

## Analysis of the AUKUS Agreement on Security in the South China Sea Region

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### ABSTRACT

Rich in natural oil and gas resources, the South China Sea region is one of the busiest shipping zones in the world. This area has been claimed by China as its sovereign territory, prompting protests from Vietnam and the Philippines, among others. This makes this region extremely conflict-prone. The existence of this possible war has prompted the United States to compete with China for influence in this region, rather than remaining mute. The United States, Britain, and Australia created the AUKUS Security Treaty to increase their power. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to assess the AUKUS security treaty for the South China Sea region. This study employs a qualitative methodology with descriptive techniques. Geopolitical dynamics have resulted in competition for supremacy in the South China Sea Region, according to the findings of this study. This has an effect on the region's security vulnerabilities. The formation of the AUKUS Pact was motivated by the need to reduce Chinese dominance in the South China Sea region. The inability of countries in the South China Sea region to sustain security stability in the region is a result of their contradictory traits. The author says that countries in the South China Sea region, particularly ASEAN members, have two options for sustaining security stability in the region: power balancing or diminishing China's dominance by backing the AUKUS Pact.

**Keywords:** AUKUS Pact, Security, South China Sea

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, the international security political scene which was previously concentrated in the Middle East region as a region prone to conflict (unstable peace) has now begun to shift to the east which is centered on the Asia Pacific region (Djelantik, 2015). The most crucial factor causing the shift in the international security constellation to the Asia Pacific region was China's rise through the Belt Road Initiative (BRI), which was accompanied by the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and China's military modernization (Ohasi, 2018). Since BRI was launched in 2013 by Chinese President Xi Jinping to revive the maritime silk route and land silk route, China has initiated cooperation or strategic partnerships with countries in investment programs and building infrastructure networks in 152 countries that have joined this cooperation framework (Chatzk & McBride, 2020). With the BRI partnership, a connectivity strategy that connects China with other countries spread across Europe, Asia, Africa and Oceania can be realized so that it is very possible for China to dominate world trade.

Factually, China's BRI policy shows China's capability as a new power in the world that will become a rival to the United States and form a bipolar international world (Rivai, 2022). This indication is clear from China's increasingly aggressive attitudes and actions in its interactions with other countries, both as a rival or enemy and as a cooperation partner of BRI. As a partner in BRI cooperation, China shows an aggressive attitude with its debt trap to countries that make loans (Jones & Hameiri, 2020).

By requiring countries that cannot afford to repay loans to apply the renminbi as a means of payment for trade transactions, China implicitly aims to reduce or weaken the strength and position of the US dollar, which has been the standard and means of payment for international trade in every country it controls (Li et al, 2021). As a rival or enemy, China is increasingly showing its arrogance and political maneuvers by triggering tensions with the countries around it. Apart from China's war with Taiwan, the South China Sea conflict with ASEAN member states such as the Philippines, Indonesia, Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Thailand is the most factual evidence of China's aggression and hubris in the Asia Pacific area (Delanova, 2021).

In recent years, the South China Sea has been a hot topic for the international community as a result of intense disputes between several countries in the surrounding region. The South China Sea is territorial waters with abundant potential for living and nonliving natural resources, as well as supporting development efforts in the economic, political, and security fields, particularly the military, making it a strategic object for countries whose locations overlap and border the region. This. China expressed optimism, based on its studies, that there are 10 times as many oil reserves in the region as the United States, or approximately 213 billion barrels (Djuyandi et al, 2021). Indicating that the South China Sea's marine resource has great promise in terms of both marine products and offshore mining. In the meantime, the United States Energy Information Administration (EIA) reported that the South China Sea region contains 11 billion barrels of oil and 190 to 900 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, which is similar to Qatar's oil reserves (Roza et al, 013).

Seeing the escalating complexity of the situation, the United States and its alliance partners, especially Australia and England, formed the AUKUS defensive alliance. The AUKUS Pact is a trilateral defense pact between the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom for the procurement of nuclear submarines for Australia, with the implicit objective of containing China's influence in the Asia-Pacific (Cheng, 2022). With the existence of this military accord, Australia is unquestionably able to expand its defense capabilities to guarantee regional security stability and peace.

