



AUKUS CAN ENDANGER ASEAN CENTRALITY

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Abstract

The article analyses how AUKUS (Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States), sharing its nuclear-powered submarine with Australia, could change the balance in the Asia-Pacific region against the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The study considers that AUKUS' nuclear-powered submarine (SSN) operation will undermine ASEAN centrality and the peace-stability environment in the region. The research included information on the countries' foreign policy discourses and made inferences by examining the information about the states' military expenditures. The article mentioned the security dilemma of the ASEAN member countries after the SSN initiative of AUKUS and also it studied what kind of impact this situation would have on the future of the organization. The study reveals that AUKUS will increase the arms race, and as a result, ASEAN centrality and stability-oriented structure will be disrupted in the China-United States (US) struggle. While ASEAN will continue as an economically strong organization by participating in the arms race, AUKUS, as a military initiative, has turned the balance in the region in favour of the US in the short term.

Keywords: AUKUS, ASEAN Centrality, Arms Race

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Introduction

The AUKUS alliance, formed in September 2021, comprises Australia, the United Kingdom (UK), and the US. The objectives of this trilateral security partnership include enhancing cooperation in a number of areas, including defence, technology and nuclear powered submarines. As AUKUS has the potential to have an impact on regional dynamics within the Indo-Pacific, it has attracted a great deal of attention. The focus of the alliance is to strengthen Australia's maritime capability by acquiring nuclear powered submarines, one of the most important aspects of it. This move signals a fundamental shift in Australia's defence strategy, indicating an increase of its commitment to regional security and deterrence. The formation of the AUKUS group has a significant impact on regional dynamics and strategic calculations. First of all, it is reflected in an increasing willingness within member states to address the increasingly complex security challenges faced by the Indo-Pacific region, particularly with regard to China's increased influence and assertiveness. The partners of AUKUS aim to shape the region's balance of power through strengthened alliance and capability, ensuring that order is maintained in accordance with its rules (Charney, 2022).

In addition, the AUKUS alliance is also a further sign of mutual interest in preserving regional stability, fostering technological innovation and strengthening closer defence relations which signal an expanded security partnership among the US, UK and Australia. It is expected that the impact of this trilateral alignment on current security architecture, regional institutions and cooperation frameworks will be felt. In sum, the establishment of AUKUS is an important development in the Indo-Pacific security environment and has a broad impact on regional power dynamics, defence postures as well as major roles played by central actors. However, questions arise regarding its potential impact on ASEAN centrality and the future direction of regional multilateralism as a result of AUKUS' emergence (Koga, 2022).

The AUKUS involves the transfer of advanced nuclear-powered submarine (SSN) technology to Australia, which significantly enhances its naval capabilities. The current balance of regional power may be disrupted and the influence of ASEAN weakened by this development. The AUKUS agreement, in particular its focus on countering China's influence in the region, increases geopolitical competition and raises tensions. The ability of ASEAN to maintain peace, stability and diplomacy could then be affected by this situation, thereby decreasing its importance as a security

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policy focal point in the region. The exclusion of ASEAN from the AUKUS Agreement raises concerns about fragmentation and unequal treatment within the regional security architecture. The central role of ASEAN as a coordination and mediation body for security in the region may be undermined by this. The AUKUS agreement can undermine efforts by ASEAN member countries to build trust as it stresses military capabilities and the potential for an arms race. This may create uncertainties and undermine trust in ASEAN's capacity for promoting cooperation and maintaining a stable environment within the region. As they navigate their relations with AUKUS countries and their strategic objectives, ASEAN member states are confronted with a dilemma of alignment. In order to preserve ASEAN unity and centrality, the implications of this Agreement on regional security dynamics could lead to strains in bilateral relations between ASEAN countries (Cheng, 2022).

