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## ***Pragmatism at What Limitations? Indonesia's Changing Position Towards AUKUS***

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### **Summary**

Although the AUKUS coalition is advertised by its member states as defense technology cooperation, it is perceived by China as a maritime alliance and a strategic challenge for it. A number of observers in the United States and Australia have also interpreted AUKUS as a policy of forming a timely collective defense as a deterrent against China. In other words, although AUKUS is not officially intended to target or contain a particular country, China and non-officials from AUKUS states frame the coalition as a containment strategy. On the other hand, AUKUS does not stand in a vacuum, but rather among countries that are not yet fully able to meet their national security needs independently and depend on one of the great powers to meet their needs. To what extent will closeness to one of the great powers invite punitive or rebuke actions from other great powers is a very relevant question if the great powers are the United States and China. Some countries in the Indo-Pacific region such as Australia and the Philippines have decided to no longer hedge against China and the US, because they perceive that the structure of the balance of power and competition between the US and China has resulted in their national interests being better met by balancing with the US against China. However, for some other countries, including Indonesia, choosing between one of the binary options is not a good idea because it is not seen as a choice that contributes to national security. This article argues that Indonesia's response to AUKUS from 2021 to the present has changed from a cautious and sceptic position into a pragmatic one, projecting possibilities for cooperation with the minilateral mechanism. Such pragmatism has been based on the notion that US-China rivalry should be perceived not as a zero-sum game but a rather a dynamic from which Indonesia should garner positive gains.

**Keywords:** *AUKUS, Indonesia, China, Strategic Independence, South China Sea*

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## **Introduction**

AUKUS is a trilateral defence cooperation declared in September 2021 with two main pillars. The first pillar is the transfer of defense technology in the form of nuclear-powered submarines (SSN) to Australia, a non-nuclear weapon country in the South Pacific that is also a US ally. In the second pillar, the three countries agreed to collaborate on the issue of transferring cutting-edge technology to be adopted for weapons platforms such as quantum computing, artificial intelligence, hypersonic missiles and undersea capabilities (McDougall, 2021). Indonesia has an interest in establishing good strategic relations with AUKUS member countries, especially Australia and the US for the sake of defense modernization that failed to achieve its Minimum Essential Forces (MEF) target in 2024 (Haripin & Priamarizki, 2024). At the same time, AUKUS - although not formally mentioned - is building a containment posture against China through the US military alliance with Australia, Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, and the Philippines (Li, 2022). Indonesia must avoid the degradation of China's trust as Indonesia's main economic partner and at the same time the country has a core interest of building its defense capability to back up its diplomatic posture of maintaining strategic independence and facilitating peace and stability.

The notion that AUKUS could exacerbate the tension of US-China rivalry leading to an open conflict in the seas surrounding and within Southeast Asia is something that transcends from the concerns expressed by Indonesian political leaders. AUKUS might be one of the drivers for Indonesia to amplify its defense capability, especially its naval forces as it bears more responsibility of flag states operating submarines in its archipelagic waters . Indonesia will not be able to afford letting the Sea Lanes of Communications under its control to be used by belligerent states to harbour their submarines (nuclear or otherwise) in times of conflict (Utami, 2022). The capability of nuclear-powered submarines (SSNs) to stay underwater for extended period and maintain stealth increases the difficulty for Indonesia or other Southeast Asia nations with limited naval capability to maintain control traffic in their waters, as well as mitigate and respond to emergencies, thereby increasing the risk of incidents that implicate on the maritime biodiversity (Rusli & Bautista, 2023). As Indonesia and other maritime Southeast Asian states including Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, Brunei, and Vietnam build up their naval presence following the realization of AUKUS, consequently Indonesia and ASEAN member states concerned as well as China will also need to manage the co-existence of naval assets in the South China Sea to avoid incidents at sea caused by unplanned encounters (Li, 2022).

## **Indonesia's Changing Stance and Balancing Act**

Indonesia's interest in establishing strategic cooperation with AUKUS countries is related to its need to modernize defense capabilities. Cooperation in the field of defense - both in the form of procurement of defense equipment, transfer of weapons technology, joint military training, technical defense cooperation and dialogue and understanding - that Indonesia has built so far is with the West or NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) members, so it is impossible for Indonesia to reject or oppose the presence of AUKUS entirely (Laksmiana et al., 2023).