The presence of the AUKUS Pact raises pros and cons in Asia Pacific security politics. China and Russia consider that the existence of the AUKUS Pact will create regional security instability and disrupt peace (Nindya & Abiyya, 2022), while Taiwan, is of the view that the existence of the AUKUS Pact is able to guarantee regional security and peace and is able to stem China's aggressive attitude which has the potential to create regional conflicts. prolonged. As a defense pact that is considered the most aggressive by presenting military modernization, especially nuclear-powered submarines, definitively has its own implications for the security of the South China Sea region. The main factor is that in conditions and situations on the verge of open war, the South China Sea area will become very open for a fight between China and Australia with the United States and Britain (Sahasrad, 2015).

The researchers argue that AUKUS is a short-term (though potentially very dangerous) mess but a long-term victory for Australia. China, as the country most offended by this issue, responded strongly with accusations that the alliance was "irresponsible" and escalated tensions between Washington and Beijing. The United States is in tension with the European Union which feels betrayed, then Australia indirectly damages the relations of several important countries which are its strategic partners in ASEAN and Europe such as Germany, Malaysia and even Indonesia (Muntansyir, 2022). As a country with middle power status located in the strategic area of the Indo-Pacific region as well as being part of a non-aligned country, Indonesia is expected to be the epicenter for maintaining regional security stability without sacrificing good relations with the United States and China. Although achieving this is of course very complex, especially with the concentration of diplomacy being divided due to increased tension in the Natuna Sea due to the Chinese Coast Guard interfering with the sovereignty of the area (Tawakal, 2022).

As a country that has a strategic geographical location, both position and role in the South China Sea conflict, Indonesia has also been explicitly affected by the AUKUS agreement. With the free and active principle, Indonesia needs to make every effort to be a neutral party and avoid affiliation with the alliance. The author considers this topic to be important for further study to find out how to see the formation of the United States, Britain and Australia (AUKUS) alliance in military security in the South China Sea region and the implications that AUKUS has for Indonesia as a country located in the region.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **a) Regional Security Complexity Theory**

Regional Security Complexity Theory or Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) according to Buzan and Waver, namely the emphasis on regional or regional elements when understanding a security dynamics and the development of countries in the region<sup>18</sup>. Countries that are indeed in one region do not mean that they have continuous harmony or as if there is no tension with each other even though countries are dependent on one another. Security issues in the region can also affect the country's national security. In a region it is even filled with several things such as alliances of other countries until external power emerges, then the balance of power between countries. Actually, in the relationship between a country in one region, two things arise, namely amity and enmity. Amity in question is a relationship between countries from ordinary friendship to better and closer between countries and in the end get support and protection in security. Meanwhile, enmity relations between countries in the region are based on suspicion between countries, especially in that region. Therefore, this theory can analyze how security developments in an area can ultimately achieve regional security.

There are four levels in analyzing regional security. First, sourced from the domestic security of one country. The domestic security of a country can cause concern for other countries because it could spread due to the instability of the domestic security. Second, formed because of the relationship between countries in the region.

Relations or interactions between countries in this region can affect the security actions and conditions. Third, there is interaction between one area and another where this interaction can increase security or even increase the more tense conditions in that area. Then the last four are global powers who themselves feel they have a role in the region, in the sense that actors from outside the region intervene because these countries or actors have power. This theory has two variables, namely internal and external. The internal variable has several indicators, the first is the geographic location where the country is located in one region, although not all countries in the same region have an agreement on security arrangements. Another indicator is the interaction between countries, which sees the closeness of these countries, giving rise to a close relationship and a feeling that they are one unit, namely in one region. The last indicator is the similarity of systems, the similarity of systems in question is the many similarities in cultural, political, economic systems. It is from this complex similarity that creates a sense of shared solidarity. Furthermore, external variables that can be measured through two indicators, namely the international situation and developing issues<sup>20</sup>. The international situation where this indicator is to see conditions that occur in the world so that it raises the question of whether security arrangements are needed in an area. Furthermore, issues that are developing, developing issues in question are that these issues can increase security cooperation in the region such as the issue of terrorism.

#### **b) Threat Balance Theory**

The theory of balance of threats appeared in 1987 in Stephen Walt's work, *The Origin of Alliances*. Walt is of the view that the state's ideas about security are not determined by the need to maintain a balance of power but are determined by perceived threats (Walt, 1991). According to Walt, states associate their own security with perceived threats and seek to balance those threats through international relations (Walt, 1990). In this case, there are four elements that define threats felt by countries, including aggregate power, geographic proximity, offensive capabilities, and offensive intentions (Anshori, 2020). Aggregate power refers to a country's total population, industry, economy, and resources owned by a country, geographic proximity refers to a situation where a country's ability to project power decreases with distance. Offensive capabilities refer to the state's ability to threaten the sovereignty or territorial integrity of other countries at an acceptable cost, while the intention felt by the state is an aggressive state that threatens that state (Keohane, 1988).

