

Impacts of AUKUS Formation on the Dynamics of ASEAN Member States

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Abstract

The establishment of AUKUS alliance in 2021 has resulted in substantial shifts in the geopolitical and security landscape of the Indo-Pacific region, especially for ASEAN member states. This study examines the effects and consequences of AUKUS on ASEAN member states, focusing on its impact on regional security frameworks, geopolitical alignments, and the strategic responses of ASEAN member states. Through qualitative research, the study investigates how AUKUS is affecting the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific and challenging each ASEAN member states role as a central player in regional security discussions. The findings indicate that AUKUS has intensified great-power competition, compelling each ASEAN member states to navigate a complex landscape of strategic partnerships and rivalries. Divergent reactions among member states highlight the fragmentation of ASEAN's unified stance, with some viewing AUKUS as a counterbalance to China's assertiveness and others perceiving it as a destabilizing factor. This research underscores the need for each ASEAN members to adapt its strategies to maintain relevance and unity amid evolving geopolitical landscapes. By addressing the challenges brought by AUKUS, this thesis offers valuable insights into the security and geopolitical complexities ASEAN member states faces in the rapidly changing Indo-Pacific region.

Keywords: ASEAN, AUKUS, formation, geopolitical, Indo- Pacific

1. INTRODUCTION

In the 21st-century era of globalization, international relations have become increasingly crucial as states confront complex and interconnected challenges across political, economic, social, and cultural domains. International relations, as a field of study, focuses on how countries and international actors interact, cooperate, and negotiate to address common interests and global threats. Among the most vital concerns in this domain is the issue of security, which has evolved beyond its traditional military dimension to include non-traditional threats such as cyber warfare, pandemics, terrorism, environmental degradation, and economic instability (Okolie, 2024). As such, understanding state behavior in relation to security requires theoretical guidance, one of which is the theory of realism. Realism emphasizes that states are rational actors operating in an anarchic international system, where survival is the primary goal and power is the central instrument. In particular, offensive realism—most notably articulated by John Mearsheimer—argues that in the absence of a global authority, states are compelled to continuously seek power to ensure their security (Mearsheimer, 2001). This drive for dominance often manifests in strategic alliances, military build-ups,

and a persistent suspicion of other states' intentions. Mearsheimer outlines five key assumptions of offensive realism: the anarchic nature of the international system, states' offensive military capabilities, the uncertainty of other states' intentions, the primacy of survival, and the rationality of state actions (Mearsheimer, 2001).

Against this theoretical backdrop, the formation of AUKUS—a trilateral security pact established in September 2021 by Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States—can be understood as a strategic maneuver to rebalance power in the Indo-Pacific region in response to China's rapid military rise (Australian Government Defence, 2023). AUKUS emphasizes defense cooperation, intelligence sharing, and advanced military technology development, most notably through a plan to provide Australia with nuclear-powered submarines (UK Ministry of Defence, 2024). Although framed as a step to enhance regional security and stability, AUKUS has significant implications for the strategic dynamics of Southeast Asia and directly impacts ASEAN member states, which have long promoted a non-aligned, multilateral, and dialogue-based approach to regional security (Luthra, 2022). The pact raises critical

questions about ASEAN's centrality and cohesion, as it was formed without ASEAN consultation and represents a growing trend of extra-regional powers shaping the security landscape. Different ASEAN countries have reacted differently: some, such as the Philippines and Vietnam, view AUKUS as a balancing force against China's assertiveness, particularly in the South China Sea, while others, including Indonesia and Malaysia, have expressed concern over the potential for an arms race, nuclear proliferation risks, and a destabilization of regional equilibrium (Djalal, 2021; Mingjiang, 2022). Meanwhile, states like Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand have remained largely silent or cautious, reflecting their close ties to China and preference for non-confrontational foreign policy.

