

AUKUS and the Nuclear-Free Norm in Southeast Asia: A Constructivist Analysis of ASEAN Responses (2023-2025)

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Abstract

This study discusses how ASEAN member states respond to the AUKUS nuclear-powered submarine program in relation to the Southeast Asia Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ) during the 2023-2025 period. Rather than treating AUKUS only as a military technology transfer, this study analyses it as a contested social object whose meaning differs across ASEAN states. Using an interpretive qualitative approach through document analysis, the study evaluates ASEAN and AUKUS policy documents, IAEA reports, selected policy studies, and peer-reviewed journal articles for their relevance to each country's official stance and foreign policy orientation. The findings show ASEAN responses fall into three analytical categories: Indonesia, Malaysia, Cambodia, and Myanmar are positioned as critical or rejector (with Myanmar treated as an inferred low-confidence case due to the absence of direct official statements). The Philippines, Singapore, and Vietnam are categorized as conditional acceptors (with Vietnam also treated as an inferred case rather than a definitive official position). Thailand, Brunei, Laos, and Timor-Leste represent cautious neutrality or strategic silence. This study argues that ASEAN responses are shaped not only by material power distribution but also by strategic identity, threat perception, alliance orientation, normative commitment to the SEANWFZ, and ASEAN centrality. Theoretically, the study contributes to constructivist analysis by showing how nuclear-powered submarines become meaningful through regional identity and intersubjective interpretation. It also contributes to the scholarship on norm contestation by showing that AUKUS does not necessarily challenge the validity of SEANWFZ. However, it does contest how the nuclear-free norm should be applied to nuclear-powered but conventionally armed submarines.

KEYWORDS

AUKUS; ASEAN; SEANWFZ; constructivism; norm contestation; southeast asia

Introduction

ASEAN plays a significant role in promoting peace, security, and stability in Southeast Asia through preventive diplomacy, political dialogue, and security cooperation (Khoirunnisa, 2023b). The Southeast Asian region has a strong normative foundation regarding nuclear non-proliferation. Through the Treaty on the Southeast Asia Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ) or the Bangkok Treaty, all ASEAN member states committed themselves on December 15, 1995, to maintaining a region free of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction (ASEAN, 1995). This treaty is not merely a legal instrument, but an expression of ASEAN's collective identity as a peaceful region that rejects the logic of nuclear confrontation. Nevertheless, the presence of AUKUS with its SSN program poses a tangible normative challenge to that commitment.

The emergence of AUKUS has sparked a new debate because the cooperation between Australia, the U.K., and the U.S. positions nuclear-

powered submarines as a key element in strengthening deterrence in the Indo-Pacific (Childs, 2023). Advances and discoveries have greatly influenced the development of deterrence concepts and strategies in military technology (Khoirunnisa, 2023a). The Australian government has clarified that the program is aimed at acquiring conventionally armed nuclear-powered submarines, not nuclear-armed submarines. A document from the Australian Submarine Agency also states that Australia will not possess or seek nuclear weapons, will not enrich uranium, will not reprocess spent fuel, and will work with the IAEA through the mechanisms of the Article 14 Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement (Australian Submarine Agency, 2024b).

The issue at hand is not merely whether AUKUS legally and formally violates the SEANWFZ. The more pressing issue is how Southeast Asian nations perceive AUKUS as a material entity that carries different social meanings. Australia and its partners may view nuclear-powered submarines as a responsible form of defence technology. However, they may be interpreted by some ASEAN countries as signs of great-power expansion, increased military projection, and a precedent that blurs the line between non-weapon nuclear use and the norms of a nuclear-free zone (Li, 2022).

Wendt (1992) argues that anarchy is what states interpret it to be, meaning that threats arising between one state and another do not stem solely from material objects, but rather from social relations, historical contexts, and shared expectations. However, this has a specific meaning in the context of AUKUS because ASEAN countries understand it through the lens of regional identity, their colonial past, non-proliferation commitments, and relations with the U.S. and China, all of which are embedded with varying degrees of resistance to powerful states and a strong commitment to the norm of ASEAN centrality.

The framework of norm contestation complements constructivism because norms do not always function as uniformly accepted rules. Norms can be contested at the levels of validity and application. Contestation of validity arises when actors question whether a norm is still valid. Contestation of application arises when actors accept the underlying norm but disagree on how it should be applied to new cases (Deitelhoff & Zimmermann, 2020). The AUKUS case demonstrates that the majority of ASEAN countries do not reject the validity of the SEANWFZ. The debate, however, centres on the application of the “nuclear-free” designation to nuclear-powered submarines that do not carry nuclear weapons.

Silence in international relations is a productive political act that can communicate a deliberate refusal to take sides, a form of hedging, or a normative signal designed to preserve diplomatic flexibility (Hansen, 2006). In the ASEAN context, where the norm of non-interference and consensus-based decision-making creates structural incentives against publicly contesting a partner state's policies, silence often serves as the most rational option available to smaller or more constrained states (Acharya, 2001). Kuik (2008) further identifies silence as a dimension of hedging behavior in Southeast Asian foreign policy, in which states avoid committing to either side of a great-power rivalry to maximize long-term strategic room for maneuver.

