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e-ISSN: 2798-4427

# JGSS

## Journal of Global Strategic Studies

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Vol. 05 No. 01 June 2025

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**MASTER'S PROGRAMS IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS  
FACULTY OF SOCIAL AND POLITICAL SCIENCE  
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## **Australia's Nuclear-Powered Submarine Future: Revisiting the View from Jakarta**

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*In spite of periodic tensions, the Australia-Indonesia relationship has historically been characterized by cooperation instead of competition. However, Jakarta's official expressions of concern in response to Canberra's plans to acquire nuclear-powered submarines under the AUKUS pact in 2021 prompted a recalibration of bilateral ties. Now, amidst significant upheaval of the global geopolitical landscape, this article revisits Indonesia's reaction to the announcement, the factors that shaped its response, and the security agreement's enduring implications for Australia-Indonesia relations. The article contends that for Australia, AUKUS has become a necessity to reduce the capability gap between itself and China. From the Indonesian perspective, a disconnect exists between official and unofficial views on AUKUS. Within Indonesia's policymaking circles, there is an implicit understanding, communicated through informal channels, of the agreement's potential benefits, despite public expressions of concern. For the Australia-Indonesia bilateral relationship, which has developed from a notably low base, AUKUS ultimately portends both challenges and opportunities in the realm of defence cooperation and beyond.*

**Keywords:** AUKUS, Australia, Indonesia

### **Introduction**

On 16 September 2021, the governments of Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom announced the formation of the trilateral AUKUS security pact. Under the agreement, Canberra flagged its intention to acquire nuclear-powered submarine capabilities, eliciting mixed reactions from global powers, ranging from support, expressions of concern, and outright condemnation. One of Australia's largest and most proximate neighbours, Indonesia, was one such actor that officially voiced its 'deep concern' over the announcement's implications for regional peace and security (Kementerian Luar Negeri Republik Indonesia, 2021). As a result, policymakers and

academics alike have observed that Jakarta's response to AUKUS may merely be the tip of a deeper and more enduring divide between the two regional powers. Important questions were raised concerning the extent to which AUKUS would result in a lasting strategic divergence or a momentary point of disagreement between Australia and Indonesia. Accordingly, then, I revisit Indonesia's initial response to the pact, examining the key factors underpinning its reaction. Furthermore, with the global geopolitical landscape having shifted considerably four years following the agreement's announcement, a recalibration of the Australia-Indonesia bilateral relationship in the context of AUKUS' uncertain future therefore becomes necessary.

Hence, this paper investigates the following question: What factors shaped Indonesia's response to the trilateral AUKUS pact and what does the security agreement portend for the country's bilateral relationship with Australia in the current global geopolitical landscape? Thus, our goal is threefold: (I) to identify the ways in which various circles of Indonesian society responded to the AUKUS announcement; (II) to determine the historical and geopolitical factors that have shaped such responses; and (III) to examine the pact's implications for Australia-Indonesia bilateral ties against the backdrop of mounting tensions in the Asia-Pacific regional security environment. To preview, I argue that Indonesia's response to AUKUS can be best described as muted and non-antagonistic – a product of its historical commitment to non-alignment. While its official response adhered to the tenets of its foreign policy, there was nevertheless an implicit acknowledgment within Indonesia's policymaking circles – expressed through informal channels – of the security partnership's potential benefits for itself, Australia, and the bilateral relationship between both countries. Now, as the United States casts an increasingly polarizing figure under the policies of President Donald Trump, Indonesia and Australia are faced with further opportunities to deepen their strategic partnership, should they first be able to navigate existing fractures in the relationship.

This article is structured as follows. This introduction has outlined the investigation's aims and previewed its main arguments. The following section describes the investigation's research method. The third section introduces neoclassical realism as a theoretical framework to guide the paper's arguments and analysis. Next, I provide background on AUKUS and the reasons Australia pursued this agreement. Then, I conduct a case study of the Indonesian response, examining the reactions of policymakers, the press, the military, and academics. Via SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis, the next section outlines the baseline of Australia-Indonesia relations and underscores the implications of AUKUS for the

bilateral relationship in the current global geopolitical context. Finally, the article concludes with a summary of the research undertaken and provides policy recommendations to deepen Australia-Indonesia ties.

### **Research Method**

This investigation utilizes a qualitative research design to examine the complexities and nuances of Indonesia's response to AUKUS. Given that qualitative research allows for the analysis of 'meaning' attached to various 'social phenomena', it is thus the most appropriate research design for understanding the multi-faceted nature of Indonesia's reaction to Australia's plans to acquire nuclear-powered submarine capabilities (Collingridge and Gantt 2008, 389). The investigation principally draws on primary sources consisting of both Bahasa Indonesia and English-language Indonesian material. This includes news sources, press releases, and polls surveying Indonesian participants. The information is supplemented by secondary sources including: peer-reviewed scholarly articles, opinion articles, and book chapters. Members of the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) and the Sea Power Centre-Australia (SPC-A) also graciously provided open-source information on the condition that their anonymity be retained due the sensitive nature of their work. The views expressed in this paper however, are solely my own and do not reflect the official position of the RAN, unless explicitly stated otherwise.

### **Theoretical Framework: Threat Balancing**

How do states formulate responses to changes in their external security environment? A fundamental neoclassical realist assumption is that states exist within an 'anarchic' international system, constantly struggling to attain relative power advantages over other actors to guarantee their survival (Waltz, 1979). Foreign policy, defined by Heywood (2011, 129) as a means by which states attempt to 'influence or manage' events outside their borders through 'relations with foreign governments', is accordingly often shaped by threats from the international system. For Indonesia, a vast archipelago situated at the centre of global trading routes and strategic chokepoints, the possibility of a neighbouring country acquiring nuclear-powered submarine capabilities is therefore one such challenge its policymakers must contend with. However, whether a country's foreign and security policy response adequately *balances* against potential threats can vary considerably on a case-by-case basis. Some threatened states may balance against 'dangerous accumulations of power' by forming alliances, accelerating their own arms production, or both (Schweller, 2004, 160). On the contrary, others may fail to recognize

a clear and present danger, respond in paltry and imprudent ways, or simply not react to security concerns at all – a behaviour Schweller (2004, 159) terms ‘under-balancing’.