These diverse reactions indicate a fragmentation of ASEAN's common position and suggest internal divisions in addressing evolving security realities. In this context, ASEAN must navigate the delicate balance between maintaining strategic autonomy and responding to shifting power alignments, all while preserving regional peace and its own relevance. AUKUS not only influences defense and diplomatic postures but also carries potential economic repercussions; increasing regional tensions may affect foreign investment, trade flows, and regional integration efforts (Josef, 2023). It also signals to ASEAN that external actors are willing to bypass regional forums when pursuing strategic objectives, which further undermines the bloc's influence and coordination role (Grossman, 2023). Therefore, this research aims to assess the geopolitical and security impacts of AUKUS on ASEAN member states by employing a realist and offensive realist framework to examine how state interests, power dynamics, and strategic behavior are reshaped in the Indo-Pacific. While the research acknowledges the limitations of available data—due to the confidential nature of defense strategies, restricted diplomatic documentation, and the short timeframe since AUKUS was formed—it seeks to offer timely insights into how ASEAN should respond to external strategic shifts. As ASEAN faces mounting pressure from both Western alliances and China's growing influence, this study is significant in identifying how regional actors can adapt and assert agency in a multipolar world order. Understanding the implications of AUKUS is essential not only to analyze current security dilemmas but also to project future scenarios in which ASEAN's unity, centrality, and strategic independence are increasingly tested.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 REALISM AND OFFENSIVE REALISM THEORIES

Realism is a key theoretical framework in international relations, emphasizing state survival, human self-interest, and the absence of a central global authority (Antunes & Camis o, 2018). It functions both as a theory and a practical guide for policymakers, using concepts like "national interest" and "balance of power" (Guzzini, 2017). Since the 1940s, realism has remained dominant alongside liberalism, based on three core assumptions: states are rational and unitary, the international system is anarchic, and global politics is driven by material capabilities such as military strength and geography (Mearsheimer, 1995; Rosyidin, 2022).

Realists argue that states cooperate primarily for security, aiming for a balance of power (Bakry, 2017). Realism is a broad tradition rather than a unified theory (Reus-Smit & Snidal, 2008), evolving from classical realism to neorealism. Classical realists like Morgenthau saw global politics as a struggle for power rooted in human nature (Morgenthau, 1948), but their views were later challenged for being too philosophical.

Neorealism, introduced by Waltz in *Theory of International Politics* (1979), presents a scientific view, claiming that state behavior is shaped by the structure of the international system—*anarchy*, *unit differentiation*, and *power distribution*. Unlike Morgenthau, Waltz saw security—not power—as the main goal (Guzzini, 1998).

Mearsheimer's *Offensive Realism* (2001) argues that great powers, due to *anarchy* and *uncertainty*, are forced to seek regional dominance to ensure survival. He outlines five assumptions about state behavior and supports his theory with historical examples (Mearsheimer, 2001). His theory, while criticized for overemphasizing aggression, remains influential in explaining power politics, alliances, and threat perceptions.

2.2 PREVIOUS STUDIES

Several previous studies have explored the implications of the AUKUS trilateral alliance on the strategic dynamics of the Indo-Pacific region, particularly in relation to ASEAN

member states. One of the most comprehensive analyses is offered by Mingjiang (2022), who examines the varied responses of ASEAN countries to AUKUS and how these reactions reflect deeper concerns regarding ASEAN centrality, regional balance of power, and strategic alignments amid growing U.S.–China rivalry. The study emphasizes that while ASEAN initially expressed uncertainty, its member states are gradually adapting to AUKUS as a strategic reality, albeit in divergent ways, which could lead to more issue-based, flexible partnerships with external actors. Similarly, Nindya and Abiyya (2022) provide a focused analysis on Indonesia's cautious response to AUKUS, highlighting how Indonesia's principle of an active and independent foreign policy shapes its preference for diplomacy over confrontation. Using Regional Security Complex Theory and Offense-Defense Theory, their study underscores the importance of ASEAN cooperation in mitigating the risks of arms races and preserving regional stability.

In a broader regional context, Kennedy, Sutrasna, and Haetami (2022) explore the economic and geopolitical consequences of AUKUS on ASEAN, revealing how the alliance has intensified intra-regional divisions and posed challenges to ASEAN's unity and strategic coherence. Their findings suggest that AUKUS has not only shifted regional security dynamics but also complicated ASEAN's external relations by pressuring its members to reassess their alignment policies. Meanwhile, Imannuridin, Sudiarso, and Sianturi (2024) analyze the impact of AUKUS on China's regional influence while also discussing the varying reactions from ASEAN states. Although their focus is on the broader Indo-Pacific security structure, their work contributes to understanding how AUKUS reshapes regional power calculations and induces strategic recalibrations within Southeast Asia. Collectively, these studies provide a crucial foundation for analyzing how ASEAN responds—both individually and collectively—to AUKUS, and how the alliance influences the evolving geopolitical and security landscape of the region.

