

Navigating ASEAN Stability: AUKUS Complexities and Chinese Influence in the Indo-Pacific

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Abstract: *AUKUS is a defense cooperation agreement that covers the Indo-Pacific region and consists of three member countries: Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The emergence of AUKUS has attracted the attention of the world community. The dynamics that occurred after the presence of the AUKUS defense pact have created challenges for ASEAN. One of the main challenges for ASEAN is how ASEAN must maintain the stability of Southeast Asia. The reactions of ASEAN countries to the AUKUS defense pact have been mixed so far. Meanwhile, the Indo-Pacific is a strategic area for big and superpower countries and is one of the targets of an unavoidable conflict. It is undeniable that the existence of AUKUS can trigger security problems in the Indo-Pacific region. In this study, the authors will use the theory of Security Dilemma as a research basis. This study aims to look at the dynamics of regional stability in Southeast Asia as a region that is in the middle of a conflict between AUKUS and China. This research will also further discuss how the movement of stability in the Southeast Asian region through ASEAN in dealing with the current conflict in the Indo-Pacific.*

Keywords: *AUKUS, ASEAN, Region, China, Indo-Pacific*

1. Introduction

AUKUS is a cooperation defense pact that covers the Indo-Pacific region and is only formed in mid-September 2021 (Firnanda, 2022). The defense pact consists of three member countries: Australia, Britain, and the United States. AUKUS cooperation will focus on the military sector, especially regarding nuclear weapons. Britain and the United States will assist Australia to mobilize the development of nuclear-armed ships. In addition, the presence of AUKUS also aims to help the three member countries in developing nuclear components and long-range attack capabilities (Firnanda, 2022). The emergence of AUKUS has attracted the attention of the world community, especially in the study of International Relations. International Relations experts think that the formation of AUKUS can threaten the defense and security of regional stability to world peace (Firnanda, 2022). Several ASEAN member countries will also be affected by the presence of AUKUS in the Indo-Pacific. AUKUS itself was formed to offset the rise of China which is seen as a threat that continues to increase and its increasingly widespread technological development (Wintour, 2021).

President Joe Biden of the United States indeed considers the relationship between his country and China to be a battle that has been going on for centuries. It is not surprising that in this case, China criticized the presence of AUKUS in the Indo-Pacific as something that was considered very irresponsible and its presence could trigger a nuclear accident with other countries in East Asia such as North Korea (Zhu, 2021). Actually, under the UN Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of nuclear weapons, Australia prohibits the production of nuclear weapons. But naval reactors are exempt from nuclear protection, and other nations are suspected of exploiting this shortcoming by using the fuel to power submarine reactors and develop nuclear weapons as well. In addition, Australia also canceled a multi-billion dollar contract to buy submarines from France in favor of acquiring nuclear-powered submarines from AUKUS (Zhu, 2021). This led to France withdrawing its ambassadors from Washington and Canberra to show its protest. This is unprecedented, even though France has returned its two envoys as it moves to mend watery ties. The UK has also shown its peaceful attitude through the former British prime minister, Boris Johnson, who announced his desire to work with French President Emmanuel Macron (Zhu, 2021).

The dynamics that occurred after the presence of the AUKUS defense pact have created challenges for ASEAN. One of the main challenges for ASEAN is how ASEAN must maintain the stability of Southeast Asia as a region that is in the middle of a conflict between AUKUS and China (Salengke, 2017). In addition, ASEAN also faces cross-border challenges. Such as the problem of drug trafficking, terrorism, and others. Therefore, the future of ASEAN depends on

how its member countries can face and deal with the existing challenges. Because basically, the most extraordinary ASEAN captain is being able to maintain Southeast Asia as a peaceful and stable region (Salengke, 2017).

In this study, the authors will use the theory of Security Dilemma as a research basis. The security dilemma in politics is a situation where the actions taken by a country are for the sake of increasing its security, but these actions cause reactions from other countries (Wivel, 2019). Some experts in International Relations argue that security dilemmas are the most important source of conflict between countries. They argue that in the international realm, each country must maintain its security. It is an important aim to maximize the security of their own country. However, many actions must be taken to achieve this goal, such as involving weapons and the development of new military technologies. The occurrence of a decrease in security for other countries does not immediately create a dilemma, but other countries tend to follow if one of the countries arms themselves suddenly (Wivel, 2019). The concept of the Security Dilemma was first described by a British historian named Herbert Butterfield in 1949. Then in his term, Security Dilemma was created by a political scientist from the United States named John Herz in 1950.

