AUKUS: Unresolved threats to the international system?

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Abstract The formation of AUKUS (Australia, United Kingdom, and United States) on September 15, 2021, elicited conflicting reactions from states in the international system. China, Southeast Asian countries, the US allies in the Indo-Pacific, European countries and other countries in the international system demonstrated their different reactions based on their perception of security threat. The objective of this study is to investigate state reactions and to examine the implications of AUKUS for the international system. This study is analysed qualitatively using literature on the topic. Most studies on the formation of AUKUS use the security dilemma concept in analysing the formation of AUKUS. However, this study revealed that immediate state reactions to the formation of AUKUS are not completely in line with the concept of security dilemma. Balance of power theory may offer a more comprehensive assessment of the implications of AUKUS for other states in the international system. This study offers recommendations for states tackling this complex balance of power phenomena as a result of AUKUS’s formation in the international system. Increasing defense diplomacy among states is a significant long-term step for states to confront AUKUS as an unresolved threat in the international system.

Keywords: AUKUS, balance of power, international system, defense diplomacy

1. Introduction

The rivalry between the United States and China has pushed the US to increase its alignment with its allies in the Indo-Pacific. The US also established new alignments, such as Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), which comprises the US, Japan, India and Australia, and the trilateral of Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS). The former is a dialogue forum for Quad members, while the latter is a strategic collaboration related to nuclear submarine technology transfer from the US and UK to Australia. The formation of AUKUS is perceived as more threatening to other countries because the format is not a dialogue as the format of the Quad. AUKUS has stated that it has upgraded weapons systems, including the nuclear submarines owned by Australia.

A considerable amount of literature has been published on state reactions toward AUKUS formation based on the security dilemma concept. The concept of security dilemma coined by John H. Herz in 1950 refers to when a state increases its defense capabilities, which will then generate insecurity to other states, particularly states in the region. Therefore, these states will eventually increase their defense capabilities to secure their national interests. Consequently, states will be in a competition to increase their defense with military capabilities. This could turn the situation into an arms race that could induce tensions, crisis or conflict in the region.

These studies argue that AUKUS could trigger regional tensions, arms races and the unclear strategic outlook of Australia (Laksmana et al 2021). The formation of AUKUS has evidently created a diplomatic crisis between France and Australia (Perot et al 2021). In contrast, certain studies suggest that the formation of AUKUS is a trilateral partnership, not a formal alliance, and it serves just as a deterrent to rising China (Shoebridge et al 2021). AUKUS is described as an advanced technological defense effort by the members, and it is not a form of nuclear proliferation (Dalpino et al 2022). It is even viewed as a form of partnership that could offer strategic importance for the Indo-Pacific (Jackett et al 2022).

While the state’s reaction to the formation of AUKUS can be analysed from contradictory perspectives, does it result in a different assessment of the implications of AUKUS formation? What are the implications of AUKUS formation for the international system?

There are two primary aims of this study: 1. To investigate different reactions in the formation of AUKUS. 2. To examine the implications of AUKUS for international systems using balance of power theory. The first section explains the research method in this study. The second section examines states’ reactions and the implication of AUKUS for states in the international system using balance of power theory. The last section concludes and proposes recommendations for states tackling this complex balance of power phenomenon as a result of AUKUS’s formation in the international system.

2. Research Method
This qualitative study analyses secondary data from the literature related to the empirical state’s reactions and implications for the formation of AUKUS. After the AUKUS is described, the study examines how the states react and implications for this alignment formation. The examination is based on the concept of security dilemma, balance of power and defense diplomacy. The study also considers how the regional security complex and alliance politics are involved in the discussion. According to the analyses, the study should include the importance of diplomatic networks and defense diplomacy in tackling AUKUS as resolved threats in the international system.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Diverging responses

AUKUS is neither a pact nor a military alliance. AUKUS is a trilateral technology partnership among the members with a nuclear submarine program as one of the agendas. The four essential areas of future but near-term military advantage offered by AUKUS are artificial intelligence, cybertechnologies, quantum technologies and undersea technologies. These areas involve governments, research organisations, and companies that include tech firms outside the traditional defense sector (Shoebridge et al 2021). As a security engagement, AUKUS can integrate industrial bases, supply chains, and security and ensure the security of EEZ based on UNCLOS 1982 (Idris et al 2022).