How, then, did Jakarta respond to AUKUS and its potentially destabilizing ramifications for Indonesia’s immediate external security environment? Proponents of neoclassical realism hold that it is a state’s ‘internal characteristics’ and ‘domestic variables’ that determine the range of policies and actions enacted in response to particular pressures from the international system (Lobell, Ripsman, & Taliaferro, 2009, 1, 17). This explains variations in the reactions of different states to similar pressures and challenges, as exemplified by the responses of several Southeast Asian nations to AUKUS, which have ranged from indifference, support, to animosity (Choong & Storey, 2021, 1). At the most superficial level, Indonesia’s official response was shaped by the guiding principles of its independent and active foreign policy. The country’s strict adherence to such principles appeared to drive its decision to not directly balance against the tripartite pact. Though, it is also very likely that Indonesia lacks the ability and will to militarily counterbalance against Australia’s submarine modernization plans, given its well-documented struggles with defence acquisition. It is also important to note that Indonesia, the world’s third-largest democracy, is not a homogeneous entity. Consequently, perspectives and viewpoints across different segments of Indonesian society – ranging from the press, the military, to the general public – can, and have varied to certain extents. Thus, I assert that whilst Indonesia’s official response to AUKUS appears consistent with its historic stance of non-alignment, a more nuanced acknowledgment of the tripartite pact’s potential benefits can be discerned in the reactions of other circles within Indonesian society. Simply put, Indonesia’s response to AUKUS and its associated risks has been anything but unified.

### **Background**

There are myriad interpretations regarding what AUKUS promises and what it portends for the regional security dynamic. Determining what the agreement does and does not entail thus becomes a prerequisite for understanding such perspectives. Accordingly, this section provides an overview of the tripartite pact’s main agreements, its costs, and its benefits.

#### *AUKUS: What It Is and What It Is Not*

AUKUS is a trilateral security pact between the UK, the US, and Australia. As part of the agreement’s first initiative – alternatively known as Pillar One – Australia has flagged its intent to ‘acquire nuclear-powered submarine (SSN) technology’ with assistance from the US and the UK (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2021a). With the new SSN-AUKUS-class fleet of nuclear-powered submarines expected to enter service in the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) in the 2040s at the earliest, Washington has also announced the planned sale of up to five Virginia-class SSNs intended to replace Australia’s ageing fleet of Collins-class submarines (Financial Times Editors, 2023; Ali, Holland, & Stewart, 2023). It is important to stress however, that beyond the hype of nuclear-propulsion technology, both SSN-AUKUS and Virginia-class submarines will be conventionally armed. Whilst the acquisition of SSN does provide the RAN with a strategic advantage, the pact is by no means arming Australia with a nuclear *ultima ratio*.

Whilst the transfer of nuclear-powered submarine technology does comprise the crux of the AUKUS agreement, it is not its only initiative. Michael Shoebridge (2021, 4) asserts that the deal is not merely about Australia acquiring ‘eight of those peak predator deterrent weapons’, nor will the pact replace the Five-Eyes intelligence partnership comprising Australia, the US, Canada, New Zealand, and the UK. At its core, AUKUS is essentially a ‘trilateral technology accelerator’ between the three participating governments aimed at developing artificial intelligence, hypersonic and counter-hypersonic weaponry, cyber and electronic warfare capabilities, quantum technology and undersea capabilities – as summarized in Table I (Shoebridge, 2021, 4; Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2022b). In theory, the pursuit of such lines of effort is expected to complement the intelligence focus areas of the Five-Eyes partnership. After all, technological strength underpins both high-end intelligence and military capabilities.

<b>Nuclear Powered Submarines</b>	<b>Advanced Capabilities</b>
Information exchange under the Exchange of Naval Nuclear Propulsion Information Agreement (ENNPIA)	Undersea capabilities
Nuclear stewardship	Quantum technologies
Australia workforce	Artificial intelligence and autonomy
New submarine base	Advanced cyber
Nuclear-powered submarine construction yard	Hypersonic and counter-hypersonic capabilities
Non-proliferation	Electronic warfare
	Innovation
	Information sharing

*Table I. Lines of effort under AUKUS initiatives.<sup>1</sup>*

*Costs, Consequences, and Concerns*

An agreement of AUKUS' magnitude does not come without significant demands. The material cost of Pillar One alone has been described as 'eye-watering' – with Australia's share of the SSN-AUKUS production program slated to cost taxpayers between AUD \$268-368 billion over the next three decades (Ryan, 2023; Newman, 2023). Former Prime Minister Paul Keating has gone so far as to lambast the pact as the 'worst deal in all history' – arguing that with such lofty figures, 40-50 conventionally-powered submarines could have instead been purchased (Karp, 2023). Keating is not alone in his criticism of the deal, with Greens leader Adam Bandt also raising concerns that AUKUS' AUD \$368 billion price tag may be used as an excuse for 'not spending money on housing, income support, or social services' (Butler, 2023).

Whilst the financial demands of AUKUS are undoubtedly high, the pact's greatest cost arguably came at the expense of Australia's bilateral relationship with France. Under the former Scott Morrison administration, Australia had reneged on an AUD \$90 billion diesel-electric attack submarine deal with France in favour of AUKUS (Tharoor, 2021). In response, France recalled its ambassadors to Australia and the US (Willsher, 2021). France's Minister of the Armed Forces Florence Parly and Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian condemned the decision as going against 'the spirit of cooperation' that had previously underpinned the France-Australia relationship (Ministère de L'Europe et des Affaires Étrangères, 2021). The latter went so far as to reproach Australia for 'stabbing [France] in the back' – adding that Morrison's defeat in the 2022 Australian federal election 'suits [him] very well' (BBC, 2021). Likewise, although French President Emmanuel Macron refrained from publicly commenting following the agreement's announcement in 2021, he nevertheless hinted at it by expressing hopes to 'rebuild' the bilateral relationship following Morrison's ousting (AFP/ABC, 2022). With the deal carrying such significant financial, political, and human repercussions, questions must be asked concerning the reasons for which Australia adjudged AUKUS to be worth such costs.

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<sup>1</sup> Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (2022).

*The Case for Nuclear-Powered Submarines*

As summarized by Table II, the most obvious argument in favour of AUKUS is the SSN’s technological superiority over diesel-electric (SSK) alternatives. For example, SSKs ‘require air and fuel to operate’ – denoting that these submarines must resurface every couple of days (Haddad, 2021). By contrast, SSNs are fuelled by highly-enriched (93%) uranium – which ‘doesn’t usually require replacing during a 30-year submarine lifecycle’ – and even produces its own oxygen and water (Ohff, 2017). In theory, SSNs could remain submerged for years, significantly mitigating the risk of detection (Haddad, 2021). In practice however, SSNs remain submerged for between 70-90 days to account for the food supply of its crew. In addition to longer endurance, SSNs also boast a ‘sustained submerged speed of 30 knots’ that thus translates into a greater covert mobility output in the open seas than the smaller, slower, and less durable SSKs (Ohff, 2017).

