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## A Pragmatic Path: Indonesia's Engagement with AUKUS

Muhamad Haripin and Adhi Priamarizki

### SYNOPSIS

*In May 2023, then-president Joko Widodo stated that Indonesia should view AUKUS as partners, marking a departure from the country's initially cautious approach. In this article, **Muhamad Haripin and Adhi Priamarizki** explore potential explanations behind this shift in perspective and examine the likely implications of President Prabowo Subianto's rise on Indonesia's relations with AUKUS.*

### COMMENTARY

The Indonesian government's initial approach to the formation of AUKUS, an US-led security arrangement with the United Kingdom and Australia, was a cautious one due to the partnership's potential negative repercussions for regional stability. The Indonesian foreign affairs ministry's [five-point statement](#) on Australia's nuclear-powered submarine programme under AUKUS reflected this cautious stance. However, Indonesia has since recognised that the best response to AUKUS is to avoid a confrontational approach. Further hesitation or opposition could jeopardise Indonesia's prospects of gaining economic benefits and from taking an active intermediary role amid the great powers' rivalry in the region.

Thus, a more conciliatory approach was evident in the statement of then-president Joko Widodo ("Jokowi") in May 2023, which described AUKUS, as well as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) involving the United States, Australia, Japan, and India, as [partners rather than competitors](#). [Intensified communication](#) launched by AUKUS members, notably Australia and the United Kingdom, was deemed to be one of the contributing factors towards Indonesia's improving perception of the grouping although domestic considerations appear to have been a major driver in softening the country's initial response to AUKUS. Since then, Prabowo Subianto has been officially inaugurated as president of Indonesia. The new president is likely to put the pursuit of national interests at the core of all his policies and could potentially [reset Indonesia's](#)

[foreign policy](#). Prabowo's diplomatic activities between his election as president in February 2024 and inauguration last month showcased such a [tendency](#).

### **Indonesia's Engagement with AUKUS Members under Jokowi**

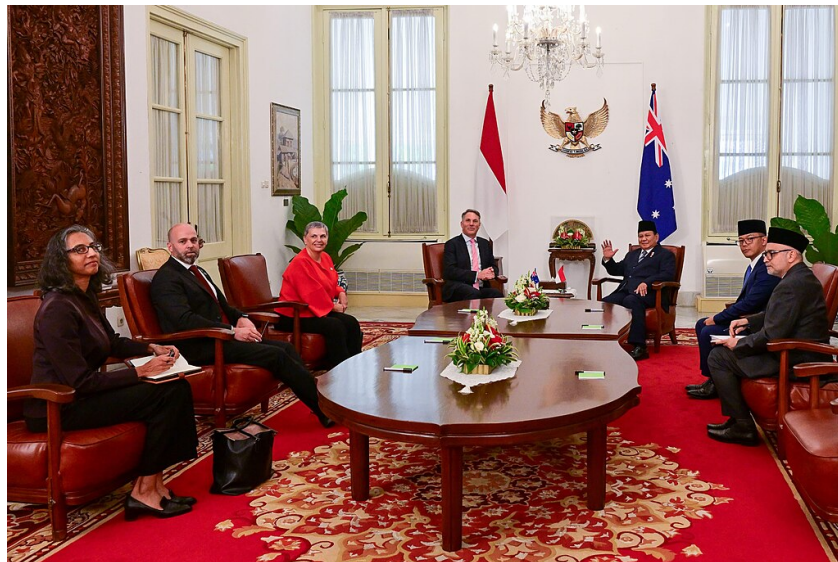
Indonesia has been enjoying defence and economic cooperation with AUKUS members, notably Australia and the United States. Indonesia is an avid user of American and Western military [platforms](#). Indonesia's close relationship with AUKUS members in the defence sector goes beyond arms acquisition and includes military education and training exercises. The expansion of the Garuda Shield military exercises between the Indonesian armed forces (TNI) and the US military into Super Garuda Shield in 2022 is one [example](#). Earlier this year, Indonesia and Australia signed a [defence cooperation agreement](#) aimed at strengthening their relationship. Indonesia is currently working with the United Kingdom on the "[Red White](#)" frigate (*Frigate Merah Putih*) joint construction project — a partnership between the UK defence company Babcock and Indonesia's state-owned enterprise for shipbuilding, PT PAL. In addition, in November 2023, the US-Indonesia relationship was elevated from a Strategic Partnership into a [Comprehensive Strategic Partnership](#). However, some analysts have criticised the upgrade as [merely a symbolic gesture](#).