As a reaction to perceived threats, state behavior refers to two approaches, namely balancing and bandwagoning. Balancing means allying with other countries to fight against existing threats while bandwagoning refers to efforts to align with the source of danger or to ally with the country which is the source of the threat. According to Waltz, because power is a means not an end, states prefer to combine two weaker conditions so that threats become important in determining state behavior and forming alliances. This means nations form alliances to prevent relatively stronger forces from dominating them. In other words, countries form alliances or coalitions when another country becomes a threat. The formation of this alliance is carried out in two ways: first, when the survival of the country is threatened and one wants to curb the opponent's aggressive intentions; second, when state involvement in the alliance makes it stronger and in a position to dominate the alliance (Walt, 1979)

### **3. RESEARCH METHOD**

This research is a qualitative research with descriptive analysis research type. In this study, researchers will present data and facts with descriptive narratives and then conduct an in-depth analysis of the data or facts that have been described (Moleong, 2014). This study uses secondary data sources with data collection techniques through literature study from books, journals, research reports and websites that discuss the AUKUS Pact, China, the United States, ASEAN and security in the South China Sea. The data analysis technique was carried out in stages, namely displaying data about the AUKUS Pact and the attitudes of countries in the South China Sea region, followed by the data interpretation stage, namely the data was interpreted in context and its correlation with theory, then the data comparison stage was carried out, namely all the data collected compared one by one to find the results so that they can be analyzed, and in the final stage the results are presented regarding the implications of the AUKUS Pact for the security of the South China Sea region.

### **4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

#### **1. Trilateral Security Pact Alliance of the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom (AUKUS)**

AUKUS (Australia, UK, US) is a trilateral security pact signed on 15 September 2021 by Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States (US). Under the terms of the agreement, the United States and the United Kingdom will support Australia in the construction and deployment of nuclear submarines in the western Pacific. The pact encompasses essential sectors such as artificial intelligence, cyber warfare, and underwater capabilities. And ranged attack skills. In addition, it contains the essential elements of a nuclear defense architecture, which may be limited to the United States and the United Kingdom. The arrangement is separate from the Five Eyes Information Exchange Alliance, which also covers New Zealand and Canada, and concentrates on military strength. Australia became the eighth country in the world to possess nuclear submarines with the adoption of the

AUKUS trilateral military pact, joining the United States, the People's Republic of China (PR China), Russia, Britain, France, and India. (Laksmana, 2021).

The AUKUS Trilateral Defense Pact received a lot of attention from the international community following the agreement, as it was agreed that Australia would receive technical assistance in the export of nuclear submarines and the construction of eight American and British nuclear submarines in use in Adelaide, southern Australia. In addition, the AUKUS Trilateral Treaty of Defense has agreed that the United States will increase the number of military personnel stationed at the US military base in Darwin, northern Australia. With the exception of a formal and publicly announced agreement between the United States and the United Kingdom on building nuclear submarines for Australia, it is difficult to say anything else beyond the AUKUS Defense Pact. What is certain from China's reaction to the formation of AUKUS and France's angry reaction is that it hides many strategic issues. The rise of the "temperature of conflict" in the South China Sea region and the rapid development of Chinese influence through advances in technology and weapons may have been one of the catalysts for the establishment of AUKUS (Saleh et al, 2021).

The AUKUS trilateral defense pact agreement between Australia, Britain and the United States can be viewed as a reaction to China's incursion in the South China Sea (SCS) conflict, where China has significantly expanded its territory through unilateral claims since the 1990s using the nine-dash line. The South China Sea (SCS) dispute has become a major worldwide political issue since it frequently sparks open military clashes between China and various Southeast Asian nations, resulting in regional insecurity. China's aggression poses a challenge to the United States as a superpower and to its Indo-Pacific strategic objectives. In the Indo-Pacific area, the conflict of interests between the United States and China has worsened as a result of a trade war between the two nations that has been ongoing since 2018. (Nugraha, 2011).

