



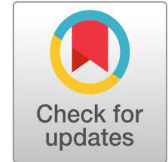
Content list available at:
<https://journals.carc.com.pk/index.php/CRISS/article/view/82>

CARC Research in Social Sciences

Journal homepage : journals.carc.com.pk



AUKUS Emergence: Navigating the Dynamics from Security to Insecurity in the Asia-Pacific



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: Dec 06, 2023
 Revised: March 19, 2024
 Accepted: March. 25, 2024
 Published: March. 31, 2024

Keywords:

AUKUS
 Security dilemma
 Asia-Pacific
 Nuclear-Powered Submarines (SSNs)
 Alliance, ASEAN
 Proliferation

ABSTRACT

AUKUS has significant ramifications for Asia-Pacific's security dynamics. The factors contributing to uncertainty among regional countries and their security dilemmas include the perceptual threats of countering China's rise and heightened insecurity among ASEAN and South Asian nations due to nuclear-powered submarines (SSNs) in the region. The proliferation of SSNs is a significant concern emerging in the wake of the AUKUS alliance. South Korea and Japan have reportedly expressed interest in acquiring SSNs by joining AUKUS or through bilateral arrangements with the United States. These developments have intensified regional insecurity. Viewing AUKUS through a Cold War lens reminiscent of the balancing strategies between the USSR and the US, China labels it as the Asia-Pacific version of NATO. Though AUKUS has been established ostensibly to review the US-led global order, it may instead sow seeds of insecurity and mistrust across the Asia-Pacific. This research paper evaluates how AUKUS would impact the insecurity outlook of the Asia-Pacific region.

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1. INTRODUCTION

AUKUS is a new defense alliance between the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia, aiming to strengthen Australia's naval capabilities with nuclear submarines (SSNs). The core of this pact, known as pillar one, involves a groundbreaking deal where the United States shares its nuclear propulsion technology with an ally apart from the UK. This move is prompted by growing concerns about China's alleged increasing threat in Asia Pacific. The

significance of this agreement lies in the fact that for the first time, the United States is sharing its nuclear propulsion technology with an ally other than the UK, showcasing the commitment of both the United States and the UK to safeguard their strategic interests in the region (Laksmana, 2021). Over the next decade, Australia aims to enhance its naval strength by developing its sovereign SSNs, combining British and American technology, expected to be operational by the late 2030s. Plans are underway for the United States to sell 3-5 US Virginia class SSNs to Australia in the early 2030s, expediting Australia's acquisition of naval nuclear propulsion technology.

The US and UK plan to deploy their own SSNs in the Asia-Pacific region as part of a strategic policy known as the "Submarine Rotational Force-West" (Wende, 2022). This move is in response to the alleged escalating Chinese threat in the vast Asia-Pacific region, stretching from India to Japan and South Korea to Australia. The AUKUS alliance gains heightened importance in regional security in this context.

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How to Cite:

Ali, M. (2024). AUKUS Emergence: Navigating the Dynamics from Security to Insecurity in the Asia-Pacific. *CARC Research in Social Sciences*, 3(1), 1-7.
 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.58329/criss.v3i1.82>

The Asia-Pacific region, which includes China, Northeast Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia, is marked by intricate geopolitical dynamics. Economic development has brought the region to global attention, yet maritime disputes remain a potential source of conflict among states. The evolving competition between China and the United States further complicates the strategic environment. The AUKUS has been conceived to play a pivotal role in shaping the landscape – impacting initiatives like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, commonly known as Quad – and establishing a foundation for integrated deterrence (Wende, 2022).

In this complex geopolitical context, the US-China relations emerge as a crucial factor influencing the dynamics among Asia-Pacific nations. The strategic focus of the United States on the region, as emphasized by President Obama, adds to the complexities. While China is committed to peacefully resolving territorial disputes through bilateral negotiations, Washington's involvement is often viewed as interference, leading to increased tensions (Cheng, 2022). However, the US has further consolidated its desire to secure its strategic and economic interests in the region through an institutional arrangement.