This study aims to look at the dynamics of regional stability in Southeast Asia as a region that is in the middle of a conflict between the AUKUS trilateral pact and China through the perspective of a security dilemma. This study will further discuss how the movement of stability in the Southeast Asian region through ASEAN in dealing with the ongoing conflicts in the Indo-Pacific, then begin to answer the question of " How is the situation of Stability in the ASEAN Region After the Presence of AUKUS?". Explanations regarding the emergence of vigilance to threats to ASEAN from the AUKUS conflict with China and ASEAN's efforts to avoid continuing conflicts will be discussed in detail in this study.

2. Method

In compiling this research, the authors used qualitative research methods. Qualitative research is a research method that is intended to deeply understand a particular phenomenon or event in a descriptive manner that contains complete information about the phenomenon or event studied. In qualitative research, the more data is obtained in detail, the better the quality of the research. Therefore, the authors use qualitative research methods so that the research results produced can be understood clearly and might be reviewed again by other authors.

This study used data collection methods from the library research. The author relies on references from various relevant books, journals, verified news, and official websites. The author also provides a complete and detailed explanation of how ASEAN stability dynamics have to facing AUKUS complexities against Chinese influence in Indo-Pacific. In collecting data, the author involves secondary sources. Secondary sources themselves are sources of information obtained from previous research by other authors. Usually, secondary sources refer to primary sources that prove that these sources are accurate. Likewise, news or websites accessed on the Internet are guaranteed to be accurate. Some come from official government websites, so the data obtained is reliable and relevant to the research being discussed.

3. Result and Discussion

Responses of ASEAN Countries to the AUKUS Conflict with China

The heated situation between AUKUS and the Indo-Pacific region greatly influenced the attitude of ASEAN countries. The defense pact has dominated the scope of the Indo-Pacific strategic discussion (Johnson Kennedy, Sutrasna, & Haetami, 2022). The reactions of countries in Southeast Asia to AUKUS have been mixed so far. While some countries are worried that AUKUS will trigger an arms race, several other countries express hope that the presence of AUKUS can contribute to regional peace and stability. In addition, a question about how AUKUS can impact ASEAN is also raised. However, the real main problem is the challenge this poses to ASEAN unity. Until now ASEAN member countries have not been able to determine their attitude toward the establishment of AUKUS. Countries in Southeast Asia have different responses. For example, Indonesia and Malaysia expressed their concern about the possibility of an arms race. On September 17 2021, the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs said with caution about AUKUS and emphasized that Jakarta is worried about the possibility of an arms race and ongoing conflict in the region. Indonesia asked Australia to continue to fulfill its nuclear non-proliferation obligations and asked Canberra to maintain its commitment to regional peace and security. However, Indonesia's fears about an arms race and ongoing conflict also refer to all countries in the region, in this case including China.

Prime Minister of Malaysia, Ismail Sabri Yaakob said their concern for AUKUS is that its presence would trigger a nuclear arms race within the region and might provoke many parties, especially countries that are not afraid to act aggressively in the Indo-Pacific region. In conveying this concern, he stressed Malaysia's commitment to the Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) and the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon Free Zone (SEANFWZ). In recent years, the

Malaysian government has warned that the increasing presence of foreign warships would risk triggering a military confrontation. Malaysia has maintained its stance on its territorial claims and EEZ rights, rejected China's nine-dash line claims, and maintained close defense ties with the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom through the Five Powers Defense Arrangements (FPDA).

The presence of AUKUS is considered with caution by Thailand. Thailand wants to maintain good relations and does not want to take a position in the AUKUS conflict with China. However, the Thai government is still preoccupied with domestic political issues and does not have much time to resolve issues in the region (Johnson Kennedy, Sutrasna, & Haetami, 2022). Therefore, Thailand has not given any official response from its foreign ministry. A few days after the announcement of AUKUS, the Prime Minister of Thailand delivered his speech at the United Nations forum. He said that Thailand promised to support the Nuclear Prohibition Treaty. This shows that Thailand does have doubts about AUKUS. Then the former Thai foreign minister also stated that no country wants to be dominated by China, but in this case, the military presence of AUKUS member countries is necessary.

Philippines The foreign minister issued a statement welcoming the establishment of AUKUS and conveyed the following three important points. First, each ASEAN member does not have the military capability to guarantee peace and security in Southeast Asia. Second, the presence of a distant country like the United States can strengthen Australia's capabilities which will help maintain regional balance and enable Canberra to better respond to threats facing the region. Third, AUKUS is considered not against SEANFWZ because Australia is not trying to get nuclear (Johnson Kennedy, Sutrasna, & Haetami, 2022). The Philippines' support for AUKUS demonstrates their positive response to the United States' alliance system and the growing concern over China's assertive policies.