	<b>Nuclear-Powered Attack Submarines (SSN)</b>	<b>Diesel-Electric Attack Submarines (SSK)</b>
<b>Sustained submerged speed</b>	30 knots	10 knots
<b>Average submersion days</b>	90 days	50 days
<b>Required depth beneath keel for navigational safety</b>	50-60 feet	30-40 feet
<b>Displacement (submerged)</b>	7,925 tonnes; 10,363 tonnes with <i>Virginia</i> Payload Module ( <i>Virginia</i> -class)	3,407 tonnes ( <i>Collins</i> -class)

*Table II. Average dimensions, displacement, and performance of SSNs vs SSKs.<sup>2</sup>*

Nevertheless, the SSK is not without its advantages either. First, SSKs are cheaper to maintain, whereas SSNs require expensive and complex infrastructure to handle maintenance and the disposal of nuclear waste (Haddad, 2021; Walker and Kruz, 2018). Second, although SSKs tend to be smaller, this affords them greater manoeuvrability in littoral or shallow-water operating environments. For navigational safety, SSKs only require 30-40 feet of water under its keel; whereas the corresponding depth for SSNs is 50-

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<sup>2</sup> Compiled from Haddad (2021); Ohff (2017); Walker and Kruz (2018); and open-source information from author consultation with RAN submariner.

60 feet (Walker and Kruz, 2018). In shallow water, the Virginia class' 7,000+ tonne displacement arguably 'makes it [too big] to operate effectively' (Ohff, 2017). Additionally, whilst SSKs are generally limited to a sustainable speed of around 10 knots, this is not as critical a factor as it is in deeper waters, given that 'a fast-moving sub [cannot easily] take corrective action' when faced with obstacles or impediments (Vego, 2010). Finally, the proximity of the seabed in shallow-waters causes reduced pressure under a submarine's keel – resulting in handling difficulties – and denoting that the smaller SSKs are ultimately better equipped than SSNs to operate in such environments (Tupper, 2004, 272).

Whilst the US Navy (USN) does value the littoral capabilities of the RAN's current fleet of submarines, the production of SSN-AUKUS is set to greatly bolster Australia's naval force projection capabilities beyond its immediate security environment. Given the SSN's superior range, endurance, and speed, they are often tasked with exercising sea control in support of ballistic missile submarines. In any potential conflict over the Taiwan Strait, a fleet of SSN-AUKUS would serve as a 'natural extension' to the USN's nuclear submarine operations (Ohff, 2017). Additionally, the substantial financial and material cost of producing SSNs means the community of states who possess these submarines are small. Currently, only six countries have nuclear-powered submarines, with Australia slated to become the seventh under AUKUS (see Table III). With China maintaining 12 operational SSNs out of a fleet of 59 total submarines, – second only to the US – the planned production of eight SSN-AUKUS will not only reduce the capability gap between the RAN and the Chinese Navy, but also foment a shift in the global military balance (Haddad, 2021).

Country	Nuclear-Powered Attack and Ballistic Submarines (SSNs + SSBNs)	Total Submarines
United States	68	68
China	12	59
Russia	40	49
UK	11	11
France	8	8

*Table III. Countries with nuclear-powered submarine capabilities.<sup>3</sup>*

### The View from Jakarta

Given its size, geography, and proximity, Indonesia has been a historical consideration in Australia's Indo-Pacific strategy. It is important then, to understand the

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<sup>3</sup> Compiled from Haddad (2021).

ways in which Jakarta responded to Canberra's announcement of its intentions to acquire nuclear-powered submarine capabilities. This section first examines the tenets of Indonesian foreign policy and how this has shaped the country's official response to AUKUS. Next, it dissects the more *informal* reactions in Indonesia to the tripartite pact, analysing individual, press, military, academic, and broad public perspectives. Overall, it observes a disconnect between the official and unofficial narratives of Indonesia's reception towards the security agreement. Whereas the official response is one of quiet concern, the unofficial reactions range from implicit support to general indifference.

#### *Indonesian Foreign Policy: A Brief Overview*

Key to understanding Indonesia's response to Australia's involvement in AUKUS are the tenets of its foreign policy. Historically, Indonesia has been a traditional proponent of non-alignment in international affairs. Since attaining independence in 1945, the country has consistently adhered to a foreign policy that is *Bebas dan Aktif* (independent and active), with Jakarta remaining formally unaligned and unopposed to any preponderant power (Vatikiotis, 1992, 352-353). In the context of Sino-American bipolarity, Indonesia therefore seeks to situate itself in the 'strategic middle-ground' between the two competing powers, a practice Evan Laksmana terms 'pragmatic equidistance' (Sulaiman, Delanova, and Jati, 2021, 155-178; Laksmana, 2017, 4). Consequently, in its bilateral engagements with both countries, Jakarta has consistently pursued a foreign policy that does not outright antagonize neither Beijing nor Washington, instead opting for diplomacy as its 'first line of defence' (Gindarsah, 2016, 336).

Indonesia often stresses its non-alignment at a regional level, usually through the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). Non-interference and respect for sovereignty form not only the basis of Indonesian foreign policy, but also the core of the ASEAN Charter. It comes with no surprise then that the bloc has often been referred to as the '*sokguru*' (cornerstone) of Indonesia's foreign outlook (Sukma, 2013, 42). Indeed, ASEAN enables Indonesia and its smaller Southeast Asian peers to avoid shouldering the entire 'weight' of relating with both the US and China on bilateral terms alone (Dunst, 2021, 37-45). For example, Jakarta has consistently reiterated its position as a non-claimant in the South China Sea dispute, with former foreign minister Marty Natalegawa asserting that no such conflict exists, despite clear overlaps between China's nine-dash line and Indonesia's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the North Natuna Sea (Prabowo, 2014). Nevertheless, Jakarta has consistently spearheaded the bloc's efforts to create a Code of

Conduct on the conflict, demonstrating precedent of ‘non-aligned’ Indonesia adopting a firmer unofficial position through the auspices of ASEAN (Supriyanto, 2016, 25).

### *Political Perspectives*

Indonesia’s official AUKUS response reflected its *Bebas dan Aktif* foreign policy: non-antagonistic, muted, and mild. On 17 September 2021, Indonesia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs released a statement emphasizing the following five points:

1. The government takes note of Australia’s planned SSN production ‘cautiously’;
2. It expresses deep concern over the ‘continuing arms race...in the region’;
3. It reminds Australia of its commitment to nuclear non-proliferation;
4. It urges Australia to remain committed to ‘regional peace and security’;
5. And it ‘encourages’ all relevant parties to settle any differences through peaceful dialogue – underscoring respect for the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) (Kementerian Luar Negeri Republik Indonesia, 2021).