Existing studies have provided important explanations of ASEAN's divergent responses to AUKUS, particularly by emphasizing ASEAN centrality, regional stability, and Southeast Asian states' different calculations toward the United States and China

(Choong & Storey, 2021; Li, 2022). Other works have already framed AUKUS as an ontological security dilemma because Southeast Asian states must negotiate between preserving regional norms and responding to extra-regional security pressures (Umar & Nuraini Santoso, 2023). However, this study extends those debates in three ways. Empirically, it expands the scope from the six major maritime Southeast Asian countries to eleven ASEAN member states, including Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Timor-Leste.

Theoretically, it shifts the analysis from whether ASEAN simply supports or rejects AUKUS toward how states attach different meanings to the same nuclear-powered submarine program. Methodologically, it treats silence not as empty data but as a cautious, low-confidence category that must be distinguished from official rejection or acceptance. Therefore, the contribution of this study lies not merely in updating the AUKUS debate to 2023-2025, but in clarifying how ASEAN's nuclear-free identity is being interpreted, stretched, and contested under changing Indo-Pacific security dynamics.

The research question in this study is how ASEAN member states respond to the AUKUS nuclear-powered submarine program in relation to the Southeast Asia Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ) during the 2023-2025 period. The objectives of this study are to explain the responses of the eleven ASEAN countries to AUKUS, to interpret the SEANWFZ and nuclear-powered submarine through a constructivist perspective, and to demonstrate the forms of norm contestation that have emerged. The author's contribution is to present a matrix of the eleven ASEAN countries' stances, update the analysis through 2025, and demonstrate that the AUKUS issue for ASEAN cannot be understood merely as a legal or military problem, but also as a matter of the production of meaning regarding the region's security identity.

Methods

This study used an interpretative qualitative document analysis approach to examine ASEAN member states' responses to AUKUS between 2023 and 2025. The research draws on primary and secondary sources to develop an interpretive understanding of regional responses, enabling a broader analytical scope and a more nuanced discussion of relevant issues (Khoirunnisa et al., 2024).

Rather than applying a rigid coding system, the researcher follows an interpretive categorization process guided by constructivist principles. Document selection is guided by relevance to ASEAN member states' positions toward AUKUS and the SEANWFZ during the 2023–2025 period, as well as the credibility and interpretive value of the sources, including official government statements, ASEAN institutional documents, and peer-reviewed academic publications. The dataset consists of nine primary sources and forty-two secondary sources covering eleven ASEAN member states. In cases where official statements on AUKUS are limited or unavailable, secondary academic literature is used as interpretive evidence, reflecting the constructivist assumption that political meaning can be derived not only from explicit articulation but also from discursive absence and contextual inference.

The classification framework is based on four analytical indicators: (1) the presence or absence of an official statement on AUKUS; (2) the framing of such statements as supportive, critical, or ambiguous; (3)

observable foreign policy behavior related to AUKUS-adjacent issues, including SEANWFZ reaffirmations, defence cooperation, and alignment patterns with major powers; and (4) interpretive inferences derived from secondary sources where direct statements are unavailable.

Rather than functioning as a scoring mechanism, these indicators are used to identify recurring patterns through triangulation. This approach minimizes reliance on any single source of interpretation while preserving analytical coherence within a constructivist framework. Finally, the analysis recognizes that silence should not be interpreted as a neutral absence of position, but as a politically meaningful practice that can be understood through a constructivist lens (Hansen, 2006).

Result and Discussion

The Social Meaning of AUKUS and the Bangkok Treaty: A Normative Contradiction

On 15 December 1995, the Bangkok Treaty (SEANWFZ) was signed as a legal and normative binding instrument by all the ASEAN member states to not develop, produce, acquire, test, or deploy nuclear weapons in the Southeast Asian region (ASEAN, 1995). Beyond the legal requirement, the treaty is a symbol of ASEAN's collective identity as a peaceful region opposed to nuclear deterrence as the basis of regional security. It illustrates the Southeast Asian region's role in building not only a geographical area, but a 'normative community' of 'restraint, non-proliferation and rejection of nuclear weapons' as envisioned by ASEAN. In this way, the Bangkok Treaty has a social dimension that goes beyond the legal obligations enshrined in the text, reflecting the shared vision of what ASEAN should be as a region. The commitment has been reaffirmed during the 42nd ASEAN Summit in Labuan Bajo in May 2023 and the 43rd ASEAN Summit in Jakarta in September 2023, and further affirmed in the 44th/45th ASEAN Summits in Vientiane in October 2024, in which the member states reaffirmed their support for the SEANWFZ (National Threat Initiative (NTI), 2024). These reaffirmations show that the SEANWFZ will remind a key regional identity within ASEAN amid evolving regional security dynamics.