Almost the same as the Philippines, Singapore has also shown its support for AUKUS in the Indo-Pacific region. After being briefed on AUKUS from Australia, the Prime Minister of Singapore noted the good relations between Singapore and Australia. He hopes that AUKUS can contribute to regional peace and stability. Then the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Singapore also expressed the same thing. He considers that Singapore has a good long-term relationship with the three members of AUKUS. This shows that Singapore is not too worried about the defense pact. Singapore still has to take the right steps and ensure that it doesn't end up in a precarious position.

The Vietnamese Foreign Ministry said that all countries should work together to achieve peace, stability, and common development in the region. Vietnam emphasized that the nuclear energy used for Australia's submarine fleet must be used for peaceful purposes and ensure that it becomes a savior for people and the environment. Vietnam has an unpredictable reaction, the dispute between Vietnam and China has made Vietnam continue to create stronger relations with the United States and its allies (Johnson Kennedy, Sutrasna, & Haetami, 2022). However, Hanoi has not publicly stated its support for the Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy. However, it has previously expressed support for the principles of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific.

The Impact of the Presence of AUKUS on the Stability of the ASEAN and Indo-Pacific Regions

The Indo-Pacific as a strategic area for big and superpower countries is one of the targets of an unavoidable conflict. ASEAN and several other countries in the region are inevitably affected, especially with the increasingly heated conflict over the South China Sea. The phenomenon of the formation of AUKUS is a turning point for the three member countries in fighting the domination of Chinese influence which they feel threatens their interests, as well as disrupting the security stability of the Indo-Pacific region (Nindya & Abiyya, 2022). However, on the one hand, AUKUS has turned into a factor driving the complexity of regional stability issues due to plans for nuclear submarines which have implications for an arms race. It is undeniable that the existence of AUKUS can trigger security problems in the Indo-Pacific region.

The fact that the Indo-Pacific has emerged as the center of gravity of the world's economy and geopolitics, and has made this region the center of competition between the United States and its ally AUKUS and China, which makes the security conditions of the Indo-Pacific region important to maintain (Delanova, 2021). The Indo-Pacific must also be alert to the nuclear threat posed by North Korea as another source of major power war outbreaks. Because North Korea's long-range missile capabilities and nuclear program would have severe strategic, economic, and humanitarian repercussions.

One of the Center for a New American Security (CNAS) research institutions stated that for the Indo-Pacific, the United States alliance remains the cornerstone of regional security (Delanova, 2021). The demand for regional involvement from the United States both diplomatically, economically, and militarily has grown amid increasing regional tensions. The economic conditions of the Indo-Pacific countries are far behind China's economic and military conditions, making many of the existing countries expect a bigger role from the United States and its ally AUKUS which are considered to have the capability to guarantee security by stopping China. It

can be assumed that before the existence of AUKUS, there was no clear directive or serious dialogue that took place to strengthen the Indo-Pacific idea (Delanova, 2021).

Southeast Asia is a region that plays an important role in determining the future of Asia. The United States in this regard is not simply accepting that a lack of cooperation with ASEAN will hinder its containment policy towards China. Meanwhile, China is an indispensable ASEAN neighbor and economic and trade partner. ASEAN realizes that their efforts which are carried out side by side will undermine themselves and tend to have fatal consequences. However, the presence of AUKUS will increase new pressure on ASEAN. AUKUS will consciously divide ASEAN unity and disrupt its political and security integration process.

ASEAN countries have shown that they do not want to get involved in the current conflict in the Indo-Pacific. In maintaining the existing security conditions, AUKUS can be categorized as an effort to counter China's assertiveness which still poses a risk to nearby countries, especially ASEAN countries. Other Indo-Pacific countries also need to realize that the worsening of Australia-China relations and the increase in China's military activities in the South China Sea are signs that regional security stability is truly declining and requires concrete actions in the economic and military fields (Delanova, 2021).