Why AUKUS Emerged?

Establishing the trilateral pact involving the formidable nations of Australia, the UK, and the United States was due to the US attempt to counter China's increasing influence in the Asia-Pacific region. This alliance primarily aims to enhance Australia's naval capabilities by providing a fleet of SSNs. While the apprehensions of the US and its allies regarding China may or may not be valid, they are somewhat exaggerated. China neither asserts nor attempts to encroach upon the territorial sovereignty of other states.

Structural realists in this context may misinterpret China's strategic and political objectives, as they are traditionally oriented towards gaining economic advantages rather than territorial acquisitions. There is substantial evidence to support this assertion. Presently, China's economic prowess is substantial enough to establish its own international order based on Chinese political and economic narratives, influencing other nations to adopt it, a paradigm reminiscent of the Cold War era when the USSR and the US pursued similar strategies.

The US has adopted skeptical views toward China, perceiving it as challenging to the liberal world order and US strategic interests in the Asia-Pacific region. Australia, Japan, and South Korea share these concerns and objectives. The deep-rooted conflict between the US and China can be explained by two main reasons: primarily perceptual rather than pragmatic. Firstly, there is an ideological clash. China's values do not align with the Western system, causing worries for the US and its allies. In the Bush administration, some considered China's commitment to communism as a threat. Samuel Huntington, in "The Clash of Civilizations," highlighted the cultural factor, warning of a dangerous alliance between Islamic and Confucian civilizations as a major threat to the West (Lai, 2013). Moreover, the UK divulged the need to mold its strategic environment in collaboration with like-minded countries, in March 2023

integrated Review of Foreign and Defense policy. It declared China as an "epoch-defining Challenge to the world order (Kazmi, 2023)

The fact is that even though China has a distinct cultural and ideological identity different from the West, there is no evidence that it poses any significant security risks to the US-led international liberal order in the Asia-Pacific region. Unlike the US and USSR during the Cold War, China is not trying to export its cultural and ideological values to other countries. The US is concerned about China's growing economic, military, and industrial power, fearing that it will not stop until it secures its own interests and respect. Some US scholars even worry that China's rising nationalism could increase aggression towards the United States (Times, 2021), but the facts do not justify such thinking.

These perceptions have molded the strategic choice of the US toward China over the past four decades, from conflict to cooperation to confrontation to competition and back to conflict. Southeast Asian states believe that the United States and China have taken stiff positions against each other on multiple fronts, but interestingly, they blame the United States for adopting an unconventional approach to its foreign policy (Lai, 2013).

Australia's concerns about China have been influenced by the United States' push for a free and open Indo-Pacific (FOIP). It is important to note that Australia and China do not have any existing disputes, but by aligning with the US stance on China, Australia finds itself in a challenging position.

Australia believes acquiring nuclear submarines will enhance its naval capabilities and competitiveness against China. Unlike diesel-powered submarines, nuclear-powered submarines can remain functional for longer periods. They are so silent that, in 2009, British and French nuclear ballistic missile submarines collided in the Atlantic Ocean without being aware of each other's presence. Furthermore, nuclear-powered submarines can achieve higher speeds and submerge for longer durations. These strategic advantages offered by nuclear submarines would enable the Australian Navy to conduct extended patrols across the vast Asia-Pacific region (Gleiman, 2022).

The naval nuclear propulsion technology would also allow Australia to maintain a discreet presence in contested areas, such as the South China Sea, Taiwan Strait, and East China Sea. Soon, Australia will acquire nuclear submarines, and its weakness of being far-flung and isolated will be changed into strategic strength. Australia's SSNs can aptly face the enemy at any time to assist the US Indo-Pacific strategic interests. Australia feels susceptible by the Chinese presence in the Asia-Pacific region and several security pacts with the Pacific Island countries such as the Solomon Islands and intends to compete militarily with China. Therefore, Australia took several initiatives, such as the Pacific step-up policy, Australia Pacific Security College, Pacific Islands Forum, and Pacific Labor Scheme, to improve its relations and investment in the region.

