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AUKUS: Not That Bad for ASEAN?

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Manila's reaction to AUKUS comes in the wake of Austin and Duterte touching base in July 2021.
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SYNOPSIS

AUKUS, the trilateral security pact established by Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States, has elicited mixed reactions from the ASEAN states. Going by recent comments from senior officials of the Biden administration, AUKUS might benefit the Indo-Pacific region if it stays non-exclusive and complements the regional architecture.

COMMENTARY

On 15 September 2021, Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States unveiled their new trilateral security pact, or AUKUS. Directed towards the Indo-Pacific region, AUKUS will reportedly focus on the development and sharing of cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence, quantum technologies and — the area that has most attracted international attention — undersea capabilities, especially nuclear capabilities, among the three security partners. In the view of many regional observers, AUKUS is unquestionably a key piece of the broader countervailing response formulated by the US and its allies and partners against China's growing power and influence in the Indo-Pacific.

Much like their reactions to the respective Indo-Pacific strategies of the Quad member countries (i.e., the US, Australia, Japan and India), the ASEAN countries' reactions to the launch of AUKUS was a mix of mild interest and moderate anxiety: while it was tacitly welcomed by Singapore, Vietnam and the Philippines as a potentially constructive contribution to the region's peace and stability, Indonesia and Malaysia, concerned about the possible rise in tensions caused by what they deem as unwarranted projections of power in the region, warned against its formation. The AUKUS announcement was quickly followed by a joint statement from Australia and the US reaffirming their continued commitment to "Southeast Asia, ASEAN centrality, and ASEAN-led architecture." Even so, the security analysts William Choong and Ian Storey are right to note that AUKUS constitutes a wake-up call to ASEAN and its member states regarding their need to be more proactive on security issues, and that ASEAN's centrality in the regional architecture can no longer be taken for granted.

The notion that ASEAN Centrality is under assault from regional visions and initiatives advanced by non-ASEAN sources has become the standard response by ASEAN and its cheerleaders. The prospect of intervention by foreign powers was a very real concern that ASEAN sought historically to address through its Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia, and its Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) and Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ) accords, which committed their signatories to respecting ASEAN's norms and aspirations for Southeast Asia and, subsequently, the wider Asia-Pacific region. When the members of the Quad announced their respective visions for the Indo-Pacific, those of Australia, India and Japan registered greater sensitivity for China's and ASEAN's perspectives than did the US' Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP). That said, all four Quad members and China underscored their support for ASEAN Centrality in various statements. And, despite President Donald Trump's withdrawal of the US from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and his absence at every ASEAN summit throughout his presidency, Southeast Asia nonetheless benefited from the US Asia Reassurance Initiative Act of 2018. It bears reminding (as I showed in my 2015 book, *Multilateral Asian Security Architecture*) that the existing ASEAN-led regional architecture would have been impossible were it not for the contributions of its non-ASEAN stakeholders like Australia, China, Japan and the US.

How bad really is AUKUS for the ASEAN region, as some have claimed? The plan of AUKUS to nuclearise Australia's undersea naval capabilities has revived concern in some Southeast Asian quarters, fairly or otherwise, over the Australians' potential non-compliance with ASEAN's treaties and regimes. China's official reaction to AUKUS

has been strong but — the typical histrionics in the opinion pages of China's *Global Times* daily tabloid notwithstanding — measured. Beijing characterised the tripartite pact as irresponsible and, given the news of American and British strategic and technical support for Australia's development of nuclear-powered submarines, as a deliberate intensification of the arms race in the Indo-Pacific. In that respect, the warnings on AUKUS issued by Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur are neither surprising nor unanticipated since none of the ASEAN states wish to antagonise China. Moreover, the day after AUKUS was announced, China formally applied to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) — an opportunity perhaps to highlight Chinese support for regional peace and stability against supposed American malfeasance.

That said, what is interesting are the relatively salubrious reactions from Singapore, Vietnam and the Philippines, the countries visited by US Vice President Kamala Harris and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin last July and August. Both Vietnam and the Philippines have longstanding disagreements with China over Beijing's infringements of the parts of the South China Sea claimed by Hanoi and Manila respectively. Moreover, despite Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte's efforts to engage more deeply with China, his decision to renew his country's Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) with the US, after his earlier threat to abrogate it, suggests a successful realignment with the US, underscoring the lengths to which the Biden administration has gone to repair bilateral ties with the Philippines since the Obama presidency. But perhaps more intriguing than the Vietnamese and Philippine dispositions is the fact that Singapore, a non-claimant in the South China Sea dispute, likewise welcomed the AUKUS arrangement in the expressed hope that it would contribute constructively to regional peace and stability and complement the regional architecture.

So far, American attempts to explain AUKUS to regional audiences seem to vindicate the Singaporean perspective. It is patently clear that AUKUS is part of the US response to China, and Biden administration officials do not deny that. However, they have sought to emphasise that AUKUS is not "just about China" but fundamentally about driving innovation and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific. In a recent interview with the Sydney-based Lowy Institute, Kurt Campbell, the White House's Asia-Pacific coordinator, referred to AUKUS prospectively as "an open architecture ... which other countries might join in time." AUKUS, according to Campbell, will serve as a platform through which the US seeks to work with "like-minded" states in key areas of military innovation. In a recent lecture delivered also to the Lowy Institute, Jake Sullivan, the US national security advisor, furnished an even more expansive view of the aims of AUKUS, which reportedly include the advancing of shared security and the deepening of technological, economic and climate cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region. Campbell concluded his own remarks by highlighting, as one of "the most important initiatives" to be undertaken by the Biden administration going forward, the task "to do everything possible to upgrade [all facets of US] engagement with ASEAN."

Only time will tell whether these promises of AUKUS being a potentially huge value-add to the Indo-Pacific region, rather than just a military alliance specifically targeted against China, hold water. To the extent that AUKUS remains a non-exclusive initiative which welcomes other regional participants, and complements rather than contradicts the existing regional architecture and norms, it will be more boon than bane for ASEAN.

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