The establishment of the AUKUS alliance presents a potential threat to the centrality of ASEAN in shaping regional dynamics and maintaining stability in the Indo-Pacific. The principle of ASEAN centrality is to provide for cooperation, dialogue and conflict resolution between its member states and external partners by positioning the Association as a key driver and coordination entity in regional affairs (Acharya, 2020). The new framework for tackling regional security challenges is created by AUKUS, which focuses its attention on multilateral cooperation between the US, UK and Australia. While AUKUS is not explicitly directed against ASEAN, its emergence raises concerns about the potential marginalization of ASEAN's role in regional security architecture (Emmers and Rüländ, 2021). ASEAN's efforts in tackling complex regional problems, as well as their influence on shaping the region's internal rules and regulations, can be weakened by deepening collaboration between AUKUS partners, especially with regard to defence and technology. In addition, the AUKUS alliance has put forward a different security cooperation platform that would potentially draw attention and funding from current ASEAN-led mechanisms like the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) or the East Asia Summit (EAS). For ASEAN, which is the most important regional organisation to promote peace, stability and cooperation, this would have a negative impact on its effectiveness and relevance (Thayer, 2022).

In addition, in the Indo-Pacific region, AUKUS would have a negative impact on the balance of power and strategic calculations. Tensions and security issues in the region can be raised by an alliance's focus on advanced military capabilities, such as nuclear submarines. This could put at risk the role of ASEAN, as a mediator and conflict resolution facilitator, potentially leading to



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dismemberment of its own mediation mechanisms in addressing regional conflicts. Finally, the establishment of AUKUS poses a potential threat to ASEAN centrality, although it is driven by specific security concerns and shared interests between its member states. The role of the ASEAN, which can play an essential role in shaping and preserving stability within the Indo-Pacific region, may be diminished by the alliance's focus on defence cooperation, technology developments or possible fragmentation of existing mechanisms (Acharya, 2017).

1. Theoretical Framework: ASEAN Centrality

ASEAN centrality is a concept that has gained significant attention in the study of regionalism and international relations in Southeast Asia. It stresses its key role in shaping regional dynamics, maintaining stability, and fostering cooperation between member states and external partners, and refers to the principle that the ASEAN is the central driver and coordinator of regional affairs. The notion that regional cooperation and coordinated action are necessary for dealing with shared challenges, such as peace and prosperity in Southeast Asia, is a driving force behind ASEAN centrality. This reaffirms the fact that ASEAN should be at the forefront of regional initiatives, playing a lead role in shaping their own standards, rules and institutions. In a number of ways, ASEAN's importance is based upon several factors. The first point is that ASEAN's founding principles set out in the Bangkok Declaration of 1967 focus on avoiding, building consensus and peacefully resolving conflicts between member states. These principles have laid down a strong foundation for the development of regional cooperation and are guiding ASEAN's decisions in this area (Acharya, 2014).

Secondly, ASEAN's inclusiveness and commitment to dialogue and engagement have made it a central point of reference. ASEAN is a forum for member states to discuss and respond to the region's challenges through different mechanisms, like the ASEAN Summit, the ARF or the EAS. These platforms will help ASEAN to promote cooperation, building trust and facilitating the diplomatic process between member states and foreign partners. Third, ASEAN's position as an integral part of the world has been reinforced by its ability to adapt and respond to changing regional dynamics. In the years that have passed, ASEAN has broadened its cooperation in order to tackle a number of issues, such as economic integration, security cooperation, social and cultural exchanges. ASEAN has been able to maintain its relevance and deal with emerging problems in the region through this adaptability (Heng, 2017).

Yet in recent years, the concept of ASEAN centrality has proved to be a challenge. The role of ASEAN and its influence have been complicated by the increasing presence of global powers such as China and the US, which are becoming more involved in regional affairs. ASEAN centrality and its ability to make decisions have often been distorted by the dynamics of high power competition and pursuit of strategic interests on the part of outside actors. Finally, as a key concept for understanding regional dynamics in Southeast Asia, it is ASEAN centrality. It makes clear the essential role played by ASEAN to shape regional norms, preserve stability and foster cooperation between member states and foreign partners. However, the importance of ASEAN as a leader and its ability to take an effective role in addressing regional problems are still tested by challenges arising from important power competition and developments in North America's dynamics (Acharya, 2017).