2.3 ASEAN CENTRALITY AND NATIONAL INTEREST

The concept of national interest refers to the goals and priorities a state seeks to protect and advance in its external relations, shaping its foreign policy behavior. According to Nuechterlein (1976), national interest comprises four main components—defense, economics, global order, and ideology—while Morgenthau (1962) distinguishes between vital interests, which are essential for a state's survival and non-negotiable, and secondary interests, which are negotiable and less urgent. From a realist perspective, national interest is the foundation of state behavior in an anarchic international system, where power and survival dominate strategic considerations (Mearsheimer, 2001). This perspective holds that states rationally pursue alliances, military development, and economic strategies to enhance their security and prevent external dominance. In an increasingly interconnected world, national interests are also shaped by regional identities and collaborative institutions. For ASEAN member states, the pursuit of national interest is often influenced by their membership in the association, where collective identity and cooperation may blur individual sovereignty in global perception (Dermawan, 2019).

Closely linked to national interest in the Southeast Asian context is the principle of ASEAN centrality, which is enshrined in the ASEAN Charter as the organization's foundational vision. It positions ASEAN as the leading and proactive force in shaping regional architecture and managing relations with external powers. ASEAN has institutionalized this role through mechanisms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Plus Three (APT), and the East Asia Summit (EAS), and through strategic initiatives like RCEP and the AEC Blueprint 2025 (Nishimura, Ambashi, & Iwasaki, 2019). Despite these formal commitments, the practical realization of ASEAN centrality remains ambiguous. Scholars argue that the principle often lacks clear implementation and cohesion, especially when ASEAN faces external pressures from major powers like the United States and China (Ba & Beeson, 2017; Muntasyir & Santoso, 2022). This has been evident in ASEAN's disjointed response to the formation of AUKUS, where member states prioritized

national strategies over a collective ASEAN position. The inconsistency underscores the challenge ASEAN faces in translating its centrality into unified regional policy. Strengthening and operationalizing ASEAN centrality is thus critical to reinforcing its role as a stable and neutral multilateral platform capable of shaping the regional order.

2.4 OVERVIEW OF AUKUS

AUKUS is a trilateral defense pact between Australia, the UK, and the US, launched on September 15, 2021, to enhance security and strategic stability in the Indo-Pacific, particularly through nuclear-powered submarine development (Putro, 2021). It includes cooperation on cybersecurity, AI, quantum technology, and undersea operations (Luthra, 2022), aimed at countering China's influence and maintaining power balance in the region.

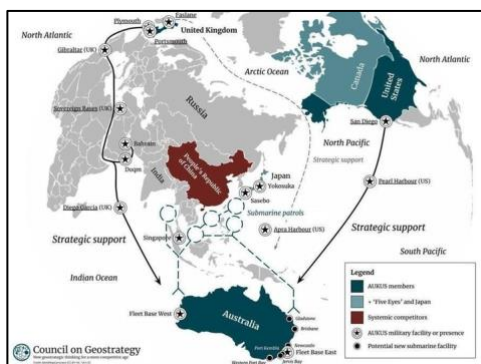


Figure 1. AUKUS Geopolitical Map
(Source: Kompasiana.com)

The alliance reflects Western efforts to preserve dominance and secure strategic interests like the South China Sea and vital shipping lanes (Irene, Perwita, & Mahroza, 2023). However, it challenges ASEAN's centrality and strategic relevance, as AUKUS is seen as a non-ASEAN-centric initiative (Debates, 2021).

Responses among ASEAN states vary: Malaysia and Indonesia raised concerns over arms races and nuclear proliferation, while the Philippines showed support. Singapore and Vietnam gave implicit backing, while Thailand remained silent (Choong & Storey, 2021). US military bases in the Philippines, though strategically located, are politically sensitive, geographically limited, and vulnerable to Chinese missile strikes. These limitations make them insufficient as AUKUS's main deterrent (Harding, 2024). AUKUS offers a mobile,

multilateral deterrence framework through Australia's nuclear submarines, enhancing strategic flexibility across the Indo-Pacific (Gill, 2021).

China strongly opposes AUKUS, calling it a destabilizing and irresponsible geopolitical move that promotes nuclear proliferation and Cold War tensions (Aulia & Sahide, 2022; Luthra, 2022). In response, China applied to join the CPTPP to counterbalance AUKUS by strengthening economic ties in the region (Purnamasari & Sushanti, 2023).