AUKUS presents a fundamental normative tension with the SEANWFZ in at least two dimensions. First, the AUKUS SSN program involves the transfer of nuclear propulsion technology in the form of highly enriched uranium (HEU) from nuclear-weapon states. Although technically not a violation of the NPT's letter, as it does not involve nuclear weapons, this transfer creates a normative loophole that could weaken the non-proliferation regime (Wibisono & Widyautami, 2024). The problem is not only whether Australia will possess nuclear weapons, but also whether the transfer of weapons-grade nuclear material for naval propulsion could normalize exceptions within the global non-proliferation order. Second, the operationalization of Australia's SSN in Southeast Asian waters via the Lombok and the Sunda Straits will introduce a nuclear dimension into a region that normatively seeks to maintain its status as a nuclear-free zone (Liliansa, 2023). This is not merely a technical issue of submarine mobility, maritime routes, or military capability. It is a clash between two distinct systems of meaning in Wendt's (1999) terminology, in which one system views nuclear-powered submarines as instruments of deterrence and stability, while another views them as symbols of normative disruption in a nuclear-free regional order.

From a constructivist perspective, AUKUS has different meanings for the parties involved, even though it refers to the same physical object, namely, nuclear-powered submarines. The AUKUS partners see it as a deterrence capability that strengthens the security of the Indo-Pacific and is in keeping with the rules of non-proliferation, since the submarines are conventionally armed. Australia has also been working to prevent any diversion of nuclear material utilized for the program for weapons development, the IAEA noted (International Atomic Energy Agency, 2024). However, constructivism does not say that legality is a given for social meaning. The submarines, which AUKUS members argue are legitimate security assets, could be seen by other actors, such as Indonesia, as a sign of nuclearization and the rise of great-power competition in the region.

Some ASEAN countries interpret the same object as a potential disruption to the identity of a nuclear-free zone. For example, Indonesia and Malaysia not only perceive the technical risks of nuclear material, but also the symbolic implications of nuclear-powered submarines belonging to U.S. allies operating closer to Southeast Asia. The presence of SSNs near Southeast Asian waters may create anxiety because it blurs the boundary between conventional military modernization and nuclear-related strategic competition. The meaning of threat is shaped by the region's historical experience of great power intervention, the norm of relative non-alliance, and concerns about ASEAN's increasing marginalization in regional security management (Umar & Nuraini Santoso, 2023).

These interpretations confirm Wendt's idea of state identities as national interests. However, the Philippines has a more favourable attitude towards AUKUS, as its security identity is closely tied to its alliance with the U.S. and ongoing conflicts in the South China Sea (Sianturi & Wiswayana, 2024). Singapore also believes that AUKUS will help increase the balance of power in the region and help ensure its open trade lanes (Korwa & Wambrauw, 2023). Indonesia and Malaysia, on the other hand, are sceptical of AUKUS, due to their commitment to non-proliferation, ASEAN centrality, and regional autonomy (Wende, 2022). Responses indicate that AUKUS is not being evaluated only through material lenses, but also through the prism of the strategic identities, diplomatic traditions, or visions of regional order of the ASEAN states.

In this way, the AUKUS conundrum is not only a material security issue, but also an ontological security challenge to ASEAN. ASEAN is striving to preserve its identity as a peaceful, nuclear-free zone, and the Indo-Pacific security environment has seen the emergence of minilateral security arrangements not based on consensus with ASEAN (Southgate, 2021). There is an objection to the transfer of nuclear technology, even if AUKUS argues that the transaction does not involve nuclear weapons; the region's collective identity is still based on nuclear restraint (Umar & Nuraini Santoso, 2023).

Position of 11 ASEAN Countries: Comprehensive Analysis. (See table 1).

Rejectors: Indonesia, Malaysia, Cambodia, Myanmar

Indonesia has been the most consistent and vocal in opposing AUKUS. Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi expressed "deep concern" over the Australian SSN. Indonesia also emphasized Australia's obligations regarding nuclear non-proliferation and its commitment to regional peace, stability, and security (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, 2021). These concerns persisted into 2023: during a session of the SEANWFZ Commission in Jakarta in July 2023, Minister Retno warned of the growing nuclear risks and called for a reassessment

of AUKUS's implications for the region ([Radio Free Asia, 2023](#)). From the perspective of Wendt's constructivism, Indonesia's opposition is shaped by its "free and active" national identity, which historically positions Indonesia as a promoter of peace and an opponent of nuclear deterrence not merely as a matter of material strategic calculation.

Malaysia has taken a stance with Prime Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob stating that AUKUS could catalyze a nuclear arms race in the Indo-Pacific and encourage other powers to act more aggressively, particularly in the South China Sea. He also emphasized the need to respect Malaysia's position regarding the operation of nuclear-powered submarines in Malaysian waters, as outlined in UNCLOS and the SEANWFZ ([The Straits Times, 2021](#)). Malaysia's opposition is grounded in the ZOPFAN principle, which has been a pillar of its foreign policy identity since 1971, as well as in its commitment to non-intervention and to a region free of great-power competition ([Umar & Nuraini Santoso, 2023](#)).

Cambodia has been one of the countries most open about expressing its concerns. On 16 March 2023, at Build Bright University in Phnom Penh, Prime Minister Hun Sen expressed doubt about the deal's transparency. It noted that AUKUS members say the submarines are not equipped with nuclear weapons, but there is no mechanism in place to verify those claims ([GlobalSecurity.org, 2023](#)). Cambodia's stance is influenced by its structural proximity to China, the actor most strongly opposing AUKUS globally. This is a concrete example of how a country's "role identity" within the international system shapes its position regarding regional norms.

