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AUKUS: ASEAN's Hesitant Response

By Amanda Trea Phua

SYNOPSIS

AUKUS – a de facto security arrangement – announced in September has triggered divided opinions in Southeast Asia. ASEAN has not been able to establish a clear consensus on the new trilateral pact at its Leaders Summits this week. More diplomatic spadework needs to be done.

COMMENTARY

THE NEW trilateral security partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, or AUKUS, has dominated discussions on the Indo-Pacific strategic landscape in recent weeks. For countries in Southeast Asia, reactions to AUKUS have so far been mixed.

While some countries worry that AUKUS may inadvertently trigger a regional arms race, others have expressed hopes that the new security formulation may contribute to regional peace and stability. Beyond individual perceptions and concerns, the question of how AUKUS may impact ASEAN has also arisen. But while AUKUS was in the backdrop of the ASEAN Leaders Summits this week, it was not mentioned in the concluding Chairman's Statement.

AUKUS, ASEAN Centrality and Cohesion

To be sure, questions about ASEAN's role, and in particular, about ASEAN Centrality, often arises whenever a new multilateral initiative emerges that involves external powers. The re-establishment of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) between Australia, India, Japan and the US in 2017 had also triggered similar questions about its impact on ASEAN Centrality.

Yet, the key issue is really the challenge such initiatives pose to ASEAN unity and the perennial struggle to forge a strong and cohesive position on regional security issues. In this regard, it is not surprising to find that ASEAN member states have been unable to reach a consensus on the establishment of AUKUS.

At the same time, one wonders if the announcement of AUKUS could have come with more diplomatic dexterity. Notwithstanding the rift with France over a foiled submarine deal, there is a sense that AUKUS had whizzed into existence over ASEAN's head, even as it blindsided allies and security partners in Europe.

Of course, AUKUS member states have since reached out to their Southeast Asian counterparts to [allay concerns](#). A few days after the announcement of AUKUS, Australia released [a statement](#) affirming its “steadfast commitment” to ASEAN Centrality. It also categorically clarified that Canberra would not be seeking to develop nuclear weapons capabilities even if the new initiative will allow it to deploy a nuclear-powered submarine fleet.

State representatives from AUKUS proponents have also reached out variously to Southeast Asian leaders to discuss the new alliance and the ambition for it to contribute constructively to regional peace. On 21 October 2021, British armed forces minister James Heappey further added that [there has been an “overhyping”](#) of controversy over AUKUS. He explained that the new trilateral agreement is not intended to “challenge others”, but an addition of Australia into a long-standing technology-sharing partnership between the US and Britain.

Dragging ASEAN Into Big-Power Politics?

Unlike the Quad that has tended to keep its discussions to non-traditional security issues such as global health, climate change, and emerging technologies, the military overtures of AUKUS is clear. Southeast Asian states are equally and expressively clear that they do not want to be embroiled in great power politics.

In that sense, they are right to be cautious insofar as AUKUS may be seen as an effort to counter China's growing assertiveness in the region. At the same time, the rapid deterioration of Australia-China relations and increased military activities in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait, amongst others, all point to the realities of the regional security environment in recent times.

AUKUS is a reflection of, and response to, an already challenging and tense regional security landscape. That AUKUS can be seen as a mechanism for countries like [Australia to cope with their vulnerabilities](#) is not in itself unreasonable to imagine.

For the US, AUKUS is the latest manifestation of the Biden administration's broad multilateral approach, and its ambition to retain American primacy in the region. President Joe Biden made it explicit by saying that [China will not achieve its goal of being the most powerful country under his watch](#).

Taken as it is, AUKUS is yet another expression of American interests in the region. The approach of working closely with allies while pursuing an expanded and targeted

network of like-minded partners to temper China's aggressive behaviour is one to be expected.

US Backing for ASEAN Centrality

The Biden administration has so far demonstrated a preference to focus on "a free and open Indo-Pacific" as the anchor of its Asia policy, circumventing explicit references to China in the process. Washington knows that it must tread the fine balance between engagement on the basis of a shared commitment to an "international rules based order" and pushing an anti-China agenda.

Yet, even "shared values" prove a difficult appeal in a region where the state of democracy has always been fragile. The fact that ASEAN struggles to present a united position on the situation in Myanmar illustrates the obstacles facing the US' values-based agenda in Southeast Asia.

For the first time in four years, the US sent its highest representation to meet ASEAN leaders at the ASEAN Summits on 26 October. President Biden held virtual meetings with Southeast Asian leaders, announcing a pledge of US\$102 million in new initiatives to expand its partnership with the regional grouping.

Notably, no mention of China was made. At the meetings, Biden also sought to reassure regional leaders that the US supported ASEAN Centrality and ASEAN's role in the regional architecture of the Indo-Pacific. He said that Southeast Asian leaders can expect to see him "[personally showing up](#)" and reaching out to the region.

As Washington makes effort to assuage concerns in Southeast Asia, the fact is that ASEAN will need to adapt and re-energise its position as the heart of the region's security architecture. To this end, it may need to find common ground and deepen cooperation with the various regional mechanisms by external partners.

In some sense, that could help foster strategic trust that may alleviate some of the misgivings individual states have. In another, working together to solve targeted issues demonstrates ASEAN's capacity for practical cooperation despite the challenges it faces.

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