1.1. The Importance of ASEAN Centrality for Regional Stability and Governance

In order to ensure regional stability and effective governance in Southeast Asia, ASEAN's central role is crucial. The concept sets out the role played by ASEAN as a key driver and coordinating agent of regional policies, highlighting its ability to foster peace, cooperation and resolve common challenges between member states and external actors. The framework to manage and avoid conflicts between member states is provided for by the initial principles of ASEAN, which include noninterfering, building up consensus as well as peacefully resolving conflict. The ASEAN strengthens trust, cooperation and peace through the adherence to these principles which are crucial for stability in the region. In order to resolve disputes and prevent the escalation of conflicts, ASEAN's commitment to diplomatic negotiation and dialogue has a key role to play. ASEAN provides a means of engaging member states and external actors in constructive dialogue, as well as finding peaceful solutions to regional tension through platforms such as the ARF and EAS (Tan, 2019).

ASEAN's centrality is instrumental in managing regional crises and addressing emerging security challenges. The ASEAN-led mechanisms, such as the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA Centre) and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) Plus, facilitate cooperation among member states and external partners in addressing transnational threats, including natural disasters and security issues. ASEAN's commitment to multilateralism encourages member states to engage in dialogue,



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consultation, and cooperation on various regional issues. It enables ASEAN member states to address each other's problems jointly and pursue common objectives through the establishment of a platform for consensus building and decision making. ASEAN's centrality is closely tied to its economic integration efforts, such as the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC). ASEAN, through initiatives aimed at promoting trade liberalization, facilitation of investment and regional interconnectivity, will further enhance the business cooperation, foster growth and promote inclusive development in the region. The overall stability and prosperity of the area are brought about by this economic integration (Acharya, 2014).

The importance of a rule based regional order, in which norms, principles and international law guide interactions between the member states and external actors, has been highlighted by ASEAN centrality. ASEAN will strengthen governance, ensure fairness and reduce the risk of conflict and power struggles by ensuring compliance with these rules. Finally, the primacy of ASEAN as a factor for regional stability and effective governance within Southeast Asia is paramount. Through its norms, principles, conflict resolution mechanisms, and commitment to multilateralism, ASEAN plays a vital role in fostering cooperation, managing crises, and promoting peace in the region. Member states and external actors are contributing to a stable, prosperous, and rules based regional order by upholding ASEAN centrality.

2. Methodology

2.1. Sources of Information

The analysis draws on a range of sources to examine the potential implications of AUKUS for ASEAN centrality. These sources include:

a. Academic Literature: Scholarly works on ASEAN, regional security, and alliances are consulted to gain theoretical insights and a comprehensive understanding of ASEAN centrality and its significance in the region. These academic sources provide a foundation for the analysis and help identify relevant concepts and frameworks.

b. Policy Documents: Official statements, policy papers, and strategic documents from ASEAN member states, AUKUS countries (Australia, the UK, and the US), and other regional actors are examined. These documents offer valuable insights into the perspectives, intentions, and policy orientations of key stakeholders in relation to AUKUS and its potential implications for ASEAN centrality.

c. News Articles: News sources and media outlets provide timely information and analysis on the development and dynamics surrounding AUKUS. By considering multiple news articles from reputable sources, different perspectives and interpretations of the AUKUS alliance and its potential impacts on ASEAN centrality can be taken into account.

2.2. Analytical Approach

To examine the possible implications of AUKUS for ASEAN's strategic importance, this analysis uses a qualitative approach. The study examines the nature and objectives of the AUKUS alliance, as well as its formation and strategic motives. In addition, it examines the potential impact of such an alliance on regional dynamics and power relations in ASEAN. The analysis assesses how AUKUS may affect ASEAN's central role in regional affairs. It assesses, in order to ensure its position as a core driver of regional initiatives, the possible challenges and risks associated with AUKUS concerning ASEAN's capacity for shaping regional norms, facilitating multilateral cooperation. The study looks at responses and reactions to the AUKUS alliance by ASEAN members. This includes assessing the potential consequences for ASEAN unity, decision-making processes, and the region's broader geopolitical landscape. The analysis takes into account the wider implications that AUKUS will have on stability in the region, security architecture and governance. The study looks at how this alliance might have an impact upon the current regional cooperation mechanisms such as ARF and EAS, which could alter Indo-Pacific's balance of power. The analysis will be based on such methodology, providing an overall and complex understanding of how AUKUS may have the potential to undermine ASEAN's central role. With a range of perspectives and sources of information at their disposal the combination of academic literature, documents on policies and news articles makes it possible to conduct an interdisciplinary examination of this subject.