In the geopolitical context of the Indo-Pacific region, the development of nuclear submarine technology is taking place, while Australia, Britain and the United States are involved in an official declaration to maintain peace and security stability in the Indo-Pacific region. Conversely, the United States through Australia, Britain and vice versa the AUKUS Trilateral Defense Pact can threaten the stability, security and peace of the Indo-Pacific region. This can be analyzed because Australia's possession of nuclear submarines, supported by the United States and Britain (a longtime US ally), is a balance between US and Chinese power. The balance of power is the United States' political response to China by equipping China with Australia, which in this case has a geographical location close to the Indo-Pacific and South China Sea regions, as well as China in the South China Sea. This is accompanied by a significant increase in China's military power, which threatens US interests in the Indo-Pacific region (Sudira, 2014).

The main significance of AUKUS lies in its political message. For a long time, the United States had doubts about how to deal with China's rise. The United States is faced with two choices: to force China to accept a global world order led by the United States as the only world power (unipolar) or to recognize and accept China as a new world power and together with the United States manage the global world order. From these two options, it is also clear that the United States' political stance is to prevent China from becoming a global power. This choice is a rational attitude of the United States in seeing China's rise through its military maneuvers.

The AUKUS Pact reflects two important points in United States policy. First, the AUKUS Pact is a firm stance on the logic of the balance of power in the United States' approach to the Asia Pacific. In this balance of power logic, the United States formed a military alliance with its two most important Anglosaxon allies to fight China. Second, this pact underlines that the United States' approach in stemming China will utilize its defense technology and that of its allies, especially Australia, which is geographically located in the Asia Pacific region. Apart from interests, another important thing about this Pact is the extraordinary nature of this agreement. This trait is the Brinkmanship Principle which actively pushes tense situations to the brink of active conflict and forces opponents to back down and make concessions. This trait refers to America's increasing vulnerability to dealing directly with China's increasingly strong naval power in the Asia Pacific region (Perdana et al, 2021).

The expansion of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) in the region poses a substantial threat to the United States, particularly to countries in the South China Sea. From a modest coastal fleet in the 1980s and 1990s, the PLAN is currently the world's largest navy (Shugart, 2021). China's shipbuilding program between 2016 and 2020 is over 50 percent greater than the U.S. (Congressional Research Service, 2021). PLAN will be able to utterly dominate the Indo-Pacific in the next years if no corrective measures are taken. Therefore, AUKUS tacitly demonstrates the United States' rising vulnerability in the Asia-Pacific area.

## **2. AUKUS Pact on security in the South China Sea**

The AUKUS Pact with the intricacies of the interests of the United States, Britain and Australia behind it does not only have ramifications for China or the Asia Pacific area as a whole, but geopolitically and geostrategically it has important repercussions for the South China Sea region. This is obviously tied to the security of the South China Sea region, as the AUKUS Pact's efforts to restrict the spread of China's dominance in the Asia Pacific will cross directly with the South China Sea region. As a territory in the midst of tension

between the two great power poles, namely China and the AUKUS trilateral partners, namely Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom, the South China Sea region naturally generates worries. This is feasible through analyzing the AUKUS Pact's impacts. This fear is legitimate because the existence of the AUKUS Pact will intensify military competition between China, the United States, and their allies and make it harder to predict the foreign policy stances of nations in the South China Sea region (Strangio, 2021)

The most concrete implication is the ambivalence of attitudes and foreign policies of ASEAN member countries towards the AUKUS Pact. This is due to the dualism of attitudes shown by ASEAN member countries which are economically oriented towards China but politically and security still tend to be oriented towards the United States. This can be seen from the differences in the political views of ASEAN members in responding to the existence of the AUKUS Pact. ASEAN member countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia view that the existence of the AUKUS Pact will trigger a nuclear arms race as happened in the Cold War and will have an impact on security and peace instability in the South China Sea region and undermine democratic values that have grown significantly in the Sea. south china. This can be seen from the response of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Indonesia, Retno Marsudi, who is concerned about the continuation of the arms race and the projection of military power in the region (Jailani, 2021). In contrast to Indonesia and Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore expressed their support for the AUKUS Pact which they saw as enhancing stability and peace in the South China Sea region. This was also evident in the statement by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Philippines, Teodoro Locsin, who stated that the increase in the capability of this close Philippine ally was to restore and guarantee balance rather than disrupt it (Department of Foreign Affairs Republic of the Philippines, 2021).

The difference in the attitude of ASEAN member countries towards the presence of the AUKUS Pact certainly has implications for ASEAN's centrality ability to take the right steps in addressing the AUKUS Pact. The bad implication for ASEAN is that it is caught between increasing economic cooperation and diplomatic closeness with China and on the other hand it still needs the United States' intrusive system in an effort to confront China in the South China Sea conflict. The dilemmas and differences in attitudes of ASEAN member countries have resulted in the loss of the central role of ASEAN agencies in Asia Pacific issues, especially with regard to regional security.