Myanmar's position toward AUKUS is the most difficult to assess due to the diplomatic isolation of the military junta that assumed power following the February 2021 coup. Myanmar has issued no official statement specifically addressing AUKUS, and junta representatives have been excluded from ASEAN summits under the Five-Point Consensus framework adopted in April 2021 ([Tene, 2024](#)). The absence of a direct statement means that any positioning of Myanmar toward AUKUS must be treated as an inference rather than a confirmed stance. Based on available evidence, two interpretive indicators suggest a likely sceptical orientation. First, Myanmar's deepening political, economic, and military dependence on China, following international sanctions, creates structural incentives to align with Beijing's firmly oppositional stance toward AUKUS ([Tang, 2025](#)).

Second, Myanmar's Permanent Representative to the United Nations reaffirmed the country's commitment to the SEANWFZ and to global nuclear-weapon-free zone norms at the 2025 NPT Preparatory Committee session, which indicates continued normative alignment with non-proliferation principles ([Ambassador Kyaw Moe Tun, 2025](#)). It should be noted, however, that this reaffirmation addresses the SEANWFZ broadly and does not constitute a direct comment on AUKUS. This study, therefore, classifies Myanmar's position as a probable rejector, grounded in structural inference and normative signals, while acknowledging that this classification cannot be confirmed by direct official evidence.

The responses of Indonesia, Malaysia, Cambodia, and Myanmar collectively demonstrate three core mechanisms of Wendt constructivism at work. First, all four countries base their opposition on identity-based frameworks rather than purely on material threat calculations. Indonesia's free and active foreign policy identity, Malaysia's ZOPFAN commitment, Cambodia's norm of ASEAN solidarity, and Myanmar's formal non-proliferation commitments all

reflect what [Wendt \(1992\)](#) describes as "corporate identity," the basic self-understanding that shapes how states perceive their interests before material conditions even enter the equation. Second, the social meaning of nuclear-powered submarines differs fundamentally from the AUKUS partners' own interpretation because it is filtered through these pre-existing identity structures.

As [Wendt \(1999\)](#) argues, the meaning of a material object in international politics is never self-evident. However, it is always assigned through intersubjective processes rooted in historical experience and shared normative expectations. For states that experienced colonial militarization of their region or that have built their post-independence identity around non-alignment, a nuclear-propulsion technology, even if not armed with nuclear weapons, carries a threat signal that transcends its technical specifications. Third, these four countries engage in what [Deitelhoff & Zimmermann \(2019\)](#) classify as "application contestation," in which they do not challenge the validity of the non-proliferation regime as such, but contest how nuclear propulsion technology should be categorized within that regime.

Acceptors: Philippines, Singapore, Vietnam

In March 2023, the Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) expressed appreciation for the work of the AUKUS partners in ensuring ASEAN is well-informed and highlighted assurances that AUKUS will help promote peace and stability in the region ([Choong & Storey, 2021](#)). This follows Foreign Minister Teddy Locsin Jr's earlier assertion that AUKUS should not be a "strategic imbalance" ([Grossman, 2023](#)). Considerations influencing Philippine support include the fact that the Philippines is a treaty ally of the U.S. and ongoing disputes with China over the Spratlys in the South China Sea. This has prompted the Philippines to adopt a balancing strategy, rather than strictly adhering to the rules of the SEANWFZ. This was further underscored by the extension of the Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) in 2023 that sees four more military bases and sites being opened for greater interoperability and alliance modernization with the U.S. (U.S. Department of War, 2023).

Singapore has a more conservative, but positive approach. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said that AUKUS will have a positive impact on regional peace and fill gaps in regional security arrangements ([Grossman, 2023](#)). Singapore did not make any major announcements after the 2023 San Diego Summit. However, it was evident that it was singing "open arms" when it agreed to host the Australian nuclear-powered submarines at Changi Naval Base after they came into operation ([Sood, 2024](#)). Singapore's membership in the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) and its reputation as a small yet strategically savvy nation reliant on the external security structure for its survival help explain why it views AUKUS as a net contributor to regional strategic equilibrium ([Umar & Nuraini Santoso, 2023](#)).

Vietnam's categorization as a conditional acceptor requires explicit justification, particularly given the absence of direct official statements on AUKUS during 2023–2025. This classification is grounded in three behavioral indicators rather than a formal declaration. First, Vietnam has not issued any statement criticizing AUKUS. Second, Vietnam's foreign policy doctrine of "bamboo diplomacy," which was formally articulated by General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong and reaffirmed in Vietnam's 2019 Defence White Paper, emphasizes strategic flexibility, multi-directional engagement, and avoiding formal alliance commitments that could restrict its manoeuvrability ([Ministry of National Defence of Vietnam, 2019](#)).

Under this doctrine, Vietnam's public silence on AUKUS is consistent with a posture of tacit acceptance rather than active rejection. Third, Vietnam's ongoing territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea, particularly around the Paracel and Spratly Islands, provide strong structural incentives for Vietnam to benefit from the deterrent effect of AUKUS without publicly endorsing it, a behavior that [Goh, \(2005\)](#) identifies as indirect balancing. Taken together, these three indicators support classifying Vietnam as a conditional or implicit acceptor, while acknowledging that this classification is inferential and subject to revision should official statements emerge.