Reaffirming such concerns, the country later cancelled a planned visit by then Prime Minister Scott Morrison on the pretext that then Indonesian President Joko ‘Jokowi’ Widodo was occupied with ‘trips’ to provinces outside of the country’s capital (Kusumo, 2021; Sky News, 2021). Likewise, the government also confirmed that it would be seeking a review of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) to assess the legality of the transfer of nuclear-propulsion technology to non-nuclearized states (Priyandita and Herscovitch, 2021).

Jokowi has since relaxed his stance on AUKUS, publicly urging ASEAN to view the agreement’s members as ‘partners, and not competitors’ (Connors, 2023). Whilst AUKUS’ members may have ‘partially reassured’ the Jokowi administration, other political and parliamentary elements within Indonesia remain unsatisfied (Connors 2023). The First Commission of the Indonesian House of Representatives – tasked with overseeing defence, foreign, and intelligence affairs – has urged Jokowi to more firmly oppose the pact, reproaching the administration for ‘*cuma bilang khawatir*’ (merely

expressing concern) (Alfons, 2021). Commission member Rizki Aulia Rahman publicly appealed to Jokowi to broach the subject of AUKUS through the auspices of ASEAN, poignantly asserting that the time for '*diplomasi kopi*' (coffee diplomacy) was over (Wakik, 2021; Iswinarno and Ardiansyah, 2021). Whilst Jokowi's official stance regarding AUKUS has softened, earlier reports indicated that the president initially took offence to having been excluded from negotiations 'until the very last minute' (Office of Assistant to Deputy Cabinet Secretary for State Documents & Translation, 2021; Purba, 2022). Questions must then be asked as to what degree of Indonesia's official response to AUKUS reflects its Bebas dan Aktif policy, and how much more may instead be attributed to displeasure over having been left in the dark about the agreement until the eleventh hour.

#### *Press Coverage*

Coverage of the pact by the Indonesian media has only amplified the government's concern, with the themes of regional tension and instability being the most common threads running through in-country reporting on AUKUS (see Table IV for a summary of headlines and English translations). State-owned news agency, Antara, published articles with headlines of Indonesian 'anxiety' over AUKUS being justified, further reporting that the government needs to be 'proactive' in responding to the threat of 'escalating tensions' in the Indo-Pacific (Cindyara, 2021; Hakim, 2021; Pramudyani, 2021). Detik – the most-visited news site in Indonesia – likewise reported of a threat of a second Cold War, and that nuclear-powered submarines are a 'disturbance' to regional stability (Rizqo, 2021; Fathan, 2021). Kompas – second only to Detik in online popularity – described AUKUS as a 'betrayal', further issuing a 'strong reminder' of the 'dangers' of nuclear-powered submarines (Puspaningrum, 2021; Iswara, 2022).

Media coverage of the pact has not only been limited to the 'threat' AUKUS poses to the Southeast Asian security region, it has also extended to calls for Indonesia to implement a variety of measures for mitigating such dangers (Utami, 2021). News site Suara published an article with the headline '*Waktunya Hard Diplomacy*' (Time for Hard Diplomacy) – calling for a 'collective [ASEAN] approach' to opposing the AUKUS pact (Iswinarno and Ardiansyah, 2021). Likewise, a Tribunnews article reported that Indonesians '*jangan kagetan*' (should not be shocked) over AUKUS, advocating in favour of obtaining its own nuclear-powered submarine capability in the near future (Candraditya, 2021). Most alarmingly, however, a separate Tribunnews article published with the

headline, *'Indonesia disarankan merapat ke China'* (Indonesia is advised to move closer to China), echoing the widespread sentiments of Indonesian 'netizens' calling for the country to align itself with China and Russia against the West on social media platforms (Irawan, 2021). As such, while the government's stance has been characterized by a more measured and policy-focused approach, the media coverage has highlighted other factors that resonate more strongly with the public.

News Source	Ownership	Headline (Bahasa Indonesia)	Headline (transl.)
Antara	State-owned	<i>Kemlu: Wajar Bahwa Indonesia Was-Was Soal AUKUS</i>	Ministry of Foreign Affairs: It's Natural That Indonesia is Anxious About AUKUS
Antara	State-owned	<i>Indonesia Perlu pro Aktif Sikapi Aliansi Militer AUKUS</i>	Indonesia Needs to Be Proactive in Responding to the AUKUS Military Alliance
Antara	State-owned	<i>Indonesia Khawatir Ketegangan Meningkat Di Indo-Pasifik Karena AUKUS</i>	Indonesia Worries That Tensions are Escalating in the Indo-Pacific because of AUKUS
Detik	Privately owned	<i>Menlu RI Kutip Sekjen PBB Soal Potensi Perang Dingin Saat Singgung AUKUS</i>	Indonesian Foreign Minister Cites UN Secretary General on the Potential of a Cold War when Alluding to AUKUS
Detik	Privately owned	<i>Wamenlu: Kapal Selam Nuklir Australia Ganggu Stabilitas Kawasan</i>	Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs : Australian Nuclear Submarines Disrupt Regional Security
Kompas	Privately owned	<i>Perancis Dekati Indonesia Dan India Setelah 'Dikhianati' Australia Dengan AUKUS</i>	France Approaches Indonesia and India After Being 'Betrayed' by Australia and AUKUS
Kompas	Privately owned	<i>Indonesia Peringatkan Keras Bahaya Kapal Selam Nuklir, Merujuk</i>	Indonesia Strongly Warns of the Dangers of Nuclear Submarines,

		<i>Ke AUKUS Dan Australia?</i>	Referring to AUKUS and Australia?
Suara	Privately owned	<i>Komisi I DPR Soroti AUKUS: Bukan Lagi Diplomasi Kopi, Waktunya Hard Diplomacy</i>	House of Representatives' First Commission Shines Light on AUKUS: No More Coffee Diplomacy, Time for Hard Diplomacy
Tribunnews	Privately owned	<i>Polemik Kapal Selam Nuklir AUKUS, Pengamat Pertahanan: Jangan Kagetan Indonesia Juga Pasti Butuh</i>	AUKUS Nuclear Submarine Polemic, Defence Commentator: Don't Be Shocked, Indonesia Also Definitely Needs It
Tribunnews	Privately owned	<i>Australia Akan Diperkuat Kapal Selam Nuklir, Indonesia Disarankan Merapat Ke China</i>	Australia to Be Strengthened by Nuclear Submarines, Indonesia advised to Move Closer to China

Table IV. Indonesian news headlines reporting on AUKUS with author translations.<sup>4</sup>

