

ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF AUKUS AND ITS STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS FOR ASEAN'S REGIONAL SECURITY

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Abstract: *The formation of AUKUS, a trilateral security alliance between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, has introduced a significant transformation in the strategic landscape of the Indo-Pacific region. Officially announced in September 2021, the pact aims to strengthen Australia's defense capabilities, particularly through the acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines, as a strategic response to the growing influence of China. While AUKUS is presented as a mechanism to uphold a rules-based international order and promote regional stability, its broader implications for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) are complex and multifaceted. This study critically examines the impact of AUKUS on ASEAN's regional security framework, focusing on both the challenges and opportunities it presents. Key concerns include the potential for an arms race, increased militarization, and the risk of internal divisions among ASEAN member states due to differing strategic alignments with global powers. Furthermore, the emergence of AUKUS raises questions about ASEAN's centrality and its capacity to maintain a neutral, inclusive, and cohesive regional security architecture. Conversely, AUKUS may serve as a catalyst for ASEAN to reassess its security strategies, strengthen intra-regional cooperation, and enhance resilience against external pressures. By analyzing the diverse responses of ASEAN member states, this research*

underscores the need for unified and adaptive approaches to navigate the evolving geopolitical environment. The findings highlight ASEAN's pivotal role in maintaining peace, stability, and strategic balance in the Indo-Pacific amid intensifying competition among major powers.

Keywords: AUKUS, ASEAN, Regional Security, Southeast Asia

Introduction

On 15 September 2021, Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States jointly announced the establishment of a strengthened trilateral security alliance known as AUKUS. The primary objective of this partnership is to enhance Australia's defense capabilities, particularly through the acquisition of submarines powered by nuclear energy. In addition to this, the agreement encompasses eleven areas of cooperation, including cybersecurity, space technology, defense industry collaboration, surveillance, and intelligence sharing (Manurung, H., 2024; Li, 2022). While AUKUS is widely perceived as a strategic response to China's expanding influence, it also significantly affects the strategic calculations of other stakeholders in the South China Sea (Shi, 2022).

The alliance seeks to establish a robust coalition capable of exerting strategic and diplomatic pressure on Beijing, urging compliance with international law across the Indo-Pacific and Southeast Asia. This initiative is not solely about containment; it is equally focused on conflict prevention and the preservation of regional stability, aiming to avoid the escalation of tensions into a full-blown confrontation or a resurgence of Cold War-style rivalries (Wilkins, 2025). As the first significant multilateral military alliance to emerge in the Asia-Pacific region in over thirty years, AUKUS represents a pivotal shift in the geopolitical landscape. It is designed not only to counterbalance China's growing influence but also to reinforce the rules-based international order that has underpinned global peace and prosperity since the end of World War II. By integrating advanced defense technologies, enhancing interoperability among member states, and promoting strategic coordination, AUKUS positions itself as a cornerstone of collective security and deterrence in a rapidly evolving regional environment.

The Biden administration has emphasized that the United States cannot address complex security challenges in isolation and must rely on strategic partnerships. AUKUS, therefore, represents a pivotal shift in U.S. foreign policy, reinforcing alliances and expanding its presence in a region critical to maintaining global influence (Shihundu, 2025). The agreement also compels member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) particularly those with territorial disputes in the South China Sea, such as Vietnam and the Philippines to reassess their security postures. While some ASEAN members view AUKUS as a deterrent to Chinese assertiveness, others, including Indonesia and Malaysia, express concerns regarding increased militarization and the erosion of ASEAN's neutrality (Li, 2022).

Moreover, AUKUS presents a significant challenge to ASEAN's longstanding role as the central platform for regional security dialogue. By promoting minilateralism, which is a strategic approach that favors cooperation among a small group of like-minded states, AUKUS potentially sidelines broader and more inclusive mechanisms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum and the East Asia Summit. This shift reflects a growing preference among major powers for more agile and outcome-oriented frameworks, but it also risks undermining ASEAN's

foundational principles of consensus and neutrality. Consequently, ASEAN's centrality and cohesion are being tested as the Indo-Pacific region becomes a focal point in the intensifying strategic rivalry between the United States and China, placing pressure on member states to balance national interests with regional unity (Hoang, 2022).

Australia's enhanced role through AUKUS underscores a broader strategic realignment. The acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines, potentially equipped with advanced cruise missile systems, signifies a substantial transformation in Australia's defense posture. This development reflects a shift in Canberra's perception of China from a strategic partner to a principal security threat (Novita, 2022). As ASEAN member states are geographically situated around the strategically vital South China Sea, they are increasingly exposed to the security implications of this evolving alliance. Although the current geopolitical context differs from the Cold War era, notable parallels can be drawn. The Indo-Pacific is once again becoming a theater for great power competition, now centered on technological supremacy and competing governance models (Shihundu, 2025). The United States, unable to secure full cooperation from ASEAN, opted to bypass the bloc in favor of a more agile and targeted alliance structure. However, the long-term effectiveness of AUKUS remains uncertain, with many Southeast Asian observers warning of its potential to destabilize the regional security order (Li, 2022).

