

# UNDERSTANDING INDONESIA'S UNEASE WITH AUKUS

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The Indonesian foreign ministry in a statement has expressed concern over Australia's decision to acquire nuclear-powered submarines under the newly constituted AUKUS pact between Australia, the US and the UK. The statement further reads into Jakarta's anxiety over "continuing arms race and power projection" in the region.<sup>1</sup> Indonesia–Australia strategic relationship has been driven by their close geography, however apparent lack of dialogue between the two countries has recently exposed its vulnerabilities.

Indonesia has been a strong advocate of rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific and has played a crucial role in drafting the "ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific".<sup>2</sup> Security arrangements like AUKUS may have similar goals of freedom and peace, and therefore it is desirable that regional powers take Jakarta into confidence, especially amidst increasing uncertainty due to US–China rivalry in the region. Given its geo-strategic importance, Indonesia's cooperation will be essential for success of any regional security framework in the Indo-Pacific. At the same time, Indonesia may find it more pragmatic to participate in frameworks outside of ASEAN, such as engagement with supply chain resilience cooperation or the Quad plus, to avoid sitting on the sidelines during vital restructuring in the Indo-Pacific balance of power.

The bilateral relationship has a strong element of defence. However, the rhetoric of "most important security partner" coming out of Canberra repeatedly for Indonesia falls short in the face of their defence engagement over the years.<sup>3</sup> A Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement was signed in 2018, building on the first bilateral defence agreement signed in 1995. But Australia's Defence Cooperation Program (DCP) has never allocated largest share of its funding to Indonesia, nor has Indonesia been Australia's most frequent defence training partner. Indonesia's defence exercises with the Australian Defence Force (ADF) between 1997 and 2015 represent only 8 per cent of ADF's total defence exercises, compared to 25 per cent (highest number) in case of the United States and ADF.<sup>4</sup> Even other ASEAN nations like Thailand and Malaysia have trained more with Australia than Indonesia.

That is not to discount the strategic importance Indonesia holds in Australian policy and academic circles. The defence white paper in 2009 and in 2016 both acknowledge Indonesia's significance to Australian national security. The incongruity has arisen due to insufficient follow-up on the narrative. Given their positioning in the Pacific Ocean, any threat to Australia will come from or through Indonesia. Richard Tanter from Nautilus Institute calls the bilateral relationship asymmetric because Indonesia is more important to Australia from a security perspective than Australia is to Indonesia.<sup>5</sup> But as he also mentions in his paper, the two countries have very different histories and political evolution, which has likely led to ambiguity in their bilateral relations.

Australia's role in separation of East Timor in 1999 badly affected its relationship with Indonesia, and has sustained Jakarta's suspicion of Australia to this day. The defence cooperation at that time was suspended only to be normalised many years later in 2006 through the Lombok Treaty.<sup>6</sup> In 2013, Indonesia uncovered that Australia was spying on the-then president Yudhoyono and people close to him. As a consequence, it had suspended mutual intelligence cooperation.<sup>7</sup> Hence, in matters of strategic conduct, Indonesia has preferred a cautious and calibrated approach in its relationship with Australia. The unsteady course of their bilateral

relationship makes Indonesia's current reactions unsurprising. The secretive manner in which AUKUS was conceived has irked many of Australia's security partners. But Canberra's clear preference for closer defence relationship with allies in Anglosphere has alienated Indonesia.<sup>8</sup> In recent years, there has been greater realisation within Jakarta of the country's maritime vulnerabilities. President Joko Widodo's "Global Maritime Fulcrum" policy revolves around propelling Indonesia as a strong maritime power, given substantial economic and logistical dependencies on the sea.<sup>9</sup> In that scenario, a development like AUKUS, which further complicates the regional security environment where Indonesia could be victimised in a great power conflict, has naturally pronounced Jakarta's insecurities.

