

## AUKUS mixed reception a symptom of strategic fault-lines in Southeast Asia

17 October 2021

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AUKUS, the new trilateral security partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States that launched last month, has had a mixed reception. Some regional policymakers publicly and privately welcome a stronger presence, commitment and set of capabilities that could balance China. Others are concerned about regional tension and an arms race, while many more appear unsure one way or the other.



The lukewarm reception to AUKUS reflects a deeper set of strategic fault-lines between Australia and the region. Some Australian policymakers, in an effort to reassure countries in the region, portray AUKUS as mere technological cooperation among longstanding allies to develop new defence capabilities. These new capabilities in turn supposedly help Australia better to work with regional partners and contribute to the rules-based order. The implicit message here is that AUKUS is not about encircling China, but instead about helping Australia to help the region.

Yet many Australian analysts acknowledge the wider strategic goal of AUKUS — detering China. By throwing its lot in with the United States in this way, Australia hopes not only to obtain sensitive military technology, but also to strengthen US and UK regional presence and commitment. Indeed, the new Australia-US force posture initiatives announced the day after AUKUS will expand the US military's air, land and sea access to bases and sustainment facilities in Australia.

So which is it — is AUKUS a limited move to strengthen defence ties among allies, or is it part of a wider pushback against China? The strategic narrative out of Canberra leaves this unclear, though the answer is likely both. Had Canberra been forthright about the China-driven and US-centric logic of AUKUS, the region might have been more alarmed. But how is that prospect any worse than the lukewarm reception to and the lingering uncertainty of Australia's strategic outlook today?

Unclear strategic narratives may avoid stronger reactions, but they also breed disinformation and fear of the unknown. Japan, India and the United States have become increasingly coherent in their strategic narratives about China, albeit in a different manner, pace and scope. The region has learned to navigate these challenges — not very easily, but at least with the aid of some clear signposts.

That some Australian policymakers thought invoking ASEAN-related slogans would 'soften the blow' of AUKUS is a tad condescending. Paying rhetorical homage to the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) or 'ASEAN centrality' while crafting an exclusively trilateral strategic policy in secret is like putting lipstick on a pig. ASEAN may not offer much, but it does value regular consultations. ASEAN members are well aware of the grouping's weaknesses and that the AOIP may not change strategic outcomes in the Indo-Pacific. The region doesn't need to be reminded of that fact by attaching ASEAN jargons to the non-ASEAN options Australia is pursuing.

Such incoherence is a symptom of Australia's wider strategic appetite of wanting to have it all: great economic relations with China, a strong security alliance with the United States, a European regional presence and a warm diplomatic embrace by the region. Australia needs to reckon with the fact that these strategic choices over prosperity, security, and diplomacy present some contradictory trade-offs.

Australia cannot easily keep its strong economic ties with China while seeking yet stronger US alliance commitments. Great power strategic competition comes with stronger polarisation. Australia also cannot keep carrying the water for the United States and expect Southeast Asia to forget its 'deputy sheriffdom'. Nor can the region take Australia's ASEAN rhetoric seriously when it entangles extra-regional powers into regional military affairs, potentially creating the strategic overcrowding that some ASEAN members most fear.

These contradictions may never be fully resolved, and that is simply the cost of doing business in the age of great power politics. Australia is fully within its rights to formulate whatever strategic policy it deems necessary — after all, ASEAN is never going to be the strategic bridge between Canberra and Beijing. But until Australia clarifies its strategic choices and their accompanying narratives, it should not be surprised to find countries in the region questioning its strategic profile.

Consider Indonesia as an example. Indonesia–Australia relations are at their strongest in a long time, economically, politically and militarily. At the 2+2 meeting held about a week before AUKUS was announced, the two countries even agreed to begin negotiating an upgrade to their existing defence cooperation arrangement. And yet, Indonesia has predictably expressed perhaps the strongest concern after China over AUKUS and its ramifications for a regional arms race and nuclear proliferation.

AUKUS and other minilateral options like the Quad sustain, if not widen, the impression that Indonesia — and to some extent, ASEAN — is helpless in the face of pressing strategic challenges. Some regional policymakers may privately acknowledge what Indonesia can and cannot do, but being made publicly redundant is not easy to stomach.

The apparent strength of the bilateral relationship may have also given the illusion that Indonesia's tepid AUKUS reaction is simply a problem of communication — had Canberra consulted Jakarta more, perhaps Indonesia would have been more supportive. But this assumes that the strength of bilateral ties will naturally lead to the strategic alignment of Australia and Indonesia over regional order.

Indonesia is unlikely to see China — or for that matter, the United States — in the same way that Australia does. ASEAN will also never be as central to Australia's foreign policymaking as it has been for Indonesia— much like Washington will never be as central to Jakarta as it has been for Canberra. In any case, AUKUS shows just what happens when the regional strategic visions of Australia and Indonesia are misaligned in how they view their bilateral ties and the world around them.

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