As a result of the incompetence and dissimilarity of opinions of ASEAN member countries in responding decisively, it will have implications for the ASEAN status quo. First, the economic dependence of ASEAN countries on China leaves ASEAN member countries with little resources and bargaining power other than complying with China's wishes and interests, as is the case with the South China Sea dispute even though many ASEAN member countries have direct territorial interests at stake. . Second, ASEAN's ineffectiveness in dealing with China's economic and military coercion further justifies the view of the United States and its allies that ASEAN does not have the ability to be able to overcome China's aggressiveness. Therefore, the growing economic and military competition in Asia Pacific has made ASEAN countries even more isolated if they are unable to take a firm stance on the AUKUS Pact and the longstanding tensions.

As a region geographically located in the center of the Asia-Pacific region, ASEAN, which represents countries in the South China Sea region, must be able to implement its geostrategic policies to suppress or limit the spread of China and the United States' influence in the South China Sea region and reduce conflicts between the two nations. continues. In this option, ASEAN countries are able to achieve a balance of power between the two conflicting great powers and maintain the stability and security of the South China Sea region without favoring either of these powers.

When examining the current situation in Southeast Asia, particularly the territorial dispute in the South China Sea, it is evident that ASEAN member states tend to bandwagon with the United States, which has played a role in supporting ASEAN member states in the territorial dispute in the South China Sea. Even though the economic cooperation regime between ASEAN member countries and China has strengthened in recent years, it is possible that the South China Sea dispute that China initiated with ASEAN member countries will provide a rationale for ASEAN to cooperate with the United States rather than China. If this choice is made, China's position and influence will be harmed, but it will also be able to maintain peace and security in the South China Sea region.

It cannot be ignored that the presence of the AUKUS Pact has heated up the conflict between the United States and China. As a result of this conflict, the security of Southeast Asia will be threatened with instability. Therefore, the choice of approach above reflects the regional security complex. This means that the security of each country is closely related to one another so that national security cannot be achieved without taking into account regional security (Buzan Waever, 2003). Even though there is interdependence between ASEAN member countries to create regional security which can lead to the stability of the national security of each country, it does not mean that a harmonious situation will be achieved. It is very possible that there will always be conflicting attitudes between ASEAN member countries because relations in the Southeast Asian region will always be influenced by various factors such as the balance of power, alliances with other countries and the entry of an external force in the region.

Therefore, ASEAN member countries driven by geostrategic interests must strive to maintain a balance in different degrees between the United States and China. This approach allows ASEAN countries the freedom to reap the economic benefits of their relationship with China while benefiting from the presence of the United States in regional security. While this is an opportunist choice, the impact of such a nuanced position will make it even more difficult for ASEAN to speak with one voice as a single, shared entity in the Southeast Asia region. The negative implications that are very likely to occur from the AUKUS Pact must be addressed in a straightforward and firm manner by ASEAN member countries. Another option is whether to take a policy as an ASEAN regional entity or to take a personal foreign policy stance as an autonomous country without the need for ASEAN centrality in addressing the implications of the AUKUS Pact.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Geopolitical competition in the context of domination at the regional level in the last decade has been heating up. The Indo-Pacific as a strategic area which is the objective of the big and superpower countries is an easy target and enters into an inevitable conflict vortex. ASEAN and several other countries in the region are inevitably affected, especially with the increasingly heated conflict related to the South China Sea territorial dispute. The phenomenon of the formation of AUKUS is a maneuver and turning point for the three countries in fighting the domination of the People's Republic of China which they feel threatens the interests of the alliance, as well as disrupting the security and stability of the South China Sea. There is a dilemma in maintaining security in the South China Sea region, mainly because the characteristics of the countries in it are completely contradictory and make democracy in this region somewhat fragile. Differences in interests and the tendency to show strong influence from each party without the courage to accept the consequences of the ongoing power politics scheme. Therefore, it is necessary to have a common vision among the countries in the South China Sea region, including ASEAN member countries, in addressing this, namely through a balance of power, which in the sense of a balance of power between the two major powers that are in conflict and at the same time being able to maintain the stability of the security of the China Sea region. The South without showing partiality to any of these powers or through partiality to the United States so as to reduce China's domination in the South China Sea Region.

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