2.3 Relevant Aspects of AUKUS

The analysis examines the military capabilities of AUKUS countries, such as Australia, the UK and the US, in terms of technological progress. Assessment of AUKUS' impact on the sea capabilities, SSNs, and intelligence sharing and defence cooperation is also part of this. The analysis is concerned with the possible influence of such technological progress on regional power dynamics and security perceptions. The analysis assesses the AUKUS countries' political interests, as well as their impact on ASEAN centrality. It probes the motives for forming an alliance, as well



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as concerns concerning regional security issues like China's assertiveness in the South China Sea. The analysis shall also take into account whether AUKUS is in line with broader Indo-Pacific strategies pursued by member states.

The analysis takes into account the possible impact of AUKUS on ASEAN unity and cohesion. The study takes a look at how an alliance can affect intra-ASEAN dynamics, decision making processes and ASEAN's capacity to talk about regional security issues in one voice. Potential divisions or differences of opinion between the ASEAN countries as regards AUKUS and its consequences are also taken into account in this analysis. The analysis examines the economic dimension of AUKUS and its possible impact on ASEAN's economic interests. It looks at the implications for regional trade, investment and economic integration initiatives. Given the interdependence of economies within the area, the analysis also takes into account possible implications for ASEAN's relations with China. The objective of the analysis is to present a comprehensive assessment of whether AUKUS will have an impact on ASEAN's central importance, taking into account these fundamental factors and indicators. This multidimensional approach allows for a nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics and interplay between AUKUS and ASEAN, shedding light on both the immediate and long-term consequences for regional stability and governance.

2.4. The Indicators to Assess the Potential Impact on ASEAN Centrality

This analysis may look at the impact of AUKUS on the Indo-Pacific region's power balance. Factors to be taken into account include changes in military capabilities, influence and strategic alignment among major powers such as the US, China or other regional actors. ASEAN's ability to maintain its central role and influence in the development of regional security architecture may be affected by changes in power dynamics. The analysis shall allow for the evaluation of AUKUS' impact on current alliances and partnerships in the region, which includes ASEAN as well as external powers. Indicators to be taken into account include the strength and coherence of the ASEAN led mechanisms, such as the ARF and EAS, and the extent to which AUKUS changes existing security cooperation and multilateralism patterns in the region. The analysis may be used to understand the impact of AUKUS on ASEAN's diplomatic relations with important powers involved in the alliance, and others throughout the Asia-Pacific region. Changes in diplomatic relations, policy positions, and rhetoric towards ASEAN from AUKUS countries and other relevant

actors are indicators to be taken into account. The analysis can also assess the extent to which ASEAN member states are able to maintain their strategic autonomy and independence in navigating complex geopolitical dynamics. The analysis could examine the perception and reaction of individual ASEAN member states to AUKUS, as well as its possible consequences for Southeast Asia's central importance. Stakeholder statements, policies and diplomatic activities by ASEAN members on AUKUS are indicators to be taken into account.

3. The Potential Impact of AUKUS on ASEAN Centrality

The enhancement of AUKUS military capacity in the region is a key aspect which must be considered. AUKUS includes the provision of SSNs to Australia, which can significantly bolster its naval power projection capabilities. This development may potentially shift the balance of power in the region, particularly in the maritime domain. The political interest of the member states involved is reflected in AUKUS. In the Indo-Pacific region, this alliance is aimed at countering China's increasing influence and assertiveness. This may, in turn, result in a reassessment of power relations and alliances. Indicators to consider include changes in diplomatic alignments, the evolution of strategic partnerships, and the reactions of other major powers such as China and regional actors. The establishment of AUKUS may have ripple effects on the broader regional security dynamics. It may trigger reactions and counterbalancing measures from other regional powers, potentially leading to an intensification of security competition. Indicators to look at include responses from ASEAN member states and their engagement with AUKUS, development of regional security architectures as well as the potential for building new security partnerships or alignments (Mearsheimer, 2018).