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research approach to explore the impacts of the formation of AUKUS on ASEAN member states. Qualitative research emphasizes non-numerical data and seeks to understand phenomena through observation and interpretation (Bhandari, 2024). It is particularly suitable for examining perceptions, motivations, and responses, especially in a geopolitical context. In this research, document and article analysis serves as the primary method, involving the collection and examination of written sources such as official reports, scientific publications, academic articles, books, news content, and government records (Patel, 2020; Bowen, 2009).

Data were collected through a structured process of identifying, selecting, and analyzing documents that meet specific criteria of authenticity, credibility, representativeness, and meaning (Flick, 2018; Dunne, Pettigrew, & Robinson, 2015). Only documents with identifiable authors and copyright details were included to ensure data validity (Mogalakwe, 2009). The analysis process follows the model developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana, which includes three stages: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014; Mariani & Suyud, 2024) as seen in figure 2. This structured method allows the researcher to synthesize large volumes of information into coherent insights addressing the research objectives.

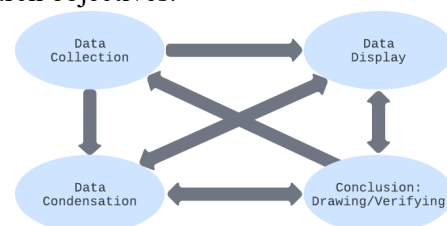


Figure 2. Interactive Data Analysis Model
(Source: Miles, et al., 2014)

To strengthen the credibility of findings, triangulation was applied using multiple data sources. This process helps mitigate biases and compensates for the limitations of relying on a single method or perspective (Patton, 1999; Carter et al., 2014). Triangulation improves validity by ensuring that results are supported by diverse forms of evidence, including various written documents from multiple sources (Brink, 1993; Yin, 2014).

The research also considers ethical principles in the use of documents. While public records and published works generally involve fewer ethical issues, the researcher remained cautious about sensitive content and potential biases in source materials (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). All sources were cited properly, and the intent behind each document's publication—whether public or private—was carefully evaluated to maintain research integrity (Hookway, 2008; Bowen, 2009).

4. RESULT

4.1 SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS RESPONSES TO AUKUS

The AUKUS security pact has elicited a variety of responses among ASEAN member states, reflecting differing strategic concerns. While some countries perceive AUKUS as a threat to regional stability and a trigger for a nuclear arms race, others view it as a balancing mechanism against China's influence in the Indo-Pacific (Muntasyir & Santoso, 2022). Indonesia and Malaysia have been notably critical, expressing concerns about nuclear proliferation and regional peace, and emphasizing commitments to ZOPFAN and SEANWFZ (Mingjiang, 2022; Choong & Storey, 2021). Indonesian officials, such as Abdul Kadir Jailani, warned that the nuclear submarine deal could set a harmful precedent and questioned its compliance with the NPT (Djalal, 2021; CNN Indonesia, 2021; Putro, 2021). During the ASEAN-Australia summit, President Joko Widodo stressed the need for mutual trust and peace, prompting Australia's reaffirmation of non-proliferation and alignment with the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific. Malaysia's Prime Minister and Defense Minister also voiced concerns and engaged in diplomatic efforts with China and Australia (Choong & Storey, 2021).

In contrast, the Philippines welcomed AUKUS as a step toward regional security and balancing against China's assertiveness in the South

China Sea (Storey & Choong, 2023). The Philippines reaffirmed its support in ministerial-level meetings with Australia and views AUKUS as a part of broader efforts to reduce dependence on China and strengthen alliances with the US, UK, and Australia (Triglavcanin, 2023). This response reflects Manila's strategic realignment and pursuit of trilateral defense cooperation, including with Japan, as part of its broader Indo-Pacific security strategy (Heydarian, 2023). Singapore has responded calmly and pragmatically, supporting the presence of U.S. forces in the region and viewing AUKUS as complementary to existing regional security frameworks. Its leadership believes AUKUS contributes to stability and balance of power in the face of China's military expansion (Choong & Storey, 2021; Koh, 2023). Singapore's willingness to host Australian submarines at Changi Naval Base reinforces its strategic relevance while signaling its commitment to alliance cooperation amid complex regional dynamics (Sood, 2024).