In the economic sector, green energy transition has emerged as a major economic cooperation subject. Driven by his ambition for economic development, Jokowi took a [transactional approach](#) in the conduct of external affairs; foreign policy for him was intended as a means to produce [tangible benefits for ordinary Indonesians](#). Under his watch, Indonesia forged various new economic initiatives, such as the [Just Energy Transition Partnership \(JETP\)](#), launched at the G20 summit in Indonesia in November 2022. Indonesia and a group of developed countries, spearheaded by the United States and Japan, established the JETP to help Jakarta accelerate its [energy transition in the electricity sector](#). Indonesia also launched economic cooperation initiatives with Australia and the United Kingdom. Australia's pursuit of [economic collaboration](#) with Indonesia was part of [Australia's Southeast Asia Economic Strategy to 2040](#), an initiative to boost Canberra's economic engagement with Southeast Asian countries. Indonesia also worked with the United Kingdom to improve the two countries' economic relations, notably through the formation of the Indonesia-UK [Joint Economic and Trade Committee \(JETCO\)](#).

### **The Rise of Prabowo and Indonesia's Approach to AUKUS**

Prabowo is known for his emphasis on a "[good neighbour foreign policy](#)", aimed at establishing good relations with as many other countries as possible. He has shown eagerness to engage the global community in a [personal and pragmatic manner](#). Prabowo used the jargon of continuity as the central theme of his 2024 presidential election campaign, pledging to continue Jokowi's policies, such as infrastructure development and the new capital project. This pledge to continue Jokowi's legacy may mean that a radical departure from his predecessor's [pragmatic foreign policy](#) is unlikely as undertaking projects such as the building of the new capital as well as Prabowo's own flagship programmes, notably food resilience and providing free meal for students, will require significant financial support.

Prabowo's past record as an ardent nationalist with a strong "Indonesia First" stance should also be taken into account in trying to assess how his foreign policy is likely to unfold. This stance suggests that he will prioritise national interests in his foreign policy approach. The new president is also likely to maintain Indonesia's "independent and active" foreign policy, which focuses on maintaining domestic and regional stability. In addition, diplomacy is likely to remain as the key tool in Indonesia's conduct of external affairs to compensate for the country's limited defence capacity and resources. These factors consequently will affect the Prabowo administration's approach to AUKUS.



President Prabowo Subianto had a meeting with Australian deputy prime minister Richard Marles on 20 October 2024. The newly inaugurated president has emphasised Indonesia's willingness to foster friendly relations with all countries through his "good neighbour" policy.

*Image by Ministry of State Secretariat (Indonesia) via Wikimedia Commons.*

## Indonesia and AUKUS: What's Next?

A survey of Indonesian elites conducted by the foreign policy research group of Indonesia's National Research and Innovation Agency (BRIN) in [December 2023](#) indicated a positive perception of AUKUS and Quad. The respondents, who included senior civil servants from state ministries and agencies and specialists in international relations from various Indonesian universities, held generally favourable views of the Quad and AUKUS. They believed these minilateral groups could create new opportunities for Indonesia in trade, investment, advanced technologies, and research and development.

The survey also revealed that the respondents were aware of the Quad and AUKUS' intention to limit China's growing influence in Indonesia, and Southeast Asia more broadly. Despite this awareness, the elites surveyed showed openness to the idea of cooperation with the minilateral groupings. In their view, the US-China rivalry should not be seen as a zero-sum game; instead, they believed great power competition should be treated as an opportunity to derive benefits for Indonesia from both countries.

Such pragmatism might also be shared by the recently inaugurated Prabowo. He has been emphasising the importance of building friendship with all countries through his

“good neighbour” policy and his philosophy of “[one thousand friends too few, one enemy too many](#)”. Pragmatism and the opportunity-seeking attitude will greatly influence the trajectory of Prabowo’s foreign policy. On the one hand, this orientation provides potential strategic advantages for Indonesia. On the other hand, it may hardly advance AUKUS’ objective of containing China’s rise in the Indo-Pacific region.

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