs and further sharpened the need. This is the context in which Southeast Asian response to AUKUS can be understood. But this only partially addressed the question why this is so the case. To complete this picture, one needs not look further away from a key factor: China.

Since AUKUS was announced, Beijing has capitalized on the development to push its strategic narrative about how extra-regional military presence and minilateral groupings such as AUKUS may potentially destabilize the region. China went about rounding up Southeast Asian governments in an obvious attempt to pull the latter on its side in rallying against AUKUS. About a week after AUKUS was announced, Director-General of the Department of Asian Affairs at the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Liu Jinsong met ambassadors of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand for “work exchanges”. The official Chinese communique of this meeting claimed that some of the Southeast Asian ambassadors “were shocked” by the AUKUS announcement and “believe that such actions would provoke an arms race and add uncertainty to the regional situation.”⁴¹ Granted, even if this is true, more likely it would have been the Indonesian and Malaysian envoys who were more vocal in expressing such views. Then, on the side-lines of the G20 meetings in Rome in late October 2021, according to Chinese state media reporting, Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi met his Indonesian counterpart Retno and “voiced serious concerns over the risk of nuclear proliferation” caused by the AUKUS submarine deal.⁴² The official Chinese narrative chose to emphasize the rhetoric, conveniently overlooking – whether deliberately or unknowingly – the nuances behind Southeast Asian responses to AUKUS, especially through viewing their policy actions.

There is every reason to believe that Indonesia and Malaysia are at least silently in support of AUKUS, and this seems to be reflected in the zero impact this pact had on their defense and security engagements with Australia, the UK and U.S. China would be a key consideration in the strategic calculus. In fact, Beijing could have done a better job pulling these Southeast Asian countries to its side against AUKUS if it had not consistently poked the latter in their eyes with what had been going on in the South China Sea, notably. Not long before AUKUS was announced, the Indonesian Maritime Security Board alleged that China Coast Guard vessels were harassing energy prospecting activities in the country’s exclusive economic zone off the Natuna Islands.⁴³ The Indonesian Navy also pledged around the time AUKUS was announced, that it would step up patrols off the Natuna in response to what was observed to be intensifying foreign maritime presence, including Chinese coast-guard vessels, which imperilled Indonesian fishing activities.⁴⁴ Malaysia also protested the presence and activities of Chinese vessels, including a survey ship, in Malaysia’s EEZ off

41. *Director-General of the Department of Asian Affairs of the Foreign Ministry Liu Jinsong Holds Talks with Ambassadors of Some ASEAN Countries to China about Trilateral Military Cooperation between the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 23 September 2021. See: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbxw/202109/t20210924_9580364.html.

42. “Chinese, Indonesia FMs voice serious concerns over AUKUS nuclear submarine deal,” *Xinhua*, 30 October 2021.

43. “Bakamla Keluhkan Kapal China Ganggu Tambang RI di Natuna,” [BAKAMLA complains that Chinese ships disrupt Indonesian mining in the Natuna], *CNN Indonesia*, 13 September 2021.

44. “AL Siagakan KRI Antisipasi Kapal China Wara-wiri di Natuna,” [Indonesian Navy puts warships on alert in anticipation of Chinese vessels in the Natuna], *CNN Indonesia*, 17 September 2021.

the coast of Sabah and Sarawak in October 2021.⁴⁵ Just a few months ago, Kuala Lumpur also protested against the intrusion of 16 aircraft of the PLA Air Force in late May into the airspace over the Malaysian Maritime Zone, close to Malaysian-occupied South Luconia Shoals – well within the country’s EEZ off Sarawak.⁴⁶

Ironically, therefore, China’s behavior which augmented the sense of geopolitical uncertainties felt in Southeast Asia has contributed towards the nuanced responses of regional governments towards AUKUS, including Duterte’s Philippines that has hitherto been upheld as a “poster boy” by Chinese state propaganda since 2016 as a “model” for Sino-Southeast Asian relations. The Philippines’ support for AUKUS, notwithstanding Duterte’s comment, is grounded also in what has happened to date in the South China Sea with Beijing’s actions within the Philippine EEZ, including boat swarms – suspected to involve Chinese maritime militia vessels – in Whitsun Reef back in March 2021. It is clear that going forward, Southeast Asian countries have recognized that while they would lean on China to promote economic recovery in the post-pandemic long-term, hedging against geopolitical uncertainties – underlined in no small part by China’s rise and growing assertiveness – would require a more robust extra-regional military presence as an effective counterweight. In this respect, therefore, it is not difficult to understand why Southeast Asian reactions to AUKUS had been so nuanced, straddling beyond the obvious rhetoric into policy actions.

Dr. Collin Koh is Research Fellow at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies which is a constituent unit of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), based in Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He has research interests on naval affairs in the Indo-Pacific, focusing on Southeast Asia. Collin has published several op-eds, policy- and academic journal articles as well as chapters for edited volumes covering his research areas. He has also taught at Singapore Armed Forces professional military education and training courses. Besides research and teaching, Collin also contributes his perspectives to various local and international media outlets and participates in activities with geopolitical risks consultancies.

Contact: iscollinkoh@ntu.edu.sg

45. *Malaysia protests the encroachment of Chinese vessels into Malaysian waters*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Federation of Malaysia, 4 October 2021. See: <https://www.kln.gov.my/>.

46. *Ministry of Foreign Affairs will issue a diplomatic protest and summon the Ambassador of the People’s Republic of China*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Federation of Malaysia, 1 June 2021. See: <https://www.kln.gov.my/>.