Vietnam has offered tacit support for AUKUS while highlighting the peaceful use of nuclear energy and national socio-economic progress (Storey & Choong, 2023). The Vietnamese government, through figures like Deputy Minister Ha Kim Ngoc, has maintained that nuclear technology should serve peaceful purposes only, while continuing to advocate for disarmament within NPT frameworks. Recent agreements with the US show Vietnam's focus on safety, compliance, and responsible nuclear governance. This approach enables Vietnam to maintain balance between cooperation with major powers and regional stability (Vietnamplus, 2022). Thailand, though a U.S. ally and China's close partner, has taken a cautious approach by remaining largely silent, which indicates tacit acceptance of AUKUS (Mingjiang, 2022). This reflects Bangkok's intention to stay neutral amid geopolitical tensions, influenced also by domestic priorities and traditional foreign policy pragmatism. Prime Minister Prayut's remarks have emphasized nuclear non-proliferation while avoiding direct support or criticism of AUKUS. The Royal Thai Navy's interest in strengthening maritime capabilities, including submarine acquisition, aligns with Thailand's strategic needs in response to the regional security environment (Sanglee, 2021).

Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar have remained low-profile and neutral, likely to avoid being entangled in the U.S.-China rivalry (Debates, 2021). Their silence reflects strategic calculations aimed at balancing relations with both powers while addressing internal concerns. Though publicly quiet, these nations acknowledge the shifting dynamics in Southeast Asia and recognize AUKUS as part of the evolving reality. China's growing military power and assertiveness in the South China Sea have driven these countries to quietly accept AUKUS as a factor in maintaining regional security. This subdued reaction highlights ASEAN's internal divisions and its struggle to maintain unified leadership on security matters. The cautious approach of Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar is a form of pragmatic diplomacy that prioritizes bilateral relations and regional stability without inviting conflict (Stiarso & Firdausi, 2022).

4.2 CHINA'S RESPONSES TO AUKUS

China views the competition with the United States and its allies in the Indo-Pacific as a threat to its regional power, particularly through the AUKUS defense pact. While China promotes the Belt and Road Initiative to expand its economic influence, it perceives the U.S. military presence and AUKUS as steps toward a new Cold War (Imannuridin, Sudiarso, & Sianturi, 2024). Beijing is particularly alarmed by the nuclear technology aspect of AUKUS, fearing it could weaken global non-proliferation norms (Aulia & Sahide, 2022). The Chinese foreign ministry has denounced AUKUS as a "path of error and danger," accusing the three countries of promoting double standards and triggering an arms race (Hawkins & Kwan, 2023). In addition to the security implications, China is concerned that AUKUS might harm its economic interests by offering alternatives to the Belt and Road Initiative and slowing regional economic growth (Sumadinata, 2022). In response, China is intensifying diplomatic relations to sustain the momentum of its BRI projects.

To counter AUKUS, China adopts a multifaceted strategy. Diplomatically, it emphasizes the risks of nuclear proliferation and questions the possible misuse of nuclear technology, despite the fact that AUKUS does not violate the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. China is also trying to undermine the

pact within international organizations such as the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) (Birtles, 2023). Economically, it is strengthening ties with Pacific Island nations to reduce their reliance on Western powers and weaken AUKUS's geopolitical influence (Aytekin, 2024). Militarily, China is enhancing its capabilities, notably in naval and air forces, and accelerating its modernization programs, including the development of nuclear-powered submarines and hypersonic missiles (BBC News, 2021; Wijaya, Widjayanto, & Nuriada, 2022). President Xi Jinping has pledged to build a "great wall of steel" in response to perceived threats from AUKUS (Hawkins & Kwan, 2023). China's militarization of the South China Sea, including its island-building activities, has also attracted criticism from the U.S. (Sumadinata, 2022). These diplomatic, economic, and military measures reflect China's coordinated efforts to challenge AUKUS, which it views as a serious threat to its security and regional influence.