#### *Military and Academic Perspectives*

Although Indonesia's military (*Tentara Nasional Indonesia*, TNI) has likewise expressed concern over the pact, its response to AUKUS has instead focused more on calling for increased defence cooperation between Australia and Indonesia. Admiral Yudo Margono, then Commander of the TNI, publicly appealed to the Australian ambassador to ensure that Indonesia 'not be affected' by the pact in the event that tensions between China and the alliance's members escalate (Achmad, 2023). Nevertheless, Margono also called for increased security cooperation between Indonesia and Australia, asserting that it is in both countries' best interests to continue 'taking care of one another' (Achmad, 2023). Writing for the Indonesian Navy's (*Tentara Nasional Indonesia – Angkatan Laut*, TNI-AL) *Jurnal Maritim Indonesia* (Indonesian Maritime Journal), Lukman Yudho Prakoso similarly posits that although the traditional concerns surrounding AUKUS – potential for an arms race, nuclear proliferation, and regional instability – are not entirely unfounded, the partnership does present opportunities for Indonesia on the global stage (Prakoso,

<sup>4</sup> Compiled from Cindyara (2021); Hakim (2021); Pramudyani (2021); Rizqo (2021); Fathan (2021); Puspaningrum (2021); Iswara (2022); Iswinarno and Ardiansyah (2021); Candraditya (2021); Irawan (2021).

2021, 215). Principally, Prakoso argues that as Southeast Asia finds itself increasingly polarized by mounting tensions between AUKUS and China, Indonesia, as the bloc's largest member, has the opportunity to capitalize on such dynamic by assuming *de facto* leadership of ASEAN and lead efforts to mediate between all parties involved (Prakoso, 2021, 16-18). Should Indonesia be successful in helping bridge the emerging gap between the West and China, not only would its policy of pragmatic equidistance be sustained, but so too would ASEAN centrality.

As other Indonesian academics have pointed out, however, this is easier said than done. Taking charge of ASEAN – in the capacity of chair or otherwise – is no small feat, particularly given the disunity that has come to characterize the bloc as of late. Dinno Patti Djalal (2021, 16) observes that although Malaysia has expressed sentiments akin to Indonesia's concern towards AUKUS, the agreement has nevertheless received mixed receptions from other Southeast Asian contemporaries. Singapore's stance is 'somewhat neutral'; Vietnam and the Philippines have welcomed the partnership, perceiving it to be necessary for strategic balancing in the region; and other member states have refrained from commenting at all (Djalal, 2021, 17; Phua, 2021). Evan Laksmana (2021) argues that such disjointed responses are more emblematic of 'strategic fault-lines' in the region, revealing that Indonesia's concerns over AUKUS' 'potentially' polarizing effect on the region have, in fact, already been realized. Ristian Atriandi Supriyanto (2021) similarly argues that ASEAN's response has been 'tepid' at best, adding that Southeast Asia should 'welcome' AUKUS as 'Australia models independence in standing up to China'. Indonesia's main concern about AUKUS ultimately should not be its potential to destabilize the region; after all, ASEAN is already evidently divided in its perceptions of the pact. It should instead redirect its focus to lead the ASEAN effort toward achieving regional consensus in navigating the new strategic equilibrium in Southeast Asia.

#### *Public Opinion*

The contrasting perspectives of Indonesia's political, journalistic, military, and academic circles surrounding AUKUS are indicative of a broader disconnect between the official and unofficial narratives of Indonesia's reception towards the pact. For the broader body politic, however, perceptions of Australia and AUKUS seem to be characterized more so by indifference and unfamiliarity. In 2021, the Lowy Institute conducted a poll surveying 3000 Indonesian adults on their views about AUKUS (see Figure I). The study revealed that 28% of participants believe that Australia's planned acquisition of SSNs 'makes Indonesia less safe', whereas a comparable 24% perceive the agreement to be

inconsequential to the country's security (Lowy Institute, 2022a). Most glaringly, however, the poll revealed that the majority of Indonesians are either unaware of Australia's planned acquisition of SSNs – with a mere 11% of participants having heard of such plan in spite of extensive media coverage – or are unsure (40%) of its consequences for Indonesian interests (Lowy Institute, 2022a). Whilst a sample size of 3000 adults out of a total population of 270 million does not definitively represent the sentiments of Indonesians as a whole toward AUKUS, the survey nevertheless provides key insights into the broader public perception – or the lack thereof – of the rhetoric espoused by the country's politicians, media, military, and academics.

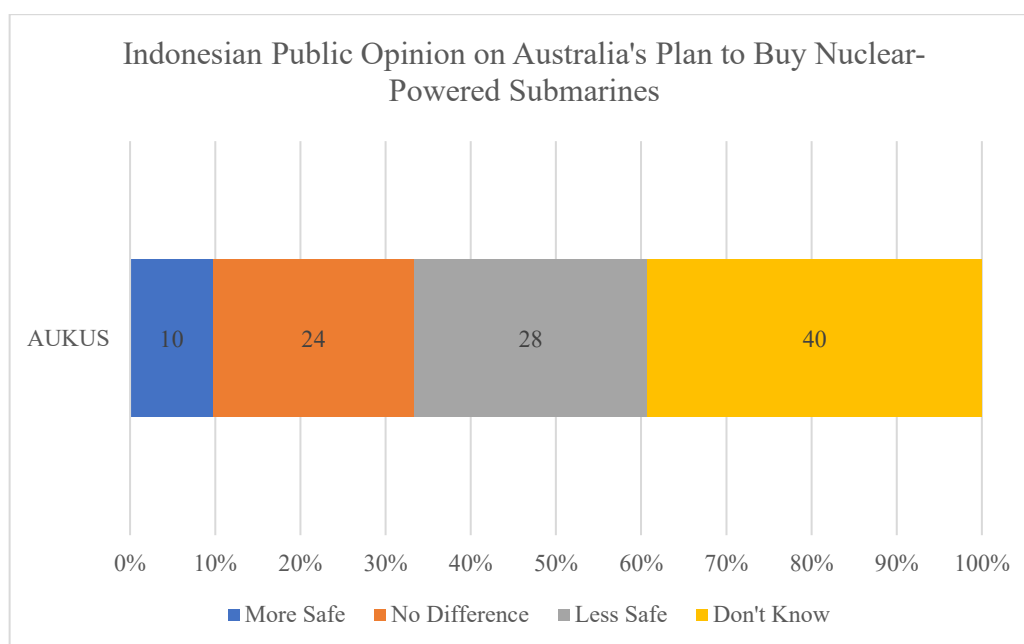


Figure I. Indonesian public opinion on whether AUKUS makes Indonesia more 'safe, less safe, bears no difference, or don't know'.<sup>5</sup>

### Indonesia – Australia Relations: What Next?

AUKUS carries with it significant implications for Australia-Indonesia ties, not least amidst ongoing changes in the global geopolitical landscape under Trump's second term in the White House. Via SWOT analysis, this section determines the repercussions of AUKUS on the bilateral relationship. First, it establishes a baseline of ties by examining existing *strengths* and *weaknesses* in the Jakarta-Canberra partnership. Next, it discusses what AUKUS portends for Australia-Indonesia relations by discussing the tripartite pact's

<sup>5</sup> Compiled from Lowy Institute (2022a); Bland, Laksmana, and Kassam (2022).

threats and opportunities for both countries. It finds that although relational dynamics between both nations have never been stronger than where it is at present, general Indonesian trust in Australia as a neighbour remains low. For the bilateral relationship, which has evolved to what it is today from such a low base, there is indeed the risk that AUKUS destabilizes relations and alienates Indonesia from the Western powers. Nevertheless, with the pact itself facing an uncertain future under an increasingly protectionist US, there is ample opportunity for the Australia-Indonesia strategic partnership to be deepened, not in spite of AUKUS, but because of it.