The potential benefit offered by AUKUS is the opportunity to increase defense innovation and the industrial base of all three member countries. For Australia, AUKUS can support its science, technology and defense industry ecosystem. It is expected that Australia can focus on force multipliers for the Australian Defence Force (ADE), which could contribute to an integrated trilateral AUKUS defence industrial-based and allied supply chains in the Indo-Pacific (Jackett et al 2022).

AUKUS offers different levels of security in comparison to Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) among the US, Japan, India and Australia. AUKUS, which was announced just a week before the first Quad Summit in 2021, has a different agenda for Quad, but the two share the same goal: creating a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific. As a trilateral partnership, AUKUS will increase the military power of the US, the UK and Australia. AUKUS can shift the military balance away from China in the Indo-Pacific. In contrast, the Quad agenda is concerned with the public goods that bind the region together to promote security cooperation, and Quad is aimed at deterring China’s leaders from using military force and intimidation to pursue their goals (Shoebridge et al 2021). AUKUS is complementary to Quad. As a minilateral security measure, AUKUS can enhance the relevance of the Quad and other trilateral arrangements within the Quad (Vijaya et al 2021).

Australia’s engagement with the US and the UK in AUKUS appears to be a practical option. From a strategic culture perspective, Australia’s decision to enter AUKUS was based on the changing geopolitical landscape and diplomatie strategic culture influence in its defense policies. Australia could actually rely on its friends and big powers, making Australia maintain its strategic dependence. However, Australia could also choose to become self-reliant. However, the formation of AUKUS reflected the return and reinforced pattern of strategic dependence within Australia’s defense policy in the age of the Indo-Pacific region (Adamy et al 2022).

Australia and China have disagreed on various political issues, including concerns about human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. Australia also supports an international investigation on the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic, and how China handled the outbreak deteriorated its relations with China. Australia’s economic relations with China deteriorated when AUKUS was announced. China, Australia’s largest trading partner, imposed sanctions on some Australian main goods, such as barley, wine, coal, and seafood. The downwards trend of bilateral cooperation was also precipitated by disagreements on various political issues. Australia was concerned about China’s assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific. China is suspicious of Australia’s close relations and participation in regional military exercise and defense cooperation with the US and other countries (Abbondanza & Wilkins et al 2022).

The unexpected announcement of AUKUS on September 15, 2021, elicted various responses from states in the region and in the international system. Mixed reactions were displayed by neighboring countries in the Southeast Asian region. Countries in the region displayed their lukewarm reception (Laksmana et al 2021). AUKUS was welcomed by the Philippines and Singapore, although Malaysia and Indonesia are among those countries that oppose the concept. Indonesia strongly reacted in its five-point statement to Australia, stating that AUKUS could threaten Southeast Asia’s region as a nuclear free zone. In responding to this warning, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison argued that the submarines would become nuclear power and would not carry nuclear weapons. Finally, in November 2021, Indonesian Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto argued that AUKUS was a pragmatic consideration of the allies (Dalpino et al 2022).

Some countries perceive that AUKUS can potentially lead to a security dilemma and escalate to an arms race in the Indo-Pacific; thus, ASEAN is recommended to strengthen its power and maintain its neutrality (Sobarini et al 2021). However, some countries perceive that AUKUS can potentially contribute to regional peace (Phua et al 2021). The different reactions have resulted in unclear strategic narratives and created disinformation and fear (Laksmana et al 2021). For ASEAN, AUKUS is a challenge that can intensify the US–China rivalry (Dalpino et al 2022).
India, as a member of Quad and partner to Australia, shows its concern about AUKUS because it appears to weaken strategic cooperation within Quad. However, AUKUS and it paved the way for India to maintain its flexibility in international engagement and strategic autonomy (Chalivet et al. 2022).

