

Why Southeast Asia Should Welcome AUKUS

Australia models independence in standing up to China.

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Decades ago, in 1976, then-Indonesian Foreign Minister Adam Malik compared Australia to an appendix in Southeast Asia's abdominal cavity: It only matters when it hurts. In other words, as the renowned Indonesian analyst Harry Tjan Silalahi interpreted it, "you only become aware of its existence when it causes pain."

On Sept. 16, that appendix was apparently inflamed. The creation of a non-treaty partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, popularly known as AUKUS, affirmed Canberra's ties to London and Washington, its "great and powerful friends," as Australia's longest-serving prime minister, Robert Menzies, once described them. AUKUS' first initiative of many is to equip Australia with at least eight nuclear-powered submarines. Washington has never shared its closely guarded, top-secret nuclear submarine technology—purportedly the world's most advanced—with any country other than Britain.

AUKUS has been widely interpreted as another U.S. effort to deter China. But in the region where Sino-American rivalry exerts the most influence—Southeast Asia—and particularly among the 10 member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the reception to the news has been surprisingly mild.

ASEAN governments are, at worst, cautious of AUKUS, but none is obviously hostile to it. So far the strongest critiques of the partnership have come from Malaysia and Indonesia. Malaysia's prime ministerial statement seemed to initially conflate nuclear weapons with nuclear submarine propulsion, alleging AUKUS to "be a catalyst toward a nuclear arms race" that could "provoke other powers to act more aggressively." Indonesia, which proudly flaunts its nonaligned foreign policy, was muted in its response: A statement from its Ministry of Foreign Affairs said Jakarta merely "observes with caution" Australia's submarine acquisition and made no mention of AUKUS itself. Meanwhile, other regional countries, like Thailand and Brunei, have yet to react publicly. Some, like Singapore, have seemingly given AUKUS their tacit endorsement. The Philippines explicitly endorsed AUKUS as keeping "the balance" in the region in light of Beijing's "challenge to the status quo."

Such tepid responses are especially noticeable because past U.S.-backed initiatives designed to deter China incited hawkish reactions from some ASEAN countries. Then-Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa feared that the Obama administration's 2011 pivot to Asia (later renamed "rebalance") could "provoke a reaction and counter-reaction" and "vicious circle of tensions and mistrust or distrust." Singapore and Malaysia registered similar concerns. In contrast, regional reception to AUKUS is more nuanced. While the Indonesian foreign ministry's statement says that "Indonesia is deeply concerned over the continuing arms race and power projection in the region," this concern is addressed not specifically to AUKUS members but to all countries, including China. Even Marty, now in his retirement, questions whether AUKUS is merely "old wine in [a] new bottle."