Overall, the answers of these three countries indicate that acceptance of AUKUS is not just a matter of material power. Rather, it is determined by each country's strategic identity and its understanding of regional security. From a constructivist perspective, this diversity of responses supports Wendt's theory, which posits that national interests are socially constructed through identity and interaction rather than merely through material capabilities ([Wendt, 1992](#)). The Philippines, Singapore, and Vietnam demonstrate conditional openness to AUKUS, shaped by their respective strategic identities.

This conclusion is in line with the argument that ASEAN responses to AUKUS are shaped by each state's strategic relationship with the U.S and China, as well as concerns over ASEAN centrality and regional stability. It also supports the argument that AUKUS creates an ontological security dilemma in Southeast Asia, as ASEAN states must balance their regional norms with the need to respond to evolving Indo-Pacific security dynamics ([Umar & Nuraini Santoso, 2023](#)). Therefore, the acceptance of AUKUS by the Philippines, Singapore, and Vietnam does not necessarily mean that these countries abandon the SEANWFZ norm, but rather that they reinterpret AUKUS as compatible with their own strategic identities when the partnership is seen as contributing to deterrence, balance, and regional stability.

Neutral, Silence: Thailand, Brunei, Laos, Timor-Leste

Thailand is the only U.S. defence treaty ally in ASEAN that has consistently refrained from commenting on AUKUS ([Grossman, 2023](#)). Analysts attribute this silence to an effort to maintain productive relations with China, which Thailand views in a more "benign" light compared to other ASEAN nations. Thailand is also grappling with domestic political instability that is consuming the government's attention. From a constructivist perspective, Thailand's silence reflects "identity ambiguity"; Thailand does not fully identify with either the U.S. or Chinese blocs, thus adopting a position that minimizes the normative costs from both sides ([Umar & Nuraini Santoso, 2023](#)). Thailand's silence is better understood as a deliberate identity-management strategy rather than as disengagement. As [Kuik \(2008\)](#) argues, hedging allows states to foster ambiguity about alignment to avoid the costs of committing to either great power.

Brunei pursues a low-profile, non-confrontational foreign policy in responding to South China Sea dynamics, relying on quiet diplomacy, peaceful dispute resolution, and ASEAN mechanisms rather than public confrontation. This stance is reinforced by its strong economic ties with China, which shape its cautious approach to maritime issues and its avoidance of positions that could escalate tensions or undermine ASEAN consensus. Its limited response to AUKUS reflects this structural dependence, resulting in a more defensive posture than other ASEAN claimant ([Putra, 2024](#)). From a constructivist perspective, Brunei's identity as a small monarchical state reliant on

Chinese investment makes explicit engagement with AUKUS politically costly, although its continued commitment to SEANWFZ signals ongoing support for nuclear non-proliferation norms.

Laos is the ASEAN country most economically and diplomatically dependent on China, particularly through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In its role as ASEAN Chair in 2024, Laos did not push the AUKUS agenda into multilateral meetings ([Epstein, 2024](#)). The absence of an official statement from Laos can be explained by Laos's desire to avoid offending China, which strongly opposes AUKUS. As a landlocked country with no direct maritime interests, Laos did not feel the urgency to take a stance. Also, Laos limited diplomatic capacity led it to prefer following the ASEAN consensus to acting independently. Laos's high structural dependence on China, marked by public debt reaching 110% of GDP in 2023 and around half of its external debt repayments tied to China ([Congressional Research Service, 2024](#)). This level of economic entrapment structurally eliminates Laos's incentive to comment on a security arrangement widely perceived as anti-China, and analysts describe Laos during its 2024 ASEAN Chairmanship as "a reactive rather than proactive chair" precisely because of this constraint ([Radio Free Asia, 2024](#)). In constructivist terms, Laos's corporate identity as a BRI-dependent landlocked state shapes its perception of AUKUS not as a direct security concern but as a geopolitical controversy best avoided entirely.

In 2022, Timor-Leste was granted in-principle consent to become a full ASEAN member, and was still in the transition process toward full membership in 2023-2025. During this time, it did not make any formal statement on AUKUS. Timor-Leste was a young state, with institutional capacity still developing, a close bilateral relationship with Australia as its key development partner, and diplomatic challenges ([Fernandes, 2022](#)). It would have been very difficult to openly contest Australia's basic defence because it would have brought considerable political and diplomatic costs in a country so reliant on Australian support.

As for the response of Thailand, Brunei, Laos, and Timor-Leste, it is not possible to divide the countries into simply supporters or opponents of AUKUS. Rather, several states have reacted in silence, carefully hedging and engaging in quiet diplomacy. Wendt's constructivist view reveals that states' interests are not solely a function of material power but also of identity, role perception, and social interaction ([Wendt, 1992](#)). In turn, Thailand's silence is an expression of its strategic ambiguity as a U.S. treaty ally and still a productive partner with China, which in essence means that neutrality minimizes the normative costs from both partners ([Grossman, 2023](#); [Umar & Nuraini Santoso, 2023](#)).

