

## AUKUS Rocks the Boat in the Indo-Pacific: And It's Not Good News

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Indonesia declared it was “deeply concerned over the continuing arms race and power projection in the region”, and called “on Australia to maintain its commitment towards regional peace, stability and security”. The two countries held a 2+2 meeting between their foreign and defense ministers in Jakarta on September 9, during which they “expressed their concern over the continued militarization of disputed features and encouraged all parties to exercise self-restraint in the conduct of activities and avoid actions that may raise tensions.” Just as they didn’t signal their coming alliance with Washington and London in their French counterparts on August 30, Australian ministers seemingly gave no indication to their Indonesian partners. Malaysian Prime Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob also “expressed concern over the AUKUS cooperation, which will catalyze the nuclear arms race in the Indo-Pacific region”, and he anticipated that “it will provoke other powers to act more aggressively in the region, especially in the South China Sea.” Malaysia’s defense minister, Hishammuddin Hussein, announced that he will go to Beijing to hold consultations with his Chinese counterparts. Singapore’s stance is less clear. During a phone call with his Australian counterpart, Scott Morrison, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong did not welcome the alliance. He stated that he “hoped that AUKUS would contribute constructively to the peace and stability of the region and complement the regional architecture.”

Finally, New Zealand, a member of the Five Eyes, was not invited to take part in the alliance.

Washington’s move is also fueling China’s rhetoric. First, AUKUS has reinforced the argument that the US is ultimately an unreliable ally. This narrative grew notably during the Trump mandate, and Beijing doubled down on it when the Americans withdrew from Afghanistan last August, accusing Washington of abandoning its allies when it no longer needs them. Second, AUKUS is being used to galvanize nationalism at home, providing support for propaganda on China being under threat from the US. This is likely to incite China’s ongoing offensive strategy in East Asia. Over the past few months, China has increased coercion over its maritime neighbors through military airborne operations against Taiwan, Japan or Malaysia, the militarization of its coast guards, and the uninhibited use of maritime militia, notably against the Philippines. As a result, an even more aggressive attitude must be expected from China in the months to come.

While the Indo-Pacific concept has been gaining momentum among democracies globally over the past few years, AUKUS seems to have fractured this apparent convergence. By negotiating with Australia behind France's back, the US has fueled the anti-American sentiment that is already widespread in France. It sidelined a firmly committed nation in the Indo-Pacific and the most active supporter of the concept within the European Union (EU). France was the first European country to publish its national Indo-Pacific strategy (2018), before Germany and the Netherlands (2020). Another questionable move was the announcement of the new AUKUS alliance by Washington, Canberra and London on the very day the EU released its own "strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific"