

AUKUS and the Need for ASEAN Unity

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In early September of this year, the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia shocked many countries with their announcement of the creation of trilateral security pact known as AUKUS. This pact involves the transfer, among other advanced military technology, by the United States of highly-guarded nuclear submarine technology to Australia through the building initially of approximately eight nuclear-powered submarines. The announcement of the formation of AUKUS is indicative—even with the absence of a formal announcement—of the United States' new geo-strategic calculation to contain China.

Over the past four decades, China has experienced unprecedented economic growth permitting it to shape the U.S.-led post-Cold War Order, which China and many countries of the Global South have viewed as a Western centric system organized on the motto that “what is good for the West is good for the rest” irrespective of diverse histories, cultures, and levels of economic development. In the first decade of the 21st century, China began to provide an alternative development model to the American-led order. Its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which is one of the most prominent development in international political economy of this century, focuses on a global program of infrastructure-driven investments and trade, spanning across multiple continents. It is the quintessential project of China's new model. China has also utilized its economic power to reclaim its global status that was denied to it by Western powers in what China calls “the century of humiliation.” China's territorial claims include a large part of the South China Sea which it considers its historical territorial waters.

China's rise and its promotion of new global political economy has created anxiety in the United States. If left unchecked, in the United States' view, China's domination over the South China Sea will undermine the security and economic interests of the United States and its allies in the region and beyond. It should be noted that in addition to its significant sea lanes, the South China Sea contains valuable stocks of resources such as natural gas, oil, and fish. In the view of the United States and its allies, China's control over the South China Sea will greatly enhance its military and economic power.

To contain China, the United States has in recent years strengthened its existing bilateral alliances with countries in the Asia-Pacific region and created new multilateral alliances in the region such as QUAD (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue with the United States, Australia, Japan and India as members) and recently, AUKUS. QUAD, with its broader objectives and multiple partners, might not best serve the United States' strategic aims of containing China. Therefore, the United States needs a slimmer but meaner pact like AUKUS. Given the recent Sino-Australian tensions over the origins of the novel coronavirus, trade and human rights issues, and Australia's strategic location and shared world views with the United States, Australia is a natural partner for the United States in the establishment of this tighter AUKUS pact.

AUKUS has broad implications for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The first is that without a doubt, AUKUS could cause regional instability in the Asia Pacific region. While Australia views AUKUS as a defensive pact, other countries particularly China and Indonesia will see AUKUS

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as an offensive alliance against them. As history has tragically shown, a country's defensive move can be seen by others as an offensive posture, a condition that could easily result in an unfortunate spiraling arms race and eventual military conflict. AUKUS, therefore, has great potential effects on the security and stability of ASEAN given its location at the forefront of the China-US rivalry.

The second is the potentially declining relevancy of ASEAN's centrality as a regional security architect. AUKUS statement reaffirms the United States and Australia's commitments to "Southeast Asia, ASEAN Centrality, and ASEAN-led architecture."¹ In reality, the secrecy leading to the announcement of the creation of AUKUS suggests otherwise. To avoid being sidelined requires that ASEAN member states present a unified front in its dealings with external powers. Recent divergent and fragmented reactions to AUKUS do not bode well for fostering ASEAN's unity. While Malaysia and Indonesia expressed their objection to AUKUS, Singapore and the Philippines offered their tacit support for the pact. Although remaining quiet for fear of antagonizing China, Vietnam undoubtedly and quietly welcomes AUKUS.

The final question is what needs to be done? ASEAN should have a candid collective dialogue

on the ramifications of China's rise and its role in regional peace and economic development. ASEAN member states should then present its collective stance emerging from this dialogue to China. It is counter-productive and dangerous for any ASEAN member state to simply endorse the United States and its allies' perception of China as a menacing, irresponsible actor. China after all is not like the former Soviet Union. Since its reforms in the late 1970s, China has never erected an iron curtain separating it from the rest of the world. As a rising power, China does not want to be seen as a bully; nor does it tolerate bullying by others. Consequently, blindly following the United States and its allies' view of China will risk ASEAN becoming a "side show" for the US's attempts to contain China.

In the final analysis, ASEAN should double-down its effort to finalize the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea based on a win-win principle. As a country that has close relations with China and no territorial conflict in the South China Sea, Cambodia should use its role as the Chair of ASEAN in 2022 to iron out such a win-win Code of Conduct in the South China Sea. Securing such an outcome will certainly serve as a foundation for confidence-building, paving the way for a co-operative, prosperous and peaceful Asia Pacific region.

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¹ See "The Australia-U.S. Ministerial Consultations Joint Statement: An Unbreakable Alliance for Peace and Prosperity," <<https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/marise-payne/media-release/australia-us-ministerial-consultations-joint-statement-unbreakable-alliance-peace-and-prosperity.>>