AUKUS: A miscalculated decision

The future of the Asia-Pacific hinges on the competition

between the US-led global order and China's efforts to establish its own order. Several important questions need consideration. First, can China's rise lead to the future spread of its political and economic order? Second, will the US continue its engagement in the Asia-Pacific in the face of a Chinese-led order?

The first case involves an American-led order that replicates the current system. In this case, Washington would consistently work with allies like Australia, the United Kingdom, South Korea, Japan, and partners like India to promote and advance regional rules and norms to align with US interests.

The second case envisions a Chinese-led order emerging independently from the existing US-led order. In this situation, Beijing would seek to take over the leadership role from Washington and continue shaping regional development. China might expand its political, economic, technological, military, and cultural influence in the region and beyond, breaking from its traditional inward-focused approach to the international system. The outcome will determine the region's political, economic, and cultural landscape in the future.

Similarly, there are two distinct approaches to engaging one's adversaries: the first involves a gradual, evolutionary process centered around the augmentation of one's military and economic prowess. This method necessitates meticulous planning, such as formulating strategic directives and cultivating a conducive domestic environment. In contrast, the second approach takes on a revolutionary character, demanding that a state boldly initiate a multifaceted campaign across both physical and diplomatic fronts, with the singular objective of weakening the adversary's overall strength. In this context, Washington is passing the buck to Australia in Asia-Pacific to check and oversee the Chinese power.

This may turn into a complex conflict or a deadly war in the Asia-Pacific region. Philip Du Rhone described in his book, "Mud Map to AUKUS," that AUKUS is a miscalculated decision by the US, UK, and Australia and may provoke war in the Asia-Pacific region (Rhone, 2021). He also argues that Australia's conventional defense and foreign policy approach led to its engagement in the trilateral agreement (AUKUS) in 2021. It is perhaps the biggest strategic step Australia has taken ever in history, acquiring nuclear submarines from the US and UK. According to the rational actor model theory, AUKUS is a failure of the US foreign policy toward the Asia-Pacific region, such as its foreign policy toward Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq. The rational actor model consists of three main elements: the actor, its environment, and outcomes. It involves a four-step decision-making process, such as identifying goals and objectives, identifying the available alternatives, evaluating the costs and benefits of each alternative, and selecting the alternative with the highest net benefit (Thu, 2020).

The US's choice of Australia as a key partner, AUKUS alliance, to have been made without a comprehensive analysis of the complex geopolitical landscape in the Asia-Pacific. This lack of thorough consideration raises concerns about the potential impact of the AUKUS alliance on regional peace and stability. The US relies on Australia to

play a significant role in maintaining a free and open Indo-Pacific. This strategic decision highlights Australia's role as a crucial ally aligning with the US to counterbalance China's influence in the region. The implications of this alignment and the geopolitical consequences in the Asia-Pacific region warrant careful consideration (Hawkings, 2023).

Alliance carries substantial risks. After World War II, the US acknowledged the Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe, which helped prevent a hot pursuit during the Cold War. Failing to recognize China's rise or its equal standing in the 21st century could increase the risk of future conflicts. In the Asia-Pacific region, the United States finds itself in a Thucydides trap with China, a concept explained by Graham Allison in his book "Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides Traps?" This trap arises when a rising power challenges an established one, leading to structural anxiety and a potential conflict (Allison, 2017).

AUKUS represents a more aggressive and coordinated effort by the United States and its allies to counter China's ascendancy. This approach may provoke China to take assertive actions in areas like the South China Sea, Taiwan Strait, and East China Sea if China's regional interests are challenged. Additionally, AUKUS could weaken existing regional security arrangements such as the Quad and ASEAN. The idea that AUKUS is a direct response to China's assertiveness toward smaller Asian countries is irrational yet alarming as it might escalate tensions and lead to conflict in the region.