In the beginning of AUKUS' declaration, Indonesia and Malaysia were the most ardent critical voices in Southeast Asia, leading to some authors to argue that ASEAN's positioning towards it represents an ontological security for the region (Umar & Nuraini Santoso, 2023). Indonesia's views on AUKUS express concerns about the potential for the trilateralism to escalate the arms race in Southeast Asian region and the proliferation of nuclear weapons due to the inability of the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) to verify the ownership of nuclear technology and materials by Australia, which is a non-nuclear weapon country. Indonesian government's critical stance towards AUKUS was mostly expressed by its submission of a working paper entitled "Nuclear Naval Propulsion" to a UN Review Conference of the Parties to the NPT (Indonesia, 2022), outlining the need to take concern on the transfer of nuclear material and technology for military purposes from nuclear-weapon states to non-nuclear-weapon states and the conversion of nuclear material that could lead to the development of nuclear weapons (Wibisono & Widyautami, 2024).

But Indonesia government's views towards AUKUS were never unified to begin with. The Ministry of Defense had a more positive view. In November 2021, the then Defense Minister Prabowo said at the Manama Dialogue in Bahrain in 2021 that a nuclear-free Southeast Asia must be maintained but that he could understand and respect the needs of each country to defend its national interests (Liliansa, 2023). Then 2023 was also marked by President Joko Widodo's statement in an interview with the New Straits Times that AUKUS and QUAD were partners and not opponents (New Straits Times, 2023).

In February 2023, the Indonesian and Australian Ministries of Defense and Foreign Affairs met at a 2+2 meeting and Minister Retno Marsudi expressed the importance of transparency and commitment to preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons, including full compliance with the IAEA safeguards (ABC, 2022).

This dynamic shows that the Indonesian government's attitude towards AUKUS has changed from caution and scepticism regarding the potential negative implications of the trilateralism on regional

stability and nuclear weapons proliferation due to non-nuclear weapon states following Australia's lead, to a stance that avoids a confrontational approach. The Indonesian government recognizes the need to protect the prospect of economic gain and the role of an intermediary amidst the rivalry between major powers in the region.

An interview with this author with a high-ranking officer in Ministry of Foreign Affairs suggests that in the future, Indonesia will maintain a balanced position, promoting transparency, by leveraging the second pillar, improving national preparedness, and encourage political will and commitment from all parties. Indonesia will seek to maintain communication with AUKUS representatives, so there is a tangible expectation that Indonesia and China, and more importantly China and AUKUS member states can manage their relationship. In addition, multiple ASEAN-centered regional mechanisms including ASEAN itself, ASEAN Ministerial Meeting (AMM), ASEAN+1, ASEAN+3, also East Asia Summit as well as the sectoral bodies, ASEAN Defense Ministerial Meeting (ADMM) and ADMM+ where all states in Indo-Pacific are involved, there is also the ASEAN Chief of Defense Force meeting, and ASEAN Regional Forum, can be used to ensure that the cooperation of the region remains ongoing and that conflicts are transformed into cooperation.

On the other hand, Indonesia's bilateral strategic partnership steps have actually paved the way for Indonesia's role in maintaining regional peace. In August 2024, in a span of just 1 week, Indonesia opened up space for strategic partnerships with Australia and China, namely with the Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) with Australia and the Senior Officials Meeting (SOM 2+2) between the Indonesian and Chinese Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defense. The Indonesia-Australia DCA will enhance interoperability between the armed forces of the two countries, deepen strategic dialogue, and technical defense cooperation (Australia Defence Ministers, 2024). Meanwhile, the Indonesia-China SOM 2+2 was China's first 2+2 dialogue with another country, which opened up space for dialogue for regional stability, including issues related to the South China Sea (SCS) (Tempo, 2024).

With these two strategic agreements with China and Australia, Indonesia has prepared a foreign policy navigation platform between AUKUS and China. Indonesia can continue to choose to establish defense partnerships with AUKUS member countries and maintain the status quo of its partnership while maintaining the non-violation of China's security interests.

## **Some Principles of Navigation**

Indonesia's position is analogous to Ukraine which is facing an aggressive revisionist power and expanding reach of both NATO and the EU. However, unlike Ukraine that chose side completely with NATO and the EU, Indonesia strives to maintain and strengthen its strategic independence.