As over most geo-political issues, ASEAN members have a differing stance on the AUKUS deal. While Indonesia and Malaysia openly expressed their concerns, the Philippines welcomed it and Singapore chose to take a moderate position. While Australia has tried to allay concerns over an emerging arms race in the region, it cannot be denied that Southeast Asia will effectively be the theatre for any conflict that breaks among larger powers like China, Australia and the US. Indonesia has advocated "ASEAN Centrality" of the Indo-Pacific on multiple forums and also in the ASEAN outlook on Indo-Pacific. And even though newer security arrangements like the Quad or AUKUS may declare commitment to ASEAN centrality, their emergence itself can be seen in relation to ASEAN's performance as a regional organisation.<sup>10</sup> ASEAN's consensus-based decision-making process has prevented any conclusive step on contentious issues like the South China Sea conflict, and more recently the Myanmar crisis.

The ASEAN may choose either to continue avoiding confrontation with regional security issues and focus on economic integration instead, or it may transform its internal workings to foster more concrete decisions on regional security. In both ways it will remain the most formidable grouping of the Indo-Pacific around which other frameworks may revolve, but the latter will allow it to engage large powers without the absolute need for newer security arrangements. It will also help ASEAN retain the upper hand in setting the tone for security discourse on Indo-Pacific. Consequentially, any anxieties regarding new groupings among larger powers will not be acute. But given ASEAN's track record of handling conflicts in the region, a radical change in its outlook is unlikely.

Indonesia, as the largest economy and most populous ASEAN nation, has assumed a leadership role within the organisation. Maintaining an independent foreign policy has compelled Jakarta to prevent taking sides between the US, its closest security partner, and China, its closest economic partner. So it has promoted ASEAN as the primary regional organisation in Indo-Pacific. But exclusive association with ASEAN and ASEAN-led organisations may limit Indonesia's strategic engagements as larger powers do not look to ASEAN for resolution of crisis situations anymore.

Senior researcher at CSIS Evan Laksmana opines that it may be useful for Indonesia to consider "flexible coalitions" with "like-minded powers such as Australia, India, Japan and South Korea".<sup>11</sup> India has reaffirmed its policy of multi-alignment,<sup>12</sup> and is already a member of Quad with Australia and Japan. Jakarta's unease with newer security arrangements in the region, even though not unfounded, may be more due to lack of its own participation. Indonesia is a vibrant democracy and straddles the most significant oceanic trade routes of the world. It has shown commitment to international peace and has consistently been one of the largest contributors of troops to UN peacekeeping operations across the globe.<sup>13</sup> If it views itself as a regional leader, it is incumbent upon large powers to acclimatise their foreign policies accordingly.

Some analysts have lauded Australia with its AUKUS deal as an example of standing up to China<sup>14</sup>, notwithstanding that it may make Australia a bigger and clearer target for Beijing's

punitive methods like economic sanctions.<sup>15</sup> It is also possible that escalations of a military nature could be intensified in the region. For Southeast Asian nations to join or constitute among themselves any military-centric grouping like AUKUS or Quad will certainly provoke China. Beijing's grey-zone operations on adversaries is a testimony of its assertive actions against countries with perceived anti-China stance. In that case, it becomes important what the smaller power in such an arrangement is getting out of that deal. For instance, Australia is getting the prized nuclear technology from the US, which was only shared with the UK up until founding of AUKUS.

Indonesia is the largest archipelagic country with long coastlines to defend. Coastal surveillance and maritime intelligence sharing could be of great benefit to Indonesia considering the Chinese incursions into its northern maritime territory of Natuna Regency in 2020. Indonesian defence acquisitions in the past have been focussed on aircrafts, and there are long-term future plans to acquire 230 combat aircraft of different varieties as well.<sup>16</sup> More importantly, if Indonesia would consider the idea of participating in a multilateral security framework, it could command cooperation in all areas of traditional security, including cyber technologies. It remains to be seen if Jakarta may be willing to assume a multi-faceted leadership role in the region and upscale its engagements with the countries involved in the Indo-Pacific. A reinvigorated and nuanced security policy will allow it to respond accordingly to fast-changing security environment in the region.

*Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Manohar Parrikar IDSA or of the Government of India.*

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