Sam Roggeveen's book, "The Echidna Strategy: Australia's Search for Power and Peace," argues that China is not a threat to Australia in the Pacific Ocean. He suggests that Canberra adopts a "defensive defense" approach instead of pursuing AUKUS arrangements. According to Roggeveen, AUKUS reflects Australia's willingness to take the lead in protecting the US-led order in the Asia-Pacific, as Australian submarines would be part of the US submarine fleet in a conflict with China (Roggeveen, 2023).

Arms race in the region and beyond

Anthony Wire, Deputy Assistant Secretary in the Bureau of International Security and Non-Proliferation, emphasized in a Washington press briefing that naval nuclear propulsion, used in the nuclear submarines of the United States and the United Kingdom, is not the same as nuclear weapons and is a safe technology. He pointed out that these submarines have traveled over 240 million kilometers without harming human health or the environment. Additionally, Australia, being a non-nuclear weapon state under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), has pledged not to pursue nuclear weapons (Mark Lambert, 2023).

However, these commitments and Australia's clean track record in non-proliferation may not prevent concerns about security tensions and arms race in the region due to the introduction of nuclear propulsion technology. Another worry is whether Australia will fully support and cooperate with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) protocols, including checks and balances and standard operating procedures (SOPs), in the management of SSNs in the future (Sanders, 2023).

AUKUS, as mentioned before, is being projected as

a direct response to China's growing influence in the Asia-Pacific region. Western democracies are concerned about China's increasing territorial disputes in the South China Sea. The alliance reflects the shared belief among policymakers that China's military activities in the region pose a clear threat to American and British interests and must be addressed. However, some scholars argue against this perspective, advocating for diplomatic engagement with China rather than confrontation.

The potential impact of the AUKUS agreement on the Asia-Pacific region is quite understandable. Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Force expressed its interest in joining AUKUS, with Tosh Minohara, a professor specializing in US-Japan relations and diplomatic history at Kobe University, explaining that Japan's navy seeks access to nuclear submarine technology. Japan shares Washington's concerns regarding China's actions in the Asia-Pacific region. Likewise, Brad Glosserman, deputy director at the Center for Rule-Making Strategies at Tama University in Tokyo, highlighted Japan's long-standing interest in becoming part of AUKUS since the establishment of AUKUS in 2021. To support this, Japan recently lifted a self-imposed ban on overseas military sales (ROBSON, 2023).

Similarly, South Korea expresses concerns about strategic stability in the region. Seoul views Washington's efforts to strengthen its strategic partnerships with European and Asian nations, including the establishment of AUKUS as a counterbalance to China's influence. In response, Beijing has already hinted at severe consequences if Seoul joins any arrangement to balance China. Despite this, South Korea has shown interest in being part of the AUKUS framework, known as AUKUS-Plus. Perhaps there is a perception that AUKUS' containment of China might impose an increased burden on South Korea.

South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategic plan, released in 2020, outlines objectives to foster cooperation and dialogue with countries sharing similar interests. It also signifies Seoul's willingness to further collaborate with the United States in the region. On the other hand, Kurt Campbell, the US coordinator for Indo-Pacific, has stated that AUKUS is an open architecture, and Washington anticipates the inclusion of other countries (Kim, 2023).

South Korea wants to seize the opportunity to define its alliance with the US through either AUKUS or a similar arrangement. AUKUS has resumed a domestic debate in South Korea regarding the acquisition of nuclear power submarines. AUKUS has changed the strategic behaviour of South Korea as it believes that its own navy will be substantially upgraded by nuclear power submarines up to ten times stronger. Moreover, nuclear submarines will prove more accurate and agile in detecting North Korean submarines and counterbalancing against China and Russia. South Korea has raised its expectation that the US might take the initiative on South Korea's nuclear submarine needs. In case Washington refuses to cooperate with South Korea on the nuclear submarine program, Seoul may feel distrustful of the US's inconsistent behavior. South Korea earns more domestic support for nuclear submarines than Australia. According to a survey conducted in 2021, around 75.2 percent of respondents supported Seoul's developing SSNs (Grossman, 2023).