### *Strengths*

The Indonesia-Australia defence relationship has, in fact, been at its 'strongest' in a long time (Laksmana, 2021). At the 2 + 2 meeting prior to the AUKUS announcement, Indonesian and Australian representatives agreed to upgrade the two countries' Defence Cooperation Agreement (Laksmana, 2023). In 2022, the TNI-US Armed Forces combined arms exercise, Garuda Shield, was expanded to accommodate Australia and seven other allied countries (McBeth, 2022). Its latest iteration, Super Garuda Shield, will be held once more in Indonesia in 2025 (Sinaga, 2025). Likewise, since 2012, the Indonesian Air Force (*Tentara Nasional Indonesia – Angkatan Udara*, TNI-AU) has participated in the biennial joint military exercise, Pitch Black – hosted by the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) – on three separate occasions (Murdoch and Bachelard, 2012). Former Commander of the TNI Admiral Yudo Margono, maintained a strong relationship with Australia; having been appointed the same year of his inauguration in 2022 as a Member of the Order of Australia's Military Division for 'exceptional service' in fostering ties between the RAN and the TNI-AL (Darmawan, 2022). Whilst incumbent Commander of the TNI General Agus Subiyanto has yet to receive similar recognition, there is nevertheless an established history of cooperation and respect between the upper echelons of Australia and Indonesia's armed forces.

Strategic cooperation between Indonesia and Australia is also likely to remain on course, given the shortcomings of the TNI. Indonesia's muted official response to AUKUS was not solely a product of its *Bebas dan Aktif* foreign policy, but was likely also a reflection of its limited capacity to counterbalance the pact militarily. In particular, Indonesia does not possess the adequate capacity to acquire a military apparatus capable of balancing against a potential SSN fleet. For the past decade, the Indonesian defence sector has been consistently hampered by constrained finances, with the average annual expenditure stagnating below 1 percent of the GDP (Ng, 2024). According to the Stockholm

International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), this ranks the country amongst ‘the lowest’ of the region’s emerging-market economies (Reuters, 2023). Additionally, with the ‘lion’s share’ of defence expenditure going to the army and ground forces, the TNI remains more concerned with maintaining influence within its borders than projecting power outwards into its regional security environment (Sambhi, 2021). Consequently, the TNI’s key air and sea platforms have aged to the extent where less than half are deemed ‘combat ready’, let alone operational (Hapsari & Harahap, 2023). As such, coupled with a foreign policy that emphasizes diplomacy, Indonesia’s troubled defence acquisition efforts indicate that the country is unlikely to directly challenge Australia’s planned SSN procurement, thereby aiming to preserve the bilateral relationship to the greatest practicable extent. Simply put, Jakarta is both unwilling and unable to take a firmer stance against Canberra and AUKUS.

#### *Weaknesses*

Whilst the strategic partnership between Indonesia and Australia may be strong, one facet of the bilateral relationship that remains considerably underdeveloped is trade. Although a free trade agreement between both countries – the Indonesia-Australia Comprehensive Economic Partnership (IA-CEPA) – was signed in 2019, private Australian businesses remain ‘too cautious’ in investing in Indonesia (Lindsey and Mann, 2022). Perhaps most glaringly, however, Australia does not even rank within Indonesia’s top ten trading partners, with China, the US, and other ASEAN countries placing well ahead (The Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2023). In 2023, Australian exports accounted for 4.14% of all Indonesian imports (The Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2023). That same year, Australia was the destination for only 1.38% of all Indonesian exports (The Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2023).

Concurrently, Indonesian trust in Australia remains low. A Lowy Institute poll revealed that only 55% of Indonesian adults expressed some level of ‘trust’ in Australia to act responsibly on the global stage (see Figure II) (Lowy Institute 2022b). 34% of participants perceive Australia to be a security threat to Indonesia (see Figure III) (Lowy Institute 2022b). Only 38% of participants expressed confidence in then Prime Minister Scott Morrison following the announcement of AUKUS (see Figure 4) (Lowy Institute 2022b). On the Lowy Institute’s ‘feelings thermometer’ Australia registers a relatively warm reading of 58° – which, whilst lukewarm, is only 5° warmer than China, Russia, India, and Afghanistan’s readings of 53° (Lowy Institute 2022b).

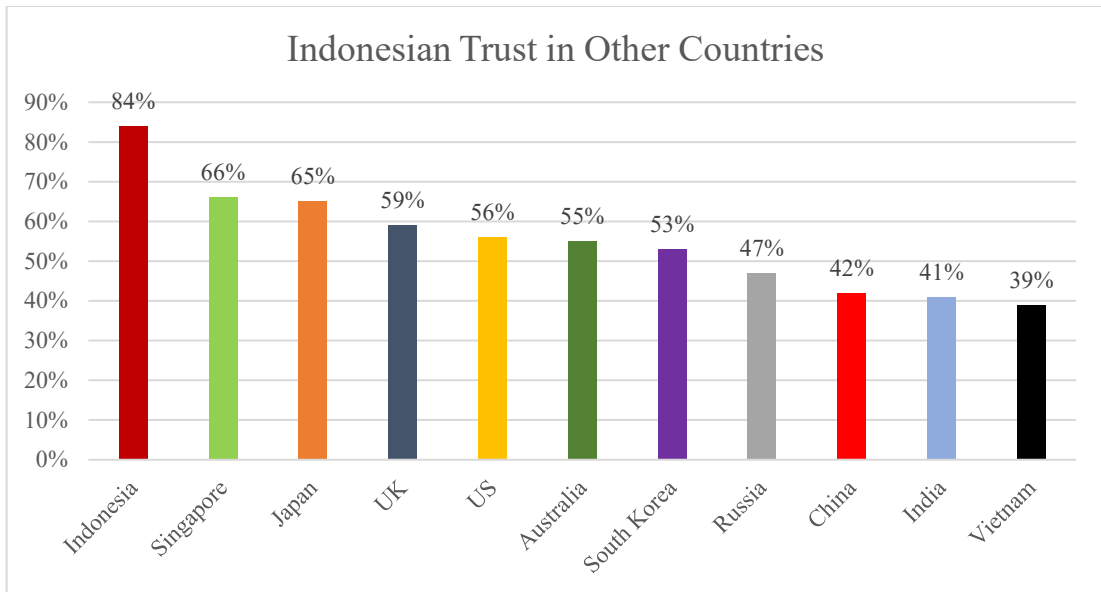


Figure II. Indonesian levels of trust in global powers and regional neighbours.<sup>6</sup>