Despite fears of Chinese influence in the future, ASEAN is likely to have been influenced to a large extent by the attitude of the United States regarding its competition with China. Since 2010, the situation in the South China Sea has worsened, forcing countries in ASEAN to immediately develop their navies by acquiring new ships (Utami, 2022). However, nuclear submarines have significant advantages over conventional submarines. Nuclear submarines are very strong and fast, making them a formidable force. They are also often armed with nuclear missiles, making them even more dangerous. As a result, ASEAN will face a rapidly growing military force. Meanwhile, ASEAN countries will always try to balance their strengths with big powers to ensure regional security.

The United States in making its policies tends to be based on the Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy so that the actions it takes through AUKUS are designed to balance the stability of the Indo-Pacific region (Utami, 2022). The formation of AUKUS will give rise to a strong defense pact in the Indo-Pacific. Compared to the European region, the security of the ASEAN region is still relatively low. ASEAN member states must develop their military forces to ensure their security. As a result, ASEAN will face danger due to efforts to develop military strength to balance forces in the region (Utami, 2022). A Security Dilemma will also arise to weaken ASEAN's efforts to ensure their region is free from nuclear weapons.

The reaction of ASEAN member countries to AUKUS was mixed. The Philippine Foreign Minister supported AUKUS and even increased joint strength with its foreign allies to maintain balance (Utami, 2022). This can show that even though AUKUS is here to counter China's increasing influence in the Indo-Pacific they are a force capable of maintaining balance so the presence of a nuclear element in AUKUS has created a new response to changes in the strategic conditions of the Indo-Pacific region. Regarding the development of the AUKUS nuclear-powered submarine, it has received a lot of criticism and scrutiny from many other countries, such as France and Russia, which essentially stated that AUKUS was an act of provocation that could undermine the security stability of the Indo-Pacific region.

ASEAN Efforts to Avoid AUKUS Continuing Conflict with China

To avoid continuing conflicts, ASEAN must pay attention to the unity of voices of its member countries so that they are not split into two camps which could cause more problems in the future. ASEAN member countries must continue to develop their foreign policy investments in ASEAN to maintain regional security. In addition, if the attitude and support of each ASEAN member country are different in dealing with China's competition with the United States through its defense pact, AUKUS, in the Indo-Pacific, it will make Southeast Asia a fighting arena for several of these major countries. This could very likely happen if ASEAN does not immediately unify its stance in overcoming the conflict. The absence of a collective response can be interpreted as the unification of ASEAN's voice as a regional international organization so that it can threaten the stability and security of the region, which mostly covers the ASEAN region. The simple thing that ASEAN can do in maintaining unity and integrity in ASEAN is to issue a stance through an ASEAN joint statement. This is one of the proofs of the effort to maintain ASEAN unity in the region. All heads of state must sit together in the ASEAN discussion room to answer doubts about ASEAN unity that continue to be questioned.

Apart from giving one voice in facing AUKUS, ASEAN must also be able to create policies that are more assertive and real in dealing with the dynamics of changing security in the Indo-Pacific region. ASEAN can't just worry about AUKUS presence in the Indo-Pacific, but must also determine a way out if the fight between AUKUS and China takes place. ASEAN unity can be strengthened by building mutual trust, especially involving countries that are members of AUKUS and even with China itself through multilateral diplomacy that has been built by ASEAN to build security in the region. The diplomatic path initiated by ASEAN through the ASEAN Regional Forum or also the East Asia Forum must be put to good use to become a forum for

building communication between many parties. The potential that triggers ongoing conflict in the Indo-Pacific region must be resolved diplomatically and ASEAN already has the capital.

4. Conclusion

The emergence of AUKUS as a defense pact between the United States, Britain, and Australia has attracted the attention of the world community. AUKUS was formed to balance China's influence in the Indo-Pacific which is seen as a threat that continues to increase over time. As a result, China criticized the presence of AUKUS in the Indo-Pacific and saw it as something that could trigger a nuclear race in the East Asia region, especially with North Korea. This then becomes a challenge for ASEAN in trying to maintain the stability of Southeast Asia as a region that is in the middle of the AUKUS conflict with China. ASEAN countries have also shown that they do not want to be involved in the conflict. However, the fact is that most countries in ASEAN tend to be more influenced by the attitude of the United States than China. The weakness of the ASEAN regional defense system will encourage its member countries to develop their military strength to maintain a balance of power. Apart from that, the presence of AUKUS can maintain regional balance so the existence of a nuclear element has created changes in the conditions of the Indo-Pacific region. However, that does not mean that the presence of AUKUS will not harm ASEAN and its surroundings. To avoid continuing conflicts, ASEAN itself must be able to maintain the unity of voice of its member countries. One of them is by issuing the same attitude through the ASEAN Joint Statement.

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