In addition, the creation of AUKUS could have a profound impact on broader security dynamics in the region. This could lead to reactions and countervailing measures of additional regional powers, which might result in an intensification of security competition. Indicators to be explored include the response from ASEAN member states towards AUKUS, its development of regional security architectures and their possible creation of new security partnerships or alignments. Existing regional institutions, such as ASEAN, might also be affected by the influence of AUKUS on region's power dynamics. The alliance could potentially have had a negative influence on the features and efficiency of ASEAN's sectoral security governance mechanisms (Beeson, 2018: 205-210).



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The agreement with the AUKUS on SSNs has significant implications for Australia's relations with China. Prior to the announcement, Australia and China had already been experiencing strained relations due to various geopolitical and economic factors. However, the AUKUS agreement, which involves the sharing of advanced military technology and capabilities between Australia, the US, and the UK, has further exacerbated tensions between Australia and China. The agreement with AUKUS has been strongly opposed by China, which sees it as a direct threat to its regional influence and security interests. China sees this agreement as an expansion of the US' lead security architecture in the Indo-Pacific region, which it considers to be a containment strategy for curbing China's rise. In its complaint, China argues that the purchase of SSNs by Australia undermines regional stability and represents a threat to national security. In response, China has taken several measures to express its dissatisfaction with Australia. Economic sanctions, restrictions on trade and diplomatic protests are also part of these measures. A number of exports from Australia, for instance coal, wine and barley, were subject to Chinese tariffs and restrictions. Additionally, Chinese officials have engaged in strong rhetoric, accusing Australia of being a puppet of the US and interfering in China's internal affairs (Graham, 2021).

The AUKUS agreement has made even more difficult the delicate balancing act of Australia's long security alliance with the US, and its economic relations with China, which is Asia's biggest trading partner. With a view to managing its security interests while preventing any additional deterioration of the economic relations with China, this agreement has placed Australia in a difficult position. Overall, SSNs had a significant negative impact on Australia's relationship with China and contributed to already complex but mutually vexed relations between the two countries. This Agreement, which has turned into a flashpoint in US and China's broader diplomatic rivalry, put Australia at the centre of that competition (Chubb, 2021).

3.1. The Implications of AUKUS for ASEAN's Role

ASEAN has long been regarded as the central driver and coordinator of regional cooperation and integration in the Asia-Pacific. Yet, the emergence of AUKUS is presenting new trends that may have an impact on ASEAN's role and influence in the region. This section discusses the implications of AUKUS for ASEAN's centrality and its ability to maintain its position as the primary regional organization. The establishment of AUKUS, which will focus primarily on trilateral security cooperation, may marginalise the ASEAN's influence in some areas where it is

concerned. ASEAN's capacity to influence security discussions and decision-making processes could be called into question as AUKUS expands military ties and coordination with its member states. It can emerge a reduced role for ASEAN in regional security administration, especially with regards to areas directly related to AUKUS' priorities, such as maritime safety and strategic balancing against China. The creation of AUKUS could change the dynamics and establish new avenues for cooperation in which Southeast Asia's key role would not be eliminated. Other countries may benefit from the emphasis on trilateral cooperation and security-centric nature of the alliance, which can enable them to seek partnerships that are not dominated by ASEAN's mechanisms. It can result in the formation of new sub-regional or issue-based groupings that operate parallel to ASEAN, thereby diluting ASEAN's centrality and its capacity to act as the primary regional coordinator (Yoshimatsu, 2023).