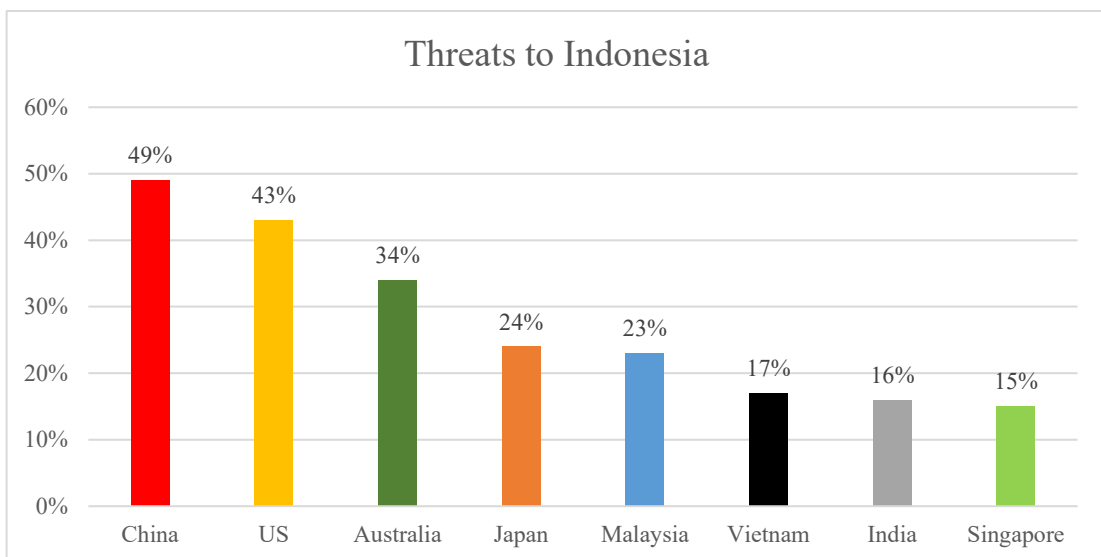


Figure III. Indonesian perceptions of which countries pose a threat to Indonesia.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Compiled from Lowy Institute (2022b); Bland, Laksmana, and Kassam (2022).

<sup>7</sup> Compiled from Lowy Institute (2022b); Bland, Laksmana, and Kassam (2022).

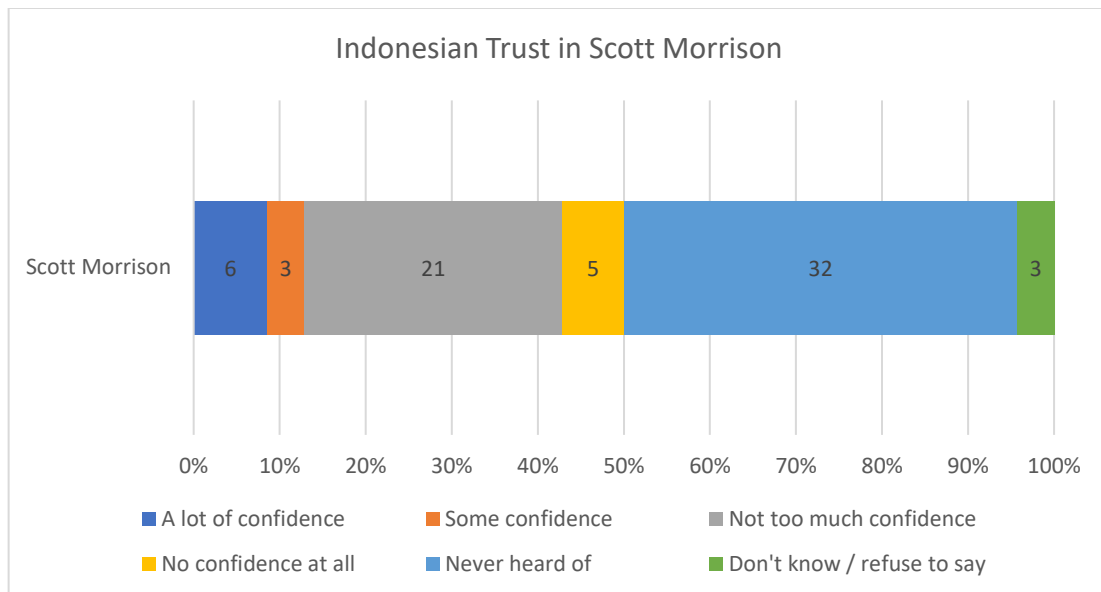


Figure IV. Indonesian trust in former Prime Minister Scott Morrison to act responsibly on the global stage.<sup>8</sup>

#### Threats

Academics have raised concerns over the possibility that Indonesia may elect to deny access to Australia’s future fleet of nuclear-powered submarines through vital chokepoints in its territorial waters. Much reference has been made to UNCLOS 1982 – to which Indonesia is party – which guarantees rights for all maritime vessels to navigate through archipelagic sea-lanes and waters for ‘innocent passage’ (United Nations, 1982). Consequently, given perceptions in Jakarta that the production of SSN-AUKUS ‘relates to war’ or the preparation leading up towards it, there have been calls for Indonesia to suspend the right of archipelagic sea-lanes passage for the RAN’s future fleet of nuclear-powered submarines (Barrett and Rompies, 2023). It is worth emphasizing, however, that whilst foreign SSNs are indeed ‘subject to stricter requirements’ when exercising the right of innocent passage, UNCLOS itself contains ‘no provision’ that permits states to ‘suspend the right of archipelagic sea lanes passage’ through its waters (Lilliansa, 2023).