Implications for ASEAN

ASEAN member states are directly linked with any development in the geopolitical framework of the Asia-Pacific region. AUKUS has given ASEAN a tough time in this regard. First, ASEAN has been put in a security dilemma situation by the AUKUS pact. The provision of SSNs to Australia by the United States and the United Kingdom will provoke a new round of arms race. Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, and other ASEAN countries have acquired conventional submarines and other types of naval vessels from Russia and Germany toward the beginning of the 21st century. Following the South China Sea situation, these countries have started modernizing their naval forces through procurement. However, conventional-powered submarines are not technically well adapted to naval surveillance at par with nuclear-powered submarines. With the emergence of AUKUS, the traditional balance of power in the region will be disturbed (Patton, 2021).

Another reason for provoking a security dilemma in the region is that AUKUS could weaken ASEAN's pursuit of maintaining a nuclear-free zone. To establish the Southeast Asian region as a nuclear-free zone and contribute toward international peace and security, ASEAN members signed the Treaty of Southeast Asian nuclear weapon-free Zone (SEANWFZ Treaty) in December 1995, which prohibits the manufacturing, controlling, testing, and possessing of nuclear weapons in Southeast Asia. Secondly, AUKUS has spurred the already intense competition among major regional powers which may undermine regional prosperity, peace, and stability.

Nonetheless, Washington has reiterated that it does not intend to force ASEAN countries to choose between the US and China. However, AUKUS alliance reflects US focus on shaping an anti-China bloc in the region. ASEAN's in shaping Southeast Asia's future is pivotal in determining the future of the United States as a great power in the Asia-Pacific region. United States will not compromise its Indo-Pacific Strategy, a policy for China's containment, and it will not be put at stake just because of the lack of ASEAN's cooperation. China is ASEAN's traditional neighbor and exceptional economic and trade partner. ASEAN cannot bear to give up China for the US as they are aware of the consequences. Yet, the emergence of AUKUS might augment the stress on ASEAN to choose between the United States and China.

AUKUS may resist ASEAN's political and security integration. ASEAN countries' reaction to AUKUS is mixed. For instance, Foreign Secretary of the Philippines, Teodoro Locsin JR., supported the AUKUS alliance while portraying that it would restore the balance of power in the Asia-Pacific region rather than destabilize it. However, Malaysian Prime Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob rescinded that AUKUS would promote a nuclear arms race in the already heated Asia-Pacific region. Similarly, Indonesian Foreign Minister Reto Marsudi expressed concern that the AUKUS alliance will intensify the region's arms race and power projection (Costa, 2021).

It is difficult for Southeast Asia States to develop mutual consent on the AUKUS alliance, and these differences will resist their effort for regional security and political integration. Moreover, ASEAN does not give weightage to

the so-called “Indo-Pacific” strategy designed to prevail over the US-led order in the region. Instead, it issued its own ASEAN Viewpoint on the Indo-Pacific in 2019, intending to strengthen the ASEAN countries’ centrality (Cheng, 2022).

Implications for South Asia

Ambassador (retired) Hassan Javed opined that AUKUS is a purely Anglo-Saxon alliance because all three states are not included in the Eurasian landmass, while Great Britain is near Eurasia. According to him, AUKUS is the formation of an alliance to strengthen NATO efforts to counteract the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Nonetheless, the nuclear dimension of AUKUS may have little strategic significance for South Asia since it is already a nuclearized region. However, resisting the expansion of Chinese economic and political actions may impact South Asia (Cheema, 2021).

Chian’s BRI is the main target of AUKUS which may result in the militarization of the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Subsequently, the increased militarization of the Indian Ocean will be used to deter the free flow of trade and energy supply of China, directly or indirectly affecting BRI. The power politics between the US and China in a fractured Asia Pacific region will build imbalance in the South Asian region. Moreover, the powerful navies in the Indian Ocean will further stir uncertainty. India is also trying to cozy up with the United States against China to sow regional instability.