The processes of decision making in ASEAN are characterised by a consensus approach which has been instrumental to maintaining unity between its diverse member states. However, efforts to achieve consensus in ASEAN are likely to be hampered by the emergence of AUKUS as well as its possible influence on power dynamics within the region. It might be more difficult for ASEAN to achieve a common position on key security issues, if its interests are divergent and the levels of alignment with AUKUS vary from one member state to another. Such a situation could result in fragmented responses as well as weakening ASEAN's cohesion. On the other hand, ASEAN has the capacity to remain a central figure and maintain its continued role as an essential driver or coordinator for regional cooperation if it demonstrates that it is capable of addressing emerging security concerns in its member states. Therefore, ASEAN could have to adjust its strategies and pursue a more proactive approach with AUKUS if it is to avoid potential challenges from the alliance (Swanström and Panda, 2021).

Nevertheless, the formation of AUKUS, with its focus on trilateral security cooperation, poses a significant risk of undermining ASEAN's centrality in regional affairs. ASEAN's influence over the discussion of security and on decisions could weaken as AUKUS strengthens military cooperation and coordination between its member states. This could have an impact on issues relating to regional security, in particular those directly aligned with the AUKUS agenda, which would lead to ASEAN being ignored. AUKUS's establishment has the potential to disrupt and weaken existing regional cooperation mechanisms, as countries may choose to prioritize partnerships within the alliance over ASEAN-led initiatives. The alliance's security-centric



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approach may attract other countries in the region to pursue alternative avenues for collaboration, leading to the formation of new sub-regional or issue-based groupings. It could result in fragmentation of cooperation efforts between countries and reduce ASEAN's ability to serve as a lead coordinator for the regional initiatives (Charney, 2022).

The emergence of AUKUS could exacerbate existing divisions within ASEAN member states regarding their alignment with major powers. The process of consensus building and establishing decisions in ASEAN can be hindered by divergent views on AUKUS as well as different levels of engagement between member countries with the alliance. It could make it difficult for ASEAN to present a united and unified stance on critical regional security issues, resulting in diminished sense of unity and compromise. AUKUS' focus on trilateral security cooperation may divert the attention and resources of major powers, such as the US and Australia, away from engaging with ASEAN and participating in ASEAN-led mechanisms. In the framework of ASEAN initiatives and forums, this could be seen as a reduction in diplomatic engagement by these powers. In order to address regional security challenges and foster cooperation, ASEAN may therefore be confronted with problems when it comes to effective dialogue with a wide range of powers (Thayer, 2022).

AUKUS has the potential to redefine regional power dynamics in the Asia-Pacific, particularly in relation to the influence of major powers. The strengthened military capabilities and strategic alignment among AUKUS members may tilt the balance of power in the region, potentially diminishing ASEAN's relative influence. It can lead to ASEAN's marginalized role in shaping regional security architectures and decision-making processes, with major powers exerting greater influence over the regional agenda. Finally, the establishment of AUKUS poses considerable risks and difficulties for ASEAN's role as a leading regional driver and coordinator. The alliance's focus on trilateral security cooperation, the potential fragmentation of regional cooperation, and the redefinition of power dynamics may undermine ASEAN's centrality and diminish its capacity to shape regional affairs (Emmers and Rüländ, 2021).

3.2. The Responses from ASEAN Countries towards AUKUS SSNs

The AUKUS nuclear-powered agreement has raised concerns about the potential challenges and risks it poses to ASEAN centrality in the region. ASEAN has historically played a central role in maintaining peace, stability, and diplomatic cooperation among its member states. Nevertheless,

new dynamics that could jeopardise ASEAN's role as a regional driver and coordinator are emerging from the arrival of AUKUS with its focus on improving military capabilities through the acquisition of nuclear submarines. The possible shift in the balance of power between regions will be one of the key challenges. Increased military capability by the AUKUS countries, particularly Australia, can disrupt existing power dynamics and create imbalances that could be detrimental to ASEAN's influence. In the field of regional security matters, this shift in power could allow AUKUS countries to exert greater influence and possibly cut off ASEAN's role as a mediator for disputes and promotion of multilateral cooperation. In addition, the dynamics of alliances in the region could also be influenced by the creation of an AUKUS alliance. The strengthening of AUKUS military cooperation could lead to a realignment of alliances, with countries reassessing their partnerships and potentially moving towards AUKUS countries for security cooperation. In doing so, it could undermine efforts by ASEAN to preserve a balance and inclusive regional security architecture (Schneider, 2022).

