

## AUKUS Sub Deal Splits ASEAN into Pro and Anti Camps

Deal could break core ASEAN tenets barring nuclear weapons in region but some welcome the boats to deter China in South China Sea

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*The Australia, United Kingdom and United States nuclear submarine deal and their announced new AUKUS trilateral alliance have sent shockwaves across the Indo-Pacific and beyond as fears rise the move could spark an armed conflict with China.*

While US allies in India, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan have all been mainly mute on the announcement, the strategic tremors of the nuclear deal will be most acutely felt in Southeast Asia and the South China Sea.

Already, the region appears to be splitting into pro and anti camps. Indonesia and Malaysia have openly criticized the deal, portraying it as a potentially destabilizing development that rekindles age-old resentment of Australia acting as America’s “deputy sheriff” in the region.

Singapore and Vietnam, two countries with rising concerns about Chinese expansionism, quietly welcomed the deal without issuing any formal statements. The Philippines, a US treaty ally, stood out by openly backing the deal as a necessary “enhancement of a near-abroad ally’s ability to project power.”

The AUKUS deal, which is purportedly consistent with regional principles on nuclear non-proliferation, is expected to be discussed in the forthcoming high-level meetings of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), including a scheduled annual summit in November.

There are serious regional concerns about the strategic implications of US-made Australian nuclear submarines patrolling the hotly contested South China Sea, where the US is pressing to maintain freedom of navigation. In recent years, Chinese and US naval forces have almost come to blows in multiple “close encounters” in the disputed sea.

Some ASEAN members worry the involvement of more naval forces, especially nuclear-powered submarines, would likely further complicate the situation and raise the risk of armed confrontation.



A US Navy Carrier Battle Group with USS Ronald Reagan in the lead in the South China Sea. Image: US Navy/Handout

Eager to preserve its “centrality” in shaping a stable regional order, the Southeast Asian bloc has actively pushed over the decades for a reduction of foreign military forces in the strategic region, now a chief theater of rivalry between the US and China.

Malaysia, a staunchly “neutral” country, has been a major advocate of the principle of ZOPFAN (Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality in Southeast Asia).

As former Malaysian **Prime Minister Abdul Razak Hussein** [argued in the 1970s](#), ASEAN should espouse “a policy of neutralization which will ensure that this region will no longer be a theater of conflict for the competing interests of the major powers.”

The ASEAN [Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia \(TAC\)](#), which has been signed by all major Indo-Pacific powers, similarly calls upon member states as well as dialogue partners to contribute to a peaceful management of disputes and, accordingly, refrain from militarizing the region.

Of particular concern is the ASEAN’s Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ Treaty) treaty, which expressly opposes the presence of nuclear weapons and other forms of weapons of mass destruction in the region.

Critics say the AUKUS deal could potentially violate some of these key ASEAN tenets, since any nuclear-powered submarine would rely on [highly enriched uranium](#) that could also be used for nuclear weapons production.

Indonesia's Foreign Ministry thus immediately criticized the Australian submarine deal, making it clear that the de facto leader of ASEAN "is deeply concerned over the continuing arms race and power projection in the region."

Sensing the potential for fallout, Australian **Prime Minister Scott Morrison** reached out to regional counterparts, including Indonesia and Malaysia, to assure the AUKUS deal is consistent with the country's nuclear non-proliferation treaty (NPT) obligations and that the subs would only act to enhance "strategic balance" in the region, in light of China's rapidly expanding naval footprint in the area.

Australia's ambassador to ASEAN, **Will Nankervis**, also issued a statement clarifying that the AUKUS "is not a defense alliance or pact" and that the nuclear submarine deal "does not change Australia's commitment to ASEAN nor our ongoing support for the ASEAN-led regional architecture."

"Australia remains staunch in our support for the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Australia will work closely with the International Atomic Energy Agency to ensure full compliance with our NPT obligations as a Non-Nuclear Weapon State," the Australian envoy said in a statement addressed to the ASEAN headquarters in Jakarta.

"We remain committed to reinforcing international confidence in the integrity of the international non-proliferation regime, and to upholding our global leadership in this domain," he added.

Malaysia's newly installed **Prime Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob**, however, remained unconvinced, telling his Australian counterpart that that "AUKUS could potentially provoke other powers to act more aggressively, especially within the South China Sea region."

Significantly, other key ASEAN states such as Vietnam and Singapore, which have welcomed greater strategic cooperation with the US, have not raised any objections. Experts and analysts believe that the two countries quietly welcome any external efforts to counter China's muscle-flexing in the South China Sea.

Surprisingly, Beijing-friendly Philippine **President Rodrigo Duterte** bucked the reticent trend by openly backing the deal as an indispensable contribution to regional security.

Following [phone conversations](#) with his Australian counterpart **Peter Dutton**, Philippine Defense Secretary **Delfin Lorenzana** reiterated the country's "neutrality" but didn't openly criticize the AUKUS deal.

A week earlier, the Philippine defense chief welcomed expanded maritime security cooperation with the US during a visit to Washington to commemorate the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Philippine-US Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) amid a recent rapid [revival of the century-old alliance](#).

Philippine Foreign Secretary **Teodoro Locsin Jr**, who also recently visited Washington, reflected Manila's quiet return to its traditional alliances after years of strategic flirtation with China by defending the deal as consistent with regional principles and the NPT because the nuclear submarines will use enriched uranium but not carry nuclear weapons.

"The enhancement of a near-abroad ally's [Australia] ability to project power should

restore and keep the balance rather than destabilize it," said the Philippine chief diplomat in an official statement.

He welcomed the submarine deal as crucial to "enhancing Australia's [deterrence] ability, added to that of its main military ally, to achieve that calibration [against regional threats]."

Though not directly mentioning China, Locsin warned of the Asian superpower's "threatening" behavior in the disputed waters, including the use of "maritime militia" vessels to intrude into Philippine-claimed waters.

"Proximity breeds brevity in response time; thereby enhancing an ASEAN's near friend and ally's military capacity to respond to a threat to the region or challenge the status quo," Locsin added in a thinly veiled jab at China.

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