Brunei's stance mirrors its low-key diplomatic approach as one of the small South China Sea claimants who aim not to escalate the issue, maintain economic relations with China, and use the ASEAN forum and peaceful methods to resolve disputes ([Putra, 2024](#)). Laos's failure to take a position can be attributed to its landlocked nature, limited maritime interests, economic dependence on China, and a desire to maintain ASEAN consensus rather than taking a unilateral initiative on the AUKUS matter during its ASEAN Chairmanship in 2024 ([Epstein, 2024](#)). Timor-Leste's silence is also understandable, as it is in the process of joining ASEAN and remains heavily dependent on Australia as a development partner.

This study treats these silences as analytically meaningful. Strategic silence in foreign policy should not be confused with an absence of position. Applying this understanding, the silence of Thailand, Brunei, Laos, and Timor-Leste toward AUKUS is not treated in this study as a

lack of data, but as a socially constructed diplomatic strategy shaped by each country's identity, structural position, and normative orientation within the ASEAN framework. This interpretation is consistent with [Wendt \(1992\)](#) argument that state behavior, including the absence of overt action, is always embedded in intersubjective structures of meaning.

Dilemma Contestation of SEANWFZ Norms and Nuclear-Powered Submarines

The dilemma between the SEANWFZ norm and AUKUS nuclear-powered submarines can be understood as a form of norm contestation, particularly at the level of norm application rather than norm validity. ASEAN member states do not openly reject the validity of the SEANWFZ because the norm of a nuclear-weapon-free Southeast Asia remains accepted as part of ASEAN's regional identity. The contestation emerges when this norm is confronted with nuclear propulsion technology that does not formally constitute nuclear-weapons but still carries strategic, military, and non-proliferation implications. [Deitelhoff & Zimmermann \(2019\)](#) explain that contestation does not always weaken a norm, as actors may contest how it should be applied without rejecting the norm itself.

This framework is useful for explaining AUKUS because Australia and the AUKUS partners frame the submarines as conventionally armed, nuclear-powered platforms that will operate under high non-proliferation standards ([Australian Submarine Agency, 2024a](#)). while the IAEA continues consultations with Australia under Article 14 of its safeguards agreement to design verification and monitoring arrangements ([International Atomic Energy Agency, 2024](#)). However, this technical and legal narrative does not fully resolve ASEAN's normative concern because the SEANWFZ is not only a legal prohibition against nuclear weapons, but also a regional identity that rejects nuclear militarization, great-power dominance, and the normalization of nuclear-related military technology in Southeast Asia. Findlay argues that the AUKUS submarine program raises difficult non-proliferation questions because the transfer of nuclear material and naval nuclear-propulsion technology to a non-nuclear-weapon state may create a precedent that other states could exploit under the NPT framework ([Findlay, 2021](#)).

In this context, Indonesia and Malaysia advocate for a wide interpretation of the SEANWFZ, whereby a nuclear-free zone implies not only the absence of nuclear warheads but also restrictions on nuclear-related militarization in the region. Conversely, the Philippines and Singapore adopt a narrower and more pragmatic interpretation, under which nuclear propulsion is still tolerable as long as the submarines are not equipped with nuclear weapons and remain subject to oversight. Vietnam and several other ASEAN countries occupy a middle ground because they do not wish to weaken the SEANWFZ norm. However, they also do not want to lose strategic flexibility amid U.S.-China competition. These differences support [Wiener's \(2018\)](#) argument that norms derive meaning through contested practices among actors with differing identities, interests, and positions. This also aligns with [Li's \(2022\)](#) finding that ASEAN's response to AUKUS is shaped by concerns over ASEAN's centrality, regional stability, and each country's strategic relations with the U.S and China.

The concept of Southeast Asia's ontological security dilemma, proposed by [Umar & Nuraini Santoso \(2023\)](#), helps explain why AUKUS challenges the ASEAN region's identity as a nuclear-free and peaceful zone of the world

and why adaptation is necessary given the changing dynamics of security in the Indo-Pacific. The SEANWFZ–AUKUS dilemma is therefore not a challenge to the nuclear-weapon-free norm in itself, but rather to the norm's interpretation in the context of major powers' introduction of nuclear propulsion technology into the region as part of a security partnership. ASEAN member states maintain their legitimacy of SEANWFZ as a regional norm. However, they have various opinions on whether nuclear-powered submarines are an acceptable use of non-weapons technology or a nuclear-related militarization.

What AUKUS has exposed is not a collapse of the SEANWFZ norm but a three-way split in how its application boundary is drawn: a broad interpretation that prohibits all nuclear-related military technology (Indonesia, Malaysia, Cambodia, Myanmar), a narrow interpretation that restricts only nuclear weapons (Philippines, Singapore, Vietnam), and a suspended interpretation that avoids committing to either boundary (Thailand, Brunei, Laos, Timor-Leste). This split maps precisely onto [Deitelhoff & Zimmermann's \(2020\)](#) distinction between validity and application contestation, confirming that the norm remains legitimate even as its scope is disputed. Crucially, the fact that all eleven ASEAN states continue to reference the SEANWFZ as the primary normative framework for evaluating AUKUS indicates that contestation here is reinforcing rather than eroding the norm's centrality in regional security discourse ([Deitelhoff & Zimmermann, 2019](#)).