Diplomatic relations within the region may also be impacted by the AUKUS agreement. Tensions and mistrust between the ASEAN member states, in particular those whose territories are at stake or with contrary strategic interests, could arise as a result of their strengthening defence ties with AUKUS countries. ASEAN's ability to foster consensus and cooperation among its members may be challenged as countries navigate their relationships with the AUKUS countries and address potential security implications. Finally, the ASEAN centrality in this region faces significant challenges and risks as a result of the agreement on nuclear power by AUKUS. A threat to ASEAN's role as a key driver and coordinator of the Asia-Pacific region is not only potential change in political balance, but also changes in alliance dynamics that have an impact on diplomacy. In order to guarantee ASEAN's role and maintain balanced, inclusive regional security architecture, it will need to manage these challenges carefully and engage proactively with the AUKUS countries.

The common point of the ASEAN countries that react or express their concerns to SSNs is the reservation that Australia will initiate the violation of the principle of denuclearization in the region. The lack of a positive approach to political and military integration among ASEAN countries and the increased risk of being surrounded by nuclear powers will lead ASEAN countries to develop their own defence policies and the possibility of member states to agree on developing a common security understanding will decrease. Despite the presence of political and military



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"pressure" on ASEAN, ASEAN member states have not yet taken any significant measures regarding the future of the organization in the face of the nuclear arms race. For this reason, there is no clear answer to the question of whether ASEAN will continue its central role in the regional integration process. When ASEAN countries, caught between Australia's nuclear-powered submarine and nuclear power India's strategy moves, do not follow other regional actors in the arms race, the understanding advocated by ASEAN centrality will disappear (Cheng, 2022).

Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia have different reactions to the SSNs agreement, which shows how different strategies are in the regional interests of these countries. For example, Singapore mentions that the presence of AUKUS and nuclear-enhanced defence technology in the region is a positive development and a strong stabilizing factor, while Malaysia points out that the nuclear agenda is kept away from its exclusive economic zone and that the development of SSNs will cause some states to follow more in threatening ways on their foreign policies and security constructions. Examples such as AUKUS and ASEAN show the importance of both countries maintaining their own agenda and increasing their strong organizational structure. On the other hand, AUKUS stands out as a good example both in understanding the effectiveness of a small number of parties in the decision-making mechanism and in showing the importance of historical alliances in strategic issues. However, besides all the positive observations, it is useful to state the fact that it will also contribute to the swelling of polarization and the nuclear arms race (Heydarian, 2023).

The Indonesian government expressed concerns over the AUKUS agreement, particularly regarding the potential escalation of tensions and arms race in the region. Indonesia emphasized the importance of dialogue and peaceful resolutions in addressing security challenges. Indonesia has reacted to the AUKUS agreement in a careful and concerned manner, taking note of the Australian Government's decision to acquire submarines that run on atomic energy. It emphasises the importance of maintaining stability and peace in the region, as it is deeply concerned by the continued development of arms race and power projection across the region. Indonesia underlines that compliance with all nuclear non-proliferation commitments is of great importance for Australia and calls on it to adhere to its responsibilities under international agreements like the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC). Indonesia calls for a constructive approach to resolving differences in order to promote peaceful dialogue. In this respect, as a means to ensure peace and security in

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the region, the country underlines the importance of respecting international law such as the UNCLOS (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of The Republic of Indonesia, 2021).

Malaysia recognizes the legitimate concerns of countries seeking to enhance their defence capabilities in line with their respective requirements. However, Malaysia emphasises the importance of respecting principles and current domestic law in keeping with its stance on the AUKUS Agreement. In principle, Malaysia emphasises the need to ensure full respect and observance of a Malaysian established regime for nuclear propulsion submarine operation within its territorial waters by all parties involved in this security partnership. This regime encompasses international frameworks such as UNCLOS, the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapons Free Zone (SEANWFZ) Treaty, and the ASEAN Declaration on the Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality (ZOPFAN). Malaysia underlines the importance of these agreements for preserving regional stability, peace and neutrality as well as calling on all interested parties to strictly observe them within the AUKUS alliance (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Malaysia, 2023).