On the other hand, Pakistan faces difficult situation in this great power matrix to choose between the United States and China. Pakistan has kept a historically good relationship with China while having a strategic partnership with the United States. The strategic calculus of South Asia is directly related to the great game between the United States and China in the Asia-Pacific region. India is already opposing BRI and CPEC and playing a destabilizing role in the region by acting as a regional hegemon having stiff relations with other South Asian states (Jacob J. Lew, 2021).

AUKUS has significant strategic implications for South Asia. It is related to the militarization of Australian navies in the Asia-Pacific region. It is more likely that India will jump in and become involved in the arms race, followed by India, resulting in further militarization of the Indian Ocean. It portends security and economic challenges for smaller countries in the South Asian region. Secondly, India will not sit idle and will sign up to acquire more nuclear weapons and advanced arms and military technologies (Rajagopalan, 2021).

In the Asia-Pacific region, Australia and India will be two countries with nuclear-powered submarines and other countries will compete with them for having similar capabilities. Indian media is portraying the AUKUS as a factor of India being marginalized by the United States in the Asia-Pacific region. There is a hot debate on India’s inclusion in the AUKUS agreement as India is already part of Quad.

India’s interest in joining AUKUS might not be primarily about acquiring nuclear submarines, as India already possesses them. Instead, it aims to gain a status by aligning with the Western powers. Although India will apparently

do it to join their efforts to contain China, it will remain focused on gaining more resources, technology, and eventually, regional hegemony. Any such developments will impact South Asia’s strategic dynamics (Ali, 2023). The Pakistan-India relationship is a significant concern, given their long-standing disputes and diplomatic as well as economic stalemate. Due to its geographical expanse and economic strength, India claims greater authority in the region (Cheema, 2021). However, Pakistan carries considerable weight on the basis of its friendly foreign policy, geographical significance, and natural as well as human resource.

As a result of these developments, other South Asian countries will need to reconsider and adjust their relations with Pakistan and India, as well as with China and the United States. They may feel pressured to align either with the United States or China. The nature of Pakistan-China relations is already clear – they enjoy cordial relations due to geographical proximity, economic opportunities, and new avenues generating from Chinese BRI, such as maritime linkages and technological offers. It is worth noting that in addition to strong economic relations, the value of Pakistan-US strategic ties is primarily in the former’s strategic location. Pakistan is the only South Asian nation that provides the United States with land access to Central Asian countries through Afghanistan (Cheema, 2021).

To navigate this changing landscape, Pakistan should strengthen its relationships with Russia, Central Asian Republics, and Iran. Most South Asian countries aim to remain neutral in the rivalry between India and Pakistan. However, the escalating strategic competition between the United States and China further complicates South Asia’s already divided geopolitical situation. Both China and India have substantial interests in the Indian Ocean, and their expanding naval capabilities pose direct challenges to Pakistan, which already faces security concerns related to India’s superior naval power.

China’s Concerns

The Asia-Pacific region offers limited leeway for the United States and European powers to navigate the escalating competition with China, given the predominantly neutral stance adopted by many countries in the region. The establishment of AUKUS indicates this reality, as the United States finds it imperative to secure its naval presence independently to oversee crucial maritime routes. Consequently, this development raises concerns, as China will oppose any physical resistance to its established naval positions and territorial claims in the region, encompassing the South China Sea and the East China Sea. For China, AUKUS is a significant and calculated threat, the Asia-Pacific version of NATO alliance” (Mercer, 2023).

The threats that China faces are two-dimensional. Firstly, there’s the overt military concern that deploying nuclear submarines creates a substantial security dilemma. Since assuming office, the Biden administration has actively championed diplomacy, advocating for establishing a democratic alliance like NATO in the Asia-Pacific region. This move, however, raises Beijing’s concerns (Odgaard, 2027).