4.3 AUKUS'S IMPLICATIONS ON ASEAN AND SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS

The AUKUS security pact has triggered various responses across Southeast Asia, reflecting the region's complex geopolitical landscape and diverse national priorities. It presents notable challenges for ASEAN and its member states, particularly in maintaining regional stability and reinforcing ASEAN's central role in international security initiatives. Established in Bangkok on August 8, 1967, ASEAN aims to promote economic growth, social progress, and cultural development, while preserving peace and stability through justice and the rule of law (Mingjiang, 2022). However, ASEAN now faces difficulties in managing external influences and balancing its members' competing interests. After the Cold War, ASEAN used institutions to reduce power competition by promoting norms through initiatives like ZOPFAN, TAC, and SEANWFZ. The emergence of AUKUS threatens ASEAN's neutrality and weakens its cooperation on shared security matters. Differing views among ASEAN states about AUKUS hinder a unified stance. Although AUKUS leaders claim it will not affect ASEAN's role, new submarine routes may reduce its influence (Singarimbun, 2021; Muntasyir & Santoso, 2022). Global skepticism about ASEAN's effectiveness is rising, with the

U.S. seemingly deprioritizing ASEAN in efforts to counter China. Despite this, ASEAN must adapt to new geopolitical realities by releasing a joint statement, building trust among members and AUKUS, and strengthening its diplomatic forums (Djalal, 2021).

Geopolitically, Southeast Asia is shaped by regional and global factors, especially China's expanding economic influence. By 2016, China's direct investments had reached \$71.553 billion (Tan, 2021), and by 2022, trade with ASEAN hit \$722 billion, making China ASEAN's top trading partner for 14 years (Lin, 2024). China's Belt and Road Initiative strengthens economic ties with countries like Indonesia, Laos, and Malaysia, boosting trade and investment. However, this influence also increases tensions in the South China Sea and leads to more assertive Chinese behavior (ASEAN Studies Center, 2024).

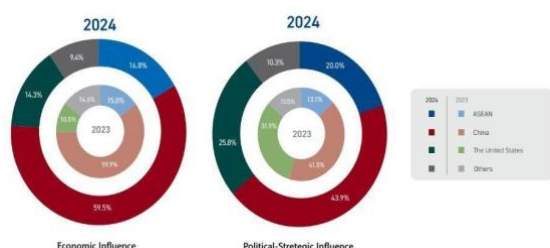


Figure 3. *Economic and Political-Strategic Influence Level in Southeast Asia (Source: The State of Southeast Asia 2024 Surveys)*

The State of Southeast Asia 2024 Survey shows China's growing presence, with many respondents recognizing its influence. Despite concerns about China's economic slowdown, countries such as Laos, Thailand, Malaysia, and Brunei view its investments positively. Domestic politics also impact foreign policy decisions in Southeast Asia—events like Indonesia's presidential election and Singapore's leadership change in 2024 are expected to influence regional geopolitics (Parameswaran, 2024).

Southeast Asian nations face intense strategic competition between the U.S. and China. They must decide whether to balance power or reduce Chinese influence through AUKUS. While this rivalry enhances their bargaining position, it also risks entangling them in superpower conflicts. As a result, many adopt "hedging" strategies to avoid firm commitments and protect national interests (Goh, 2005). AUKUS

is a key development to counter China's influence by strengthening collaboration in defense and technology. It complements other efforts like ASEAN and the Quad to build a broader security strategy. However, AUKUS may intensify tensions and arms races in the region, and Southeast Asian countries could face pressure to choose between AUKUS and China. Rising military tensions may also disrupt trade routes, affecting economic stability. ASEAN and its members must carefully navigate these risks and bolster regional cooperation. ASEAN has long played a role in fostering a shared security identity (Umar & Santoso, 2023), but mixed responses to AUKUS highlight its current struggles to adapt to shifting security dynamics.

Countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia find it difficult to balance traditional diplomatic principles with growing foreign influence, while Singapore, Vietnam, and the Philippines see AUKUS as a counterbalance to China's power. This divergence complicates ASEAN's cohesion. To respond effectively, ASEAN should clarify the operationalization of its norms and establish a comprehensive policy framework for security issues. ASEAN must also represent member interests assertively and engage in diplomatic dialogue with AUKUS countries (Muntasyir & Santoso, 2022). Furthermore, ASEAN should initiate conversations with AUKUS members to understand their goals and ensure ASEAN priorities are considered. According to Mingjiang (2022), ASEAN states may need to reassess their relationships with both the U.S. and China, leading to more complex and competitive geopolitical dynamics. In summary, AUKUS has reshaped the security and geopolitical landscape of Southeast Asia, bringing both challenges and opportunities for ASEAN. While it may foster security collaboration, it also poses a challenge to ASEAN's established role. As nations navigate competing alliances and strategic shifts, they are likely to intensify diplomatic maneuvering and hedging approaches.