The formation of AUKUS benefitted the UK, which gained US support to return to the Indo-Pacific. There is potential for the UK to build a naval presence in Singapore and Brunei and increase its alignment with Australia (Bromund et al. 2022). The UK’s possible return to the Indo-Pacific will bring lasting strategic significance for the UK. Using artificial intelligence and quantum communication, AUKUS will significantly change the direction of UK relations with Australia and other countries. It also changes UK relations with the European Union and France (Mathur et al. 2022).

The formation of AUKUS generated a severe crisis with France because Australia then chose to contract with the US and the UK. France loses the largest arms export contract in history, €56 billion in total. France loses the opportunity to build submarine contracts, which could impact the French defense industry and French jobs. France was angry because it had been developing an Indo-Pacific strategy for decades and argued that losing the submarine contract affected the French defense industry and French jobs. France felt left out from Australia and with the US (Peifer et al. 2021).

However, AUKUS will not automatically change the geopolitical configuration, but it damages diplomatic relations. France feels "backstabbing", as stated by the French Minister of Foreign Affairs, Jean-Yves Le Drian. France recalled its ambassadors posted in Washington and Canberra for consultations and cancelled a gala dinner between the US and France (Perot et al. 2021).

Lack of loyalty was demonstrated by AUKUS, as the establishment was under secret negotiation. However, the formation of AUKUS can also be a trigger for EU strategic autonomy. Portugal was the supporter of France and considered the importance of EU military autonomy (Marafona et al. 2021). The EU is considered to have economic and regulatory power but still needs to improve security and defence capabilities because there is fragmentation among the member states and members who are also subordinate to NATO. The EU has also been the backstage of US intervention in international politics to include in Afghanistan. This may be the time for France, as the powerful country in European defense needs to build Europe in this competitive world of Hobbesian in nature instead of being frustrated with AUKUS (Morillas et al 2021). AUKUS could serve as a political, technological and security architecture in the Indo-Pacific region along with other forms of minilateralism, such as the Quad and Sydney Dialogue (Shoebridge et al. 2021).

3.2. Has AUKUS not (or has yet) created a security dilemma?

The formation of AUKUS has been analysed in the majority of the literature using the security dilemma concept. However, the hypothesis and fear that AUKUS would lead to the condition of security dilemma has not been proven or at least until this article is written. Two years after the formation of AUKUS, neither an arms race nor conflict escalation among neighboring countries emerged in the region. The fear that AUKUS may generate an arms race emerged among the states, but there has not been an immediate effect of the security dilemma as a consequence of the AUKUS formation.

The fear of nuclear proliferation due to AUKUS formation did not occur. This could be possible because the AUKUS nuclear submarine project in Australia AUKUS is working toward increasing member defense capabilities. Europe may have criticised the formation of AUKUS, but this trilateral political alliance did not trigger the new form of alliance by other countries.

Therefore, how can we explain why AUKUS has not (or has yet) created a security dilemma since its formation in 2021? The concept of security dilemma in the case of formation of AUKUS cannot be fully applied due to certain conditions.

First, AUKUS is based on the common goal of its members: to deter China. This goal is also consistent with the interests of many countries, deterring the future hegemon that can lead the world. China is perceived by many countries as an aggressive future hegemon that can change the international system.

The similarity of interests between AUKUS members and other countries in the international system prevents the concept of security dilemma from being applicable. The goal of AUKUS is to deter the aggressive future hegemon, and this encourages other countries not to feel too insecure or threatened by the formation of AUKUS because the goal of AUKUS is also the goal or interest of these countries.

Second, AUKUS’s goal to deter China is also followed by balancing behavior through AUKUS’s activity plans. One of the balancing behaviors is to improve Australia’s defense system. Although there are some countries that do not agree with the formation of AUKUS, this does not encourage insecurities or arms races from other countries. This is because the purpose of AUKUS is to build Australia’s defense system. In this case, if Australia becomes strong, it will ultimately contribute to peace and stability in the region. Based on this view, countries do not become insecure or threatened by the formation of AUKUS. Thus, they did not act as predicted in the concept of the security dilemma, that is, the arms race.