On the one hand, Indonesia is witnessing the expansion of US Naval Bases in Southeast Asia is test for ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific. The Philippines has opened new US Naval bases in Camilo Osias, La-Lo Airport (Cagayan), Camp Mechor De La Cruz, and Balabac Island, in addition to the original bases in Camp Magsaysay, Basa Air Base (Pampanga), Mactan-Benito Abuen Airbase, and Lumbia Air Base. Overall, US military bases in Southeast Asia are located in Diego Garcia, Cocos Island, Christmas Island, Darwin, Dili, Papua New Guinea, Malaysia, Singapore, Philippines, Vietnam, Palau, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, and Guam. At the same time, China has developed military base at the Fiery Cross – 700 Kms from Natuna Islands, equipped with port, desalination facility, court of justice, 5G network, and houses, and possibly a strategic bomber Xian H-6. In addition, China also conducted the so called Grey-Zone strategy through deployment fishing trawlers shadowed by Chinese Coast Guard ships.

However, in the SCS, Indonesia also has overlapping Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) with Malaysia and Vietnam. At the same time, China also claims some of Indonesia's EEZ with its ten-dash-line; at least 83,315 square KMs of Indonesia's EEZ is overlapping with China's ten-dash-line, or two-and-half times the size of Bali Island. Indonesia needs to guarantee its access to Block East Natuna or Natuna D-Alpha containing 36 million barrels of oil and 222 trillion cubic feet of gas. Coordinating Minister for Maritime Affairs and Investment Luhut Binsar Panjaitan once stipulated that – in regard to the overwhelming and under-exploited natural resources in the North Natuna Sea, Indonesia should consider developing a South China Sea council, in mimicry of the Baltic Sea Council, where conflict could be transformed into cooperation for exploration and responsible exploitation of marine resources.

Indonesia does not recognize overlap of EEZ with China and there is a belief that China is pushing Indonesia to negotiate its EEZ with China. Indonesia must not discuss this overlap of EEZ and China's ten-dash line, because it would trigger the push for negotiating Indonesia's EEZ and recognition of the ten-dash line. Some principles that Indonesia must put forward regarding establishing a defense partnership with AUKUS countries are as follows.

First, Indonesia must avoid being part of AUKUS. Indonesia needs to avoid any form of integration with AUKUS trilateralism. So far, the US has indicated the need to expand the AUKUS partnership by collaborating with other countries, especially Japan, as indicated by the US Ambassador to Japan Rahm Emanuel in April 2024. In this case, Indonesia needs to prevent any members of ASEAN – especially Vietnam and the Philippines as claimants to the SCS – from joining AUKUS, for example by accepting the transfer of offensive defense technology or conducting joint military exercises in the SCS. Things like this can provoke China to escalate its military presence in the SCS and increase tensions.

Second, Indonesia must continue its anti-nuclear weapons proliferation campaign. Indonesia's diplomacy as a member of the IAEA Board of Governors 2023-2025 is to ensure that the IAEA has a mechanism for verifying the ownership of nuclear technology and materials on weapons platforms by non-nuclear weapon states (Non-Nuclear Weapon State/NNWS). Without this mechanism, Australia's ownership of Naval Nuclear Propulsion (NNP) technology will trigger efforts by other non-nuclear states to obtain nuclear technology and materials from nuclear weapon states.

Third, Indonesia must prioritize ASEAN centrality by using regional mechanisms centered on ASEAN such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Defense Ministerial Meeting Plus (ADMM+) which not only consist of ASEAN member countries but also extra-regional partners, to discuss security and peace in the Indo-Pacific Region, both in terms of ownership of nuclear technology and materials, maritime navigation safety and marine biota conservation, as well as the latest digital technology that can affect regional security. This includes the completion of the Code of Conduct (CoC) for navigation safety and peace in the SCS. If not, then it is certain that AUKUS will torpedo ASEAN centrality by creating polarization between members, between supporters and critics of AUKUS.

Indonesia will remain important to China, because Indonesia is the only country that has firmly established an international cooperation framework that includes China amidst other cooperation frameworks initiated by the US in the Indo-Pacific that exclude China.

Indonesia needs to continue to conduct law enforcement operations in its territorial waters and EEZ. Indonesia has no good reason to sit down and negotiate with China about the overlap between Indonesia's EEZ and China's 10-dash line claim. Only with continuous maritime operations will China learn to respect Indonesia's EEZ and maritime territory that are in accordance with UNCLOS 1982.

Indonesia's strategic independence can be maintained through finding alternatives to its critical supply chains. This is to make sure that it has the capacity to say no to Chinese interests that are problematic for Indonesia's interests. Indonesia's economic interests in terms of trade and investment relations with China do not need to be a barrier to Indonesia's efforts to maintain its interests and sovereignty.

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