Whilst the law of naval warfare supersedes UNCLOS in wartime for belligerents, the latter continues to govern conduct ‘between neutral and belligerent states’, and ‘among neutral states’ (Lilliansa, 2023; Kraska and Pedrozo, 2022, 15-42). The main concern for Australia, then, is whether Indonesia denies its SSNs passage should the existing tensions

<sup>8</sup> Compiled from Lowy Institute (2022b); Bland, Laksmana, and Kassam (2022).

in the South China Sea or the Taiwan Strait escalate into armed conflict. The popular view in Indonesia has long echoed Admiral Margono's sentiments of remaining 'unaffected' in any military conflict between China and AUKUS' members (Achmad, 2023). There is 'overwhelming consensus' amongst Indonesians that Indonesia should remain neutral – with 84% of participants in a Lowy Institute poll expressing a desire to support neither side should war break out (Lowy Institute, 2021).

Whilst there is little to suggest Indonesia would side with China in the event of any armed conflict, Jakarta's relations with Beijing in realms beyond defence are already well established and may pose some level of concern for Australia. Since 2009, China has been both Indonesia's largest market for exports, and its top source of imported goods (Rakhmat, 2021). As part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the two countries also signed five contracts worth a total of USD \$23.3 billion for the development of industry and energy infrastructure (The Jakarta Post News Desk, 2018). Recently, Indonesia has expanded relations with the broader Eastern bloc as a whole. In January 2025, Indonesia formally joined the BRICS group, which includes Russia and China, and is often viewed as a 'counterweight' to the West (Al Jazeera, 2025). In April of the same year, reports emerged that Russia had requested permission for its aircraft to be based at the Manuhua Air Force Base in Papua, just 1300 kilometres away from Darwin (Sussex, 2025). These reports followed the first-ever joint naval exercises between Russia and Indonesia held in late 2024 (Mahdi, 2025). While it is unlikely that Jakarta fully aligns itself militarily with the likes of China and Russia in the near future, Matthew Sussex (2025) nevertheless argues that Australia should realise that its neighbours may have 'friends we don't like'. Overall, then, Australia has reason to be cautious about further alienating Indonesia and pushing it closer to Eastern powers, whether through AUKUS or other means.

#### *Opportunities*

Nevertheless, there is reason to believe that the trajectory of Indonesia-Australia relations is on an upwards trend. Irrespective of the country's proclaimed neutrality on the global stage, Indonesia's military is nevertheless 'tilting ever more towards the West', with the recent Super Garuda Shield manoeuvres – a staple in the Indonesian-US defence relationship since 2009 – indicating as such (McBeth, 2022). In fact, there has long been an implicit acknowledgement of *Pax Americana* 'without any complaints' amongst the country's policymaking and military elite (McRae, 2014). In spite of the country's official expressions of concern relating to the initial AUKUS announcement, incumbent President Prabowo Subianto is 'accepting', having publicly stated that he understands Australia's

urge to ‘protect their national interest’ (Cook, 2024). For Canberra’s Indo-Pacific strategy, Indonesia’s Western-friendly armed forces, particularly its navy, may prove invaluable in compensating for ‘Australia’s sea-air gap defences’ in its northern approaches against potential military encroachment from Chinese forces (Chai, 2018).

Of course, Australia must remember that Indonesia ‘is unlikely’ to ever see the US the same way it does – as a ‘benevolent provider of regional security’ (Laksmana, 2023). In fact, following Trump’s sweeping imposition of steep protective tariffs on nearly all goods imported into the US, such a perception has perhaps become even less likely. Whilst Jakarta too must remain cognizant of the fact that ASEAN will ‘never’ be as central to Canberra as its relationship with Washington, Trump’s growing protectionism may compel Australia to at least assign greater importance to its relations with its Southeast Asian neighbours (Laksmana, 2021). In fact, there have been growing concerns regarding the future of AUKUS as a whole. Alison Broinowski argues that Australia does not know what ‘Trump’s going to do’, leaving the country ‘fearing the worst’ with no control over the tripartite pact’s future (Doherty, 2025). Jennifer Parker (2025) notes that the agreement carries the risk of whether, amidst the Trump administration’s move away from the US’ ‘traditional’ European allies, there remains the political will to continue with the partnership. Such developments have no doubt factored into incumbent Prime Minister Anthony Albanese’s decision to recently advocate for the importance of ‘Indonesia and ASEAN’ to Australia’s future (Stewart & Campbell, 2025). In the second age of Trump, then, it appears that AUKUS – and the uncertainty surrounding its future – may ultimately be a boon to Australia-Indonesia relations

### **Conclusion**

This preceding analysis ultimately yields three key points. First, the strategic advantages of an SSN fleet offset the material and diplomatic costs of the AUKUS pact for Australia – especially in the context of the rise of Sino-American bipolarity in the Asia-Pacific security landscape. Second, Indonesia’s AUKUS response has been anything but unified – whilst officially it is concerned by the agreement’s potential to destabilize its surrounding security environment, there nevertheless exists an implicit acknowledgement that AUKUS does present opportunities for the country to further its regional standing. Third, the Indonesia-Australia relationship has developed into the strongest it has ever been – albeit from a very low base. Whilst the risk of Indonesia denying archipelagic sea-lane access to Australia’s nuclear powered submarines remains low, it is by no means negligible. Nevertheless, TNI’s inclination towards the West does at least open the possibility for

deeper multilateral defence and security cooperation between Indonesia, Australia, and other Western allies. Bilaterally, Australia and Indonesia have the opportunity to foster stronger ties amidst increasing American protectionism under Trump's sweeping tariffs.

Whilst the future of AUKUS remains uncertain, what is clear is that now is a time for reconciliation and greater unity between Jakarta and Canberra. To do so, it would be advisable for Australia to explore the possibility of incorporating not only Indonesia, but also its ASEAN peers into a 'joint AUKUS + cooperative arrangement' (Thomas, 2022, 230). After all, the SSN-AUKUS is but one of seven branches of technological cooperation; and with US officials continuing to explore the possibility of New Zealand being incorporated into the pact's non-nuclear aspects, there is little reason to once again exclude Australia's largest and most proximate democratic neighbour – Indonesia – from exploratory discussions (The Guardian Staff, 2023).

Ultimately, there can be no doubt that Indonesia's initial response to AUKUS did indeed present a setback to Australia-Indonesia relations. Canberra should not be under any illusion that Jakarta's softening stance on AUKUS represents the country's full support for the tripartite pact, nor should it by any means conflate Indonesian apprehension towards China as an endorsement of US hegemony. Nevertheless, as this investigation has highlighted, there is no shortage of opportunities for Australia-Indonesia ties to blossom, both in the realm of defence and beyond. In an increasingly anarchic global geopolitical landscape dominated by armed conflicts and trade wars, Australia and Indonesia would be wise to avoid further strategic estrangement, prioritize rebuilding trust, and actively foster a stronger and more consolidated bilateral relationship.

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