As argued by the realists, who are proponents of balance of power theorists, states are rational and primary actors in the international system. International systems would evolve and thus would not be in a static condition. As the international system does not have a central authority, states will seek to maximise their power and protect their interests. It drives states in balancing behavior toward any threats, including responding to the emerging hegemonic state. AUKUS balancing behavior is the implementation of balance of power theory.
The formation of AUKUS has not generated an arms race due to security dilemmas. It has demonstrated a form of balancing behavior by AUKUS members toward China as their perceived threat. Australia accepted the United States offer to be part of the US integrated deterrence. Under AUKUS, the UK also accepted the US offer to re-engage with the Indo-Pacific through the formation of AUKUS. If AUKUS does not conduct its balancing behavior toward a future hegemon, other countries may feel threatened by the existence of AUKUS.

3.3. Reinvigorating Defense Diplomacy

Although the formation of AUKUS has not yet (and hopefully not) created the condition of security dilemma but a form of balancing behavior toward China, there is implication of AUKUS formation to the international system. The formation of AUKUS could generate a possibility that in the long term, this trilateral alignment may provoke insecurities of other states. This could possibly occur because states are rational actors, as indicated by balance of power theory.

According to the balance of power theory, the absence of a central authority in the international system could drive states to prioritise their security and survival. However, their balancing behavior could somehow be perceived as an offensive act. Therefore, a balancing behavior could somehow trigger insecurities for other states if the balancing behavior did not result in maintaining security and stability.

Therefore, to tackle complex balance of power phenomena as the implication of AUKUS’s formation in the international system, states should maintain open communication that could reduce the possibility of perceived threats. In this case, increasing defense diplomacy among states is significant, as it could generate understanding and trust among states.

Defense diplomacy could convey the ideas, worldviews and policy trends of a state to other states. In conducting this diplomacy, there is an effort by a state to communicate its strategic thinking to other countries. There are also efforts by defense diplomacy actors to influence each other by using their soft power instruments. The purpose of implementing defense diplomacy is to create confidence-building measures, military capability and military industry (Winger, 2014).

If AUKUS members could increase the conduct defense diplomacy to other states, their action may not be misinterpreted. If AUKUS members can conduct defense diplomacy, they can gain trust from other states. Defense diplomacy is not only about exchanging diplomats with other states, training programs, joint military exercise, and visiting diplomatic actors to build partnerships. Defense diplomacy that should be conducted by AUKUS members includes exchanging or changing views among the states involved to create confidence-building measures. By conducting defense diplomacy, other states in the international system can also create a balance of power that could maintain stability and peace.

4. Conclusions

State reactions toward the formation of AUKUS have varied due to their different perceptions of AUKUS as security threats. This paper has met its objectives in investigating state reactions toward the formation of AUKUS and in examining the implication of AUKUS to the international system.

By examining the literature, this study revealed that immediate state reactions to the formation of AUKUS are not completely in line with the concept of security dilemma. States projected that AUKUS’s project would increase the level of Australia’s military capabilities. Therefore, these states perceive AUKUS as a threat to its neighboring states and states in the international system. However, the implications of AUKUS for states in the international system can be best examined by balance of power theory. It explains that the formation of AUKUS is a form of balancing behavior to avoid a hegemon that could change the structure of the international system. However, this behavior has the potential to drive other states to interact in the international system for the long term.

This study offers recommendations for states tackling this complex balance of power phenomena as a result of AUKUS’s formation in the international system. Increasing defense networks and defense diplomacy among states are significant long-term steps for states to confront AUKUS as an unresolved threat in the international system. Given that states’ power and interests may evolve while pursuing their national interests, states should maintain and foster defense networks and defense diplomacy. States can adapt or even shape the behavior of other states in the international system by conducting defense diplomacy.

However, there are some limitations in this study. First, this study does not include primary research, which could limit the depth of the findings. Second, this study can only address immediate state reactions and projections of the long-term implications based on theories. This is because the AUKUS projects are currently ongoing. Therefore, we must continue to investigate the formation of AUKUS to address the unresolved threats of AUKUS to the international system. ***

Ethical Considerations

Not Applicable.

Conflict of Interest

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