The second dimension is the strategic threat posed by the AUKUS arrangement. This alliance can disrupt the delicate strategic balance, leading to regional instability. The introduction of nuclear submarines significantly undermines Beijing's nuclear retaliation capabilities, potentially eroding China's strategic deterrence. Interestingly, the unfolding scenario parallels the 1990s, when Washington, through NATO, sought to diminish Russia's influence in European lands.

Chinese Foreign Ministry's spokesperson Wang Wenbin did not mince words, accusing AUKUS of exemplifying a Cold War mentality designed to contain China. The geopolitical chess game unfolding in the Asia-Pacific region mirrors historical maneuvers, and Wang Wenbin's characterization underscores the gravity of the situation (AP, 2023).

Beijing has leveled accusations against the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, claiming that their response to global concerns and the transfer of nuclear submarine technology to Australia are frivolous. China deems the AUKUS deal a "textbook case of double standards" and perceives it as a direct threat to the nuclear non-proliferation regime. China argues that the provision of nuclear submarines to non-nuclear weapon states such as Australia is tantamount to deriding the non-proliferation regime, claiming that it undermines the fundamental principles of nuclear non-proliferation.

The US deals with China based on a realist paradigm that suggests a rising power tends to create tensions with the dominant power. This belief is rooted in historical events, like before the World Wars when Germany's growing economic and military strength raised concerns among other European powers, leading to conflict. Similarly, the US is wary of China's economic growth, which could translate into military power and challenge the existing international order (Gardner, 2023).

China has a different way of thinking about strategy. They mainly focus on defending themselves rather than trying to take over other places. Unlike how the Western countries used their strong economies to expand in the past, China has not used its money and power to take over new territories. The United States and other Western countries might be wrong to think that China will be a problem for world peace in the future. The new AUKUS alliance, including the US, UK, and Australia, could change China from being mostly defensive to more aggressive (CAMUT, 2023).

For instance, China is developing advanced nuclear-powered submarines, specifically the type 096 ballistic missile submarine, which could be operational soon. Experts suggest these submarines will be challenging to detect. This development can be seen as an aftershock of the AUKUS alliance, impacting the security dynamics in the Asia-Pacific region.

2. CONCLUSION

The AUKUS alliance in the Asia-Pacific region may sow seeds of insecurity among regional states, pushing them into a complex situation of choosing between the United

States and China. The ASEAN countries may be caught in the dilemma and compelled to redraw their strategic objectives, aligning with the US or the Chinese-led alliance. This political and strategic bifurcation may intensify bloc politics and ultimately escalate tensions, potentially leading to regional conflict.

On the other hand, China's strategic behavior is shaping the policy orientation of regional states. If China adopts a rigid stance, vehemently resisting any action or alliance that undermines its regional strategic objectives, most regional states will not opt to challenge China. Beijing's substantial economic influence and its significance in the region would dissuade many countries from opposing China, except for a few states such as the Philippines, Vietnam, and Taiwan.

China has discerned the underlying motive behind the AUKUS. The United States seeks to bolster its naval presence in the Asia-Pacific region, particularly in areas where it perceives threats to its interests, such as the South China Sea, Taiwan, and the East China Sea. However, China remains steadfast in its unwillingness to tolerate any actions challenging its territorial claims and established regional stance.

Furthermore, there is growing anxiety regarding the possibility that other nations allied with the United States in the region, such as South Korea and Japan, might aspire to develop comparable nuclear submarine capabilities in the future. This potential scenario raises concerns about the potential erosion of efforts aimed at preventing the spread of nuclear weapons and the intricate dynamics of regional security. The narrative suggesting that the establishment of a US-led alliance will safeguard the global liberal order, ostensibly under threat from China, is paradoxical. AUKUS itself poses a menace to global security and the international nuclear order by directing states' attention towards augmenting their security through diverse means. It fosters a naval arms race in the Asia-Pacific region for the acquisition of SSNs, a trend that could undermine the established international nuclear order.

Conflict interests

The author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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