Reason ASEAN Fails to Form a Strong Collective Stance: Implications for ASEAN Centrality and Non-Proliferation.

ASEAN's inability to form a collective stance on AUKUS stems from four structural constraints. First, its consensus-based decision-making is hampered by divergent threat perceptions, with some members viewing AUKUS as a proliferation risk and others as a necessary counterbalance to China's assertiveness in the South China Sea ([Syofyan et al., 2024](#)). Second, differences in alliance orientation and economic dependencies, from the Philippines' U.S. treaty alliance to Cambodia and Laos's deep ties with China, make any unified position politically unworkable ([Li, 2022](#)). Third, AUKUS operates as a minilateral arrangement outside ASEAN's formal authority, exposing the limits of ASEAN centrality as Indo-Pacific security becomes more technology-driven ([Rizki Apriliana, 2024](#)). Fourth, ASEAN states' ambivalence toward China, simultaneously wary of its influence yet reluctant to endorse an anti-China pact, makes strategic silence the most viable default position ([Chea, 2023](#)).

However, Timor-Leste brings a new dimension to this debate. It is the newest member of ASEAN, and its membership enhances the legitimacy of the SEANWFZ as a regional norm. While Timor-Leste has yet to officially comment on AUKUS, its ties with Australia indicate that it will be wary. However, its aspiration to become a SEANWFZ is a testament to ASEAN's non-nuclear nature, which continues to attract new members ([ASEAN, 2025](#)). The AUKUS conundrum has significant implications for ASEAN centrality. There is a risk that strong opposition will lead to overlooking the security concerns of member states under external pressure. However, excessive silence will reduce ASEAN's normative power on non-proliferation and nuclear-free zone issues. ASEAN's most feasible strategy is thus likely to focus on transparency, dialogue with AUKUS partners, and compliance with IAEA safeguards, rather than opposition per se. The continued promotion of SEANWFZ and its protocol by nuclear-weapon states shows that the treaty remains a very important diplomatic instrument. However, AUKUS also highlights ASEAN's lack of control over non-nuclear military technologies in the region.

AUKUS has implications for the NPT from a non-proliferation perspective and raises important questions about the meaning of Article 14. The treaty does not rule out the use of nuclear propulsion in the navy. However, it complicates verification because nuclear material may be exempt from routine inspections for military reasons. AUKUS is a critical test of the non-proliferation regime as it is the first time nuclear propulsion technology is transferred to a non-nuclear-weapon state from nuclear-weapon states. When it comes to verification, AUKUS could create a new international standard or undermine

[Table 1. Summary of ASEAN Positions on AUKUS \(2023-2025\)](#)

the regime ([Acton, 2021](#)).

This indicates that ASEAN needs to create a more concrete normative stance on AUKUS. This does not mean that such a position must be a rejection of the partnership. However, it should certainly emphasize transparency and full cooperation with IAEA safeguards, assurances that no nuclear weapons are involved, regular consultations with ASEAN, and guarantees that nuclear-powered submarines will not violate the principles of the SEANWFZ. This would help achieve strategic stability in a region that is also a nuclear-weapon-free zone.

Position	Country	Official Statement	Secondary-Source Interpretation	Academic Inference
Reject	Indonesia	Statement by the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs on Concerns Regarding Proliferation and Commitment to the SEANWFZ	Indonesia expressed deep concern over the AUKUS arrangement and urged respect for nuclear non-proliferation norms (Wibisono & Widyautami, 2024)	AUKUS is interpreted as a potential destabilizer of maritime security and regional normative order
	Malaysia	The Prime Minister's statement regarding the potential for an arms race and opposition to nuclear escalation	AUKUS may trigger a regional arms race and undermine Southeast Asia's nuclear-free commitment (Umar & Nuraini Santoso, 2023)	AUKUS is framed as contradictory to ZOPFAN identity and ASEAN centrality
	Cambodia	Statements by Prime Minister Hun Sen criticizing the transparency of AUKUS	AUKUS is perceived as a dangerous precedent for arms race escalation (Choong & Storey, 2021)	Alignment with China and normative opposition to nuclear ambiguity
	Myanmar	No explicit official statement on AUKUS, ASEAN exclusion under Five-Point Consensus	Myanmar's silence is interpreted as diplomatic marginalization rather than neutrality, reflecting reduced agency in regional security discourse (Tang, 2025)	Absence of voice is a structural outcome of regime isolation.
Accepted with Conditions	Philippines	Defence cooperation alignment with the United States in the South China Sea security discourse	The Philippines has an alliance with the U.S., and the continued conflicts in the South China Sea (Sianturi & Wiswayana, 2024)	AUKUS is seen as a balancing mechanism against China's maritime assertiveness
	Singapore	Diplomatic statements supporting regional stability and open Indo-Pacific order, including PM Lee Hsien Loong's endorsement of AUKUS as a Positive Contribution to regional balance.	Singapore also believes that AUKUS will help increase the balance of power in the region and help ensure its open trade lanes (Korwa & Wambrauw, 2023)	AUKUS is interpreted as a contributor to strategic equilibrium in Southeast Asia
	Vietnam	No explicit official statement on AUKUS	Vietnam has Bamboo Diplomacy, which is interpreted as a hedging strategy, balancing between China and the United States while avoiding explicit alignment in security blocs (Trinh & Do, 2025)	Strategic ambiguity is used to preserve autonomy in great-power competition.
Neutral (Silence)	Thailand	No official position issued	ASEAN is shaped by "norm, identity and social construction" (Acharya, 2001)	Neutrality reflects ASEAN-style strategic ambiguity rather than the absence of a position.
	Brunei	No public official statement	Brunei's low-profile diplomacy is interpreted as a small-state survival strategy aimed at minimizing exposure to geopolitical tension (Putra, 2024)	Silence reflects risk-avoidant behavior in a high-stakes security environment.