4.4 IMPACTS OF AUKUS ON ASEAN AND INDO-PACIFIC GEOPOLITICAL DYNAMICS

The formation of AUKUS in 2021 has significantly altered the Indo-Pacific's geopolitical and security dynamics, especially

for ASEAN member states. The pact, which strengthens Australia's defense capabilities through acquiring nuclear-powered submarines, aims to counter China's growing influence. This shift creates a challenging strategic environment for ASEAN, as its members must navigate the changing power balance while maintaining regional stability and neutrality.

One major impact on ASEAN is the increasing militarization of the Indo-Pacific. AUKUS signals stronger Western military involvement, raising tensions with China and sparking concerns among ASEAN countries that prefer to avoid major power rivalries. The transfer of nuclear-propulsion technology to Australia has especially alarmed Indonesia and Malaysia, who fear it could trigger an arms race and undermine the Southeast Asian Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ). Meanwhile, countries like Singapore and the Philippines see AUKUS as a stabilizing force that enhances deterrence against China's assertiveness in the South China Sea.

AUKUS also affects ASEAN's unity and diplomatic coherence. Due to differing threat perceptions and strategic goals among its members, ASEAN's internal divisions have become more visible. While some nations support AUKUS as a counterbalance to China, others worry that it may reduce ASEAN's centrality in regional security. ASEAN has traditionally emphasized resolving security matters through multilateral forums such as the East Asia Summit and ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). AUKUS, as an exclusive pact, challenges this approach and raises doubts about ASEAN's relevance in shaping the region's security landscape.

Economically, AUKUS may influence trade and investment trends in the Indo-Pacific. The intensified U.S.-China rivalry, reinforced by AUKUS, could pressure ASEAN countries to balance their economic dependence on China with their security ties to the West. With many ASEAN states deeply engaged in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), AUKUS might force difficult decisions on aligning economic strategies without compromising strategic interests (Southgate, AUKUS: The View from ASEAN, 2021).

Beyond ASEAN states, AUKUS has wider implications for the Indo-Pacific region. A stronger U.S. and allied presence could deter Chinese assertiveness and reassure nations wary of Beijing's actions. However, this also raises the possibility of an arms race and greater geopolitical friction, while sidelining ASEAN in security dialogues. ASEAN's long-standing commitment to neutrality and a rules-based order via multilateral engagement is challenged by the emergence of AUKUS, which operates outside ASEAN-led frameworks (Li., 2022).

5. CONCLUSION

The 2021 formation of AUKUS—a trilateral security alliance between the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia—has significantly transformed the geopolitical and security landscape of the Indo-Pacific region. Aimed at countering China's growing influence, AUKUS focuses on strengthening defense cooperation through nuclear-powered submarine acquisition and advanced military technologies such as cyber, AI, and quantum computing. While it enhances interoperability among the three allies and reinforces collective defense, the pact has elicited mixed reactions globally, including within Southeast Asia. Some ASEAN member states view AUKUS as a stabilizing force, while others express concern over its potential to escalate tensions, trigger an arms race, and undermine ASEAN's unity and centrality.

Southeast Asian countries face a strategic dilemma, balancing national interests amid intensified U.S.–China rivalry. AUKUS offers opportunities for enhanced security cooperation but also risks polarizing the region and complicating ASEAN's diplomatic efforts. Diverging responses within ASEAN reflect these tensions, with some nations supporting AUKUS as a counterbalance to China, and others warning of its destabilizing effects, especially concerning ASEAN's commitment to a nuclear-weapon-free zone. This situation underscores the region's reliance on hedging strategies to preserve autonomy and cohesion.

As AUKUS continues to shape regional dynamics, ASEAN's ability to respond collectively is being tested. To remain central in shaping Southeast Asia's geopolitical future, ASEAN must operationalize regional norms, reinforce institutional frameworks, and engage in active dialogue with external powers. Unified diplomatic efforts and coordinated policy responses are essential to uphold regional stability and strengthen ASEAN's role as a mediator amid rising global tensions. Ultimately, multilateral

cooperation remains critical to address emerging risks and safeguard Southeast Asia's strategic relevance.

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