There is growing concern that AUKUS could trigger a nuclear arms race, thereby undermining ASEAN's vision of a Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality (ZOPFAN). The alliance also raises the risk of ASEAN losing its central role in regional multilateral security frameworks (Li, 2022). From the perspective of the security dilemma, divergent responses among ASEAN member states may exacerbate regional tensions and accelerate military buildups (Sobarini, 2021). These developments underscore the urgent need for ASEAN to critically assess the implications of AUKUS and to reinforce its centrality in maintaining peace, stability, and strategic autonomy in the Indo-Pacific.

Research Objectives

Having a clear understanding of a project's research objective paves the way for other important decisions about the design and running of the project (Thomas & Hodges, 2010). To specify, this research demonstrates several objectives that can be achieved, as follows:

- i. To analyze the underlying reasons for the varied reactions among ASEAN member states in response to AUKUS.
- ii. To examine the potential challenges that AUKUS may pose to ASEAN's regional security architecture.

Research Question

Alvesson and Sandberg (2013) emphasize that a defining criterion of a research question is its research ability. Furthermore, research questions serve as the backbone of any study, guiding the identification of key variables and shaping the overall inquiry (Creswell, 2018). Based on the objectives outlined above, this research is guided by the following questions:

- i. Why has AUKUS elicited different reactions among ASEAN member states?
- ii. In what ways could AUKUS pose challenges to ASEAN's regional security framework?

Scope Of Study

The scope of the study will focus on four key dimensions: geography, time, content, and methodology. Geographically, it centers on ASEAN member states within Southeast Asia, particularly those directly or indirectly affected by the AUKUS agreement. The temporal scope spans from September 2021, when AUKUS was officially announced, to the present, while also considering relevant prior events that may have influenced the agreement's formation and reception. In terms of content, the study aims to explore the implications of AUKUS on ASEAN members, with a particular emphasis on regional security dynamics and strategic positioning. Methodologically, the research adopts a qualitative approach, utilizing official statements, policy documents, academic literature, and expert analyses to assess ASEAN's responses and the broader impact of AUKUS on the region's security architecture.

Literature Review

Despite its recent inception on 2021, the AUKUS pact has already sparked considerable academic and strategic discourse, particularly regarding its implications for regional security dynamics. Scholars have examined how the trilateral security partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States aims to counterbalance China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific. The pact's provision for sharing nuclear submarine technology with Australia has been viewed as a significant shift in defense cooperation, raising concerns about nuclear proliferation and the potential escalation of military tensions in the region. These developments have prompted debates on the future of strategic stability and the evolving nature of alliances in the 21st century.

In the context of Southeast Asia, AUKUS presents a complex challenge for ASEAN member states, which traditionally prioritize neutrality and regional cohesion. While some ASEAN countries have cautiously welcomed the pact to maintain balance in the Indo-Pacific, others fear it may provoke an arms race or undermine ASEAN's centrality in regional security architecture. Emerging literature highlights how ASEAN's strategic positioning is being tested, as member states navigate the pressures of aligning with major powers while preserving their autonomy. This evolving landscape underscores the need for ASEAN to reassess its diplomatic strategies and strengthen intra-regional cooperation to remain relevant amid shifting geopolitical currents.

The emergence of AUKUS, a trilateral security pact

The AUKUS trilateral security pact, announced on 15 September 2021, represents a strategic partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Its primary aim is to enhance defense and security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region, particularly in response to China's growing assertiveness. The pact is structured around two pillars: Pillar I focuses on helping Australia acquire conventionally armed, nuclear-powered submarines, while Pillar II promotes collaboration in advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence, quantum computing, and cyber capabilities (Council on Foreign Relations, 2023; Denmark & Edel, 2025). AUKUS is widely regarded as a bold geopolitical move to reinforce deterrence and stability in a region increasingly shaped by great power competition.

This initiative is expected to dramatically enhance Australia's naval reach and strategic deterrence, with the first submarines projected to be delivered in the 2030s (National Bureau of Asian Research, 2025). However, this aspect of AUKUS has raised concerns regarding nuclear non-proliferation. Critics argue that the deal exploits a loophole in the Treaty on the Non-

Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), allowing non-nuclear weapon states to remove nuclear material from International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards for naval reactor use (Acton, 2021; Gold, 2025). While Australia is not expected to misuse the material, the precedent could be problematic for global nuclear governance. The announcement of AUKUS caused a diplomatic rift, particularly with France, which had previously secured a \$90 billion submarine contract with Australia. France viewed the abrupt cancellation of the deal as a betrayal, with Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian describing it as “a stab in the back” (Staunton, 2021). In protest, France temporarily recalled its ambassadors from Washington and Canberra. Although relations have since improved, the incident highlighted tensions among Western allies and raised questions about transparency and trust in international partnerships (Bachelier & Pajon, 2022). France’s reaction also underscored its strategic ambitions in the Indo-Pacific, which were undermined by its exclusion from the pact.