Laos	No official statement available	Laos is structurally dependent on China, and its silence is interpreted as alignment through dependence rather than neutrality (Umar & Nuraini Santoso, 2023)	Structural dependence on China is shaping the strategy of silence.
Timor-Leste	No official position after the ASEAN accession process	Timor-Leste's silence is interpreted as prioritization of domestic institution-building over strategic alignment in regional security debates (ASEAN, 2025)	Priority on state-building over strategic alignment

(Source: Compiled by author from official government statements, ASEAN institutional documents, and academic sources. Note: Classification marked as "Official Statement" where primary government documents are available; marked as "Secondary-Source Interpretation" in the absence of direct official statements on AUKUS and marked as "Academic Inference" where positions are derived from documented foreign policy orientation).

Conclusion

This study set out to answer how ASEAN member states respond to the AUKUS nuclear-powered submarine program in relation to the SEANWFZ during 2023–2025, and what those responses reveal about identity and norm contestation in Southeast Asian security. The findings show that ASEAN's fragmented response is systematically structured by three variables: each state's strategic identity and foreign policy doctrine, its structural relationship with the United States and China, and its interpretation of what the nuclear-free norm prohibits. Taken together, these responses confirm that AUKUS is not primarily a military technology dispute but a contest over the social meaning of nuclear-free regionalism in Southeast Asia, whose outcome depends less on legal text than on the identities and normative commitments that eleven ASEAN states bring to interpreting a treaty they all formally uphold.

The results also reflect the difficulties for ASEAN Centrality. ASEAN needs to balance the various security interests among its members and maintain its normative role in non-proliferation. It is important to reinforce transparency procedures, AUKUS partner cooperation, adherence to IAEA safeguards, and assurances of the non-nuclear nature of submarine operations to maintain regional security and keep Southeast Asia a nuclear-weapon-free zone. Beyond the empirical findings, this study carries three theoretical contributions. First, it demonstrates that Wendt constructivism retains explanatory power even when applied to cases of normative fragmentation, as the variation in ASEAN responses is not a failure of the constructivist framework but is precisely what the framework predicts: different identities produce different social meanings, and different social meanings produce different interests. The diversity of responses across eleven ASEAN states thus provides constructive empirical evidence of the centrality of identity in shaping state behavior (Wendt, 1992).

Second, this study extends the application of Deitelhoff & Zimmermann's (2020) norm contestation framework to a regional security context in the Global South, showing that the distinction between validity and application contestation is analytically productive for understanding cases in which norms are not rejected outright but are reinterpreted under new technological conditions. AUKUS represents precisely this kind of challenge, which is not a threat to the norm's existence, but to its interpretive boundaries. Third, the study's inclusion of strategic silence as a classifiable foreign policy category contributes to the growing scholarship on non-alignment behavior in Southeast Asian security studies. By treating silence as a socially constructed

diplomatic strategy rather than an absence of data, this study builds on Kuik's (2008) hedging framework. It offers a more complete picture of how smaller or more constrained ASEAN states navigate competing normative pressures in an era of intensifying great-power competition.

Author contributions

The writer extends her gratitude to Dr. Khoirunnisa, S.Sos., M.Si., for her great assistance and guidance in preparing and finishing this study. The study was carried out with a clear demarcation of roles between the author and the supervisor. The background, method, data collection, analysis, argument construction, writing, and revision were conducted by Dewi Puspa Maharani, the main researcher, who also determined the research focus and the manuscript's structure. Academic supervision and constructive input were provided by Dr. Khoirunnisa, S.Sos., M.Si., during the conduct of this research. She helped to ensure that the research focus was relevant, the theoretical framework was appropriate, the analysis was clear, and the manuscript was presented at a high academic level. This guidance ensured the research was presented systematically, analytically, and in keeping with the scientific style.

Funding

This study did not receive any external funding from public, commercial, or not-for-profit agencies. All research activities and related costs were fully supported by the author's personal funds as part of the requirements for completing the undergraduate (Bachelor's) degree program.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to acknowledge that this article was prepared independently as part of the final academic requirements for the completion of an undergraduate degree. No external funding or institutional financial support was received during the research and writing process. The author is grateful to academic supervisors, peers, and institutional support systems for their intellectual guidance, feedback, and scholarly resources throughout the preparation of this work.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in the publication of this manuscript. This research

received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors. The views expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not represent the official position of any institution or organization.

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