Phạm Thu Hằng, Deputy Spokesman of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, stressed that there are common goals for nations in terms of peace, stability, cooperation and continuous engagement within both regional and international contexts at a regular press conference held in Hanoi. Hằng underlined that all countries are responsible for meeting these common objectives, and reminded them of their obligation to make a contribution. Emphasizing that the use and regulation of nuclear energy should be guided by absolute safety for individuals and the environment, Hằng emphasized its importance in achieving peaceful purposes as well as using it to advance societies' socioeconomic development. In recognition of the potential benefits and risks associated with atomic energy use, this statement is based on Vietnam's willingness to act responsibly and develop sustainably (“Việt Nam urges peaceful”, 2023).

The Philippines expressed appreciation to the AUKUS parties for their efforts in providing information and updates on the Alliance, in its official statement. The Philippines has confirmed their recent statement and highlighted its commitment to strengthen existing bilateral security arrangements in the region. The statement has, in particular, pointed out that the assurances given to AUKUS at senior level on its contribution to maintaining regional peace and stability have been fulfilled. In addition, the importance of ensuring that the regional security architecture is based on the central role played by ASEAN has been underlined. The Philippines stressed that the country's



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focus on deeper regional cooperation, sustained economic dynamism and resilience essential for national development and regional security should be aligned with a partnership or arrangements within the Indo-Pacific including AUKUS. The Philippines' position on ensuring that regional partnerships are aligned with its priorities, contributing towards overall stability and prosperity across the region is reflected in its statement (Rocamora, 2023).

Singapore expressed support for the AUKUS agreement, acknowledging the need for enhanced regional security cooperation. In order to guarantee stability and prosperity in the region, however, Singapore also highlighted the importance of inclusive regional frameworks and maintaining ASEAN's central role (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Singapore, 2021).

In summary, it has been shown from this review that Australia comments that the issue of SSNs will help it increase its commercial capacity and be effective in protecting its exclusive economic zone. The Australian Foreign Minister, Penny Wong, explains that ASEAN's concerns about Australia's possession of nuclear weapons are unfounded ("Australia FM stresses" , 2022). The reason why Australia takes ASEAN's concerns so seriously is that it is a dialogue partner in ASEAN and the ARF and is a member of the EAS. It is understood that Australia will not allow such "anxiety" to affect its commercial and political relations with ASEAN (Singh, 2021).

Conclusion

The AUKUS submarine strategy presents a complex set of challenges to ASEAN centrality in the Indo-Pacific region. The strategy risks jeopardising the delicate unity that ASEAN has worked so hard to foster among its members, if it prioritises armed forces over diplomacy. The potential for an arms race triggered by the introduction of advanced nuclear-powered submarines could upset the delicate balance of power that ASEAN has sought to maintain, leading to heightened tensions and a shift in regional dynamics. Furthermore, the AUKUS approach risks marginalising ASEAN's vital role as a mediator for maritime disputes. This strategy would undermine the importance of diplomacy and peaceful resolution of conflict, which are central principles of ASEAN's foreign policy, because it relies on a security framework where emphasis is placed on troop strength. This will reduce the importance for ASEAN as a mediator and make it less capable of maintaining stability in the region.

To address these challenges and safeguard ASEAN centrality, it is vital for ASEAN member states to engage in open and constructive dialogue with the AUKUS partners. By



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expressing their concerns and emphasizing the principles of ASEAN centrality, member states can ensure that their interests are taken into account and that the partnership does not overshadow ASEAN's regional leadership. Moreover, in order to resolve conflicts and preserve stability, the importance of diplomacy and cooperation security frameworks should continue to be given high priority by ASEAN. By maintaining its commitment to dialogue, ASEAN can assert its relevance and influence in shaping the future of the Indo-Pacific region. Overall, ASEAN's centrality is not an irreconcilable task given the risks posed by AUKUS submarine strategy.



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