In Southeast Asia, reactions to AUKUS have been mixed. While some countries appreciate the effort to maintain regional balance, others express concern that the pact could escalate military competition and undermine ASEAN’s centrality in regional security architecture (Harun, 2022; Indo-Pacific Studies Center, 2025). Malaysia and Indonesia, for instance, have voiced apprehensions about the potential for a regional arms race and the implications of nuclear-powered submarines operating in their waters. The concept of “strategic equilibrium,” as articulated by Australian officials, seeks to reassure regional partners that AUKUS is not aimed at confrontation but at preserving a rules-based order (Silverberg, Sharpe, & Murray, 2025). Nonetheless, the long-term impact of AUKUS on regional stability and diplomatic relations remains to be seen.

The Security Dilemma in ASEAN on AUKUS Pact

A security dilemma arises when actions taken by a state to increase its security in such as forming alliances or enhancing military capabilities that lead other states to feel threatened, prompting them to respond in kind. This dynamic can result in an arms race or increased regional instability. In the context of ASEAN, the AUKUS pact has introduced a multi-layered ontological security dilemma, as articulated by Umar and Santoso (2023). Their analysis identifies three core dimensions of this dilemma. First, the tension between balance of power and regional stability is evident in the reactions of countries like Indonesia and Malaysia, which have expressed concern that AUKUS could disrupt the regional equilibrium and provoke an arms race. The introduction of nuclear-powered submarines is perceived as a potential catalyst for increased militarization in Southeast Asia (Umar & Santoso, 2023).

Second, the dilemma between security and sovereignty is reflected in the more favorable or neutral stances of countries such as Singapore, Vietnam, and the Philippines. These nations view AUKUS as a strategic counterbalance to China’s assertiveness, particularly in the South China Sea, where territorial disputes have heightened tensions (Li, 2022). Third, ASEAN’s organizational cohesion is challenged by the divergent responses among its member states. The bloc’s foundational principles of centrality and consensus-based decision-making are undermined by the lack of a unified stance on AUKUS, revealing a deeper institutional dilemma that threatens ASEAN’s ability to act as a cohesive regional security actor (Umar & Santoso, 2023).

One significant study by Sobarini, Ahmad Rajab, and Waluyo (2021), titled *“AUKUS Pact in the Perspective of Security Dilemma”*, examines the implications of AUKUS through the lens of the security dilemma is a concept rooted in realist theory. The authors argue that the pact, which enhances military cooperation among Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, has triggered concerns across the Indo-Pacific region, including among ASEAN member states. The study highlights that increased military capabilities may be perceived as offensive, thereby exacerbating regional tensions and potentially leading to an arms race. The authors emphasize two core aspects of the security dilemma: first, that military build-up is often interpreted as a threat, and second, that distinguishing between defensive and offensive postures is inherently difficult.

Furthermore, the study observes that ASEAN member states have responded differently to AUKUS, largely influenced by their respective relationships with China. While some countries have expressed support, others have voiced apprehension, reflecting the complex geopolitical dynamics within the region. Importantly, the authors note that these divergent national responses do not necessarily represent ASEAN’s collective stance, but they do pose challenges to the organization’s centrality and neutrality in regional security affairs. The paper concludes by stressing the importance of mutual trust and cooperation to maintain stability, although it acknowledges that the initial reactions captured may evolve over time (Sobarini et al, 2021).

AUKUS: The Changing Dynamic and Its Regional Implications

The AUKUS trilateral security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States is widely regarded as a strategic response to China’s increasing assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific, particularly in the South China Sea. The alliance aims to rebalance regional power dynamics by enhancing the military capabilities of its member states, reinforcing deterrence, and promoting deeper integration among allies. AUKUS also seeks to uphold the principles of freedom of navigation and adherence to international norms, countering China’s expansive maritime claims and growing influence in the region (Ellis, 2025).

The emergence of AUKUS has posed a significant challenge to ASEAN’s centrality in the regional security architecture. Traditionally, ASEAN has positioned itself as the cornerstone of multilateral security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, facilitating dialogue through platforms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the East Asia Summit (EAS). However, the formation of AUKUS, with its exclusive membership and focus on advanced military capabilities, has raised concerns about the marginalization of ASEAN-led mechanisms and the erosion of its influence in shaping regional security norms (Prayitno, 2021). Southeast Asian nations now face an ontological security dilemma, which refers to the tension between maintaining national autonomy and engaging in external security partnerships.

Countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia have expressed apprehension over the nuclear dimensions of AUKUS, fearing it could trigger an arms race and undermine regional stability. Conversely, Singapore, Vietnam, and the Philippines have adopted a more pragmatic stance, viewing AUKUS as a potential counterbalance to China’s assertiveness in the South China Sea. This divergence in perspectives reflects the broader challenge ASEAN faces in preserving unity while navigating complex geopolitical rivalries (Umar & Santoso, 2023). Moreover, ASEAN’s internal fragmentation over AUKUS complicates its ability to respond cohesively to shifting strategic dynamics. The alliance’s emphasis on high-tech military cooperation and nuclear-

powered submarines has exposed ASEAN's limited capacity to influence major power interactions in the region. As a result, ASEAN must reconsider its strategic frameworks and leadership roles to remain relevant. Scholars argue that enhancing the role of the ASEAN chair and strengthening regional institutions could help mitigate the security dilemma and reinforce ASEAN's position as a stabilizing force amid intensifying U.S.–China competition (Li, 2022; Umar & Santoso, 2023)

A critical examination of evolving security dynamics in the Indo-Pacific region is presented in article, AUKUS: The Changing Dynamic and Its Regional Implications. The study investigates the strategic impact of the AUKUS trilateral alliance comprising the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia on regional stability and geopolitical balance. Cheng offers a detailed account of the alliance's formation and strategic objectives, particularly in response to China's expanding influence. The article highlights AUKUS's potential to reshape regional power structures, with a focus on the introduction of nuclear-powered submarine technology and other advanced defense capabilities. Cheng warns that these developments may provoke a regional arms race, thereby complicating efforts to maintain peace and stability. Furthermore, the paper explores the varied responses of regional actors, especially within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), emphasizing concerns over nuclear proliferation, strategic realignment, and the diminishing role of ASEAN in regional security governance.

Cheng (2022) further analyzes the reactions of regional powers such as ASEAN member states, Japan, and India, highlighting how AUKUS may influence their security strategies. The article suggests that while the alliance aims to enhance military capabilities and deter threats, it could also escalate tensions with China, which perceives AUKUS as a direct challenge to its regional dominance. The author presents a balanced view, acknowledging both the strategic benefits and the risks of increased militarization, and stresses the importance of strategic coordination among regional actors to mitigate potential instability. At the conclusion, the article argues that AUKUS may disrupt the balance of power and intensify tensions in the Indo-Pacific. Although the alliance offers certain strategic advantages, Cheng emphasizes the need for cooperative efforts among regional powers to maintain stability. However, a notable gap in the study is its limited analysis of ASEAN's specific responses and the broader implications for Southeast Asia. This omission suggests a need for further research to understand how ASEAN nations might navigate the evolving security landscape shaped by AUKUS.

Research Methods

Research methods consist of three elements: (a) the forms of data collection; (b) analysis; and (c) interpretation that the researchers propose for their studies (Abutabenjeh & Jaradat, 2018). This chapter will provide a brief overview of the study of the topic, and it is intended to be a qualitative method considering all the literature reviews also using the same method. The data collection technique, variable discovers, and data analysis will be analyzed and issues in the problem statement will be investigated thoroughly. Imenda (2014) stated that methodological considerations refer to the research design and the process of addressing a given research problem – including the approach to the literature review, and the nature of the data to be collected, analyzed and interpreted. However, according to Abutabenjeh (2018), a lot of research methods and designs are available for social study such as experiments, survey research, qualitative field research, unobtrusive research, and evaluation research. This study will use a qualitative research method that involves the collection of non-numerical data and

also will use methods such as content analysis and in-depth interviews with subject matter experts in the field.

Research Design and Sampling

Given the qualitative nature of this research study, the traditional concepts of measurement and instrumentation are not applicable. Therefore, the emphasis will be on gathering rich, descriptive data through methods such as interviews, and document analysis. Using a qualitative method, this study seeks to provide a contextual understanding of the research topic, allowing for an exploration of individuals' experiences, knowledge and perspectives. This will provide an understanding towards the research questions considering this area is non-numerical and all the variables will be explained using qualitative research methods such as in-depth interviews. In this study, the dependent variable that has been identified is neo-realism, as the foundational theory. This research will emphasize key principles of the theory towards the pact and elaborate in depth on different reactions of ASEAN towards this pact and will focus on implications towards ASEAN regional security.

The sampling technique conducted in this research study will be purposive sampling. This method will allow for the intentional selection of subject matter experts in the field under investigation. The use of purposive sampling will enable the researcher to engage with highly knowledgeable individuals who possess the necessary expertise to shed light on the research problem and generate rich data for analysis. The purposive of sampling as a non-probability sampling technique that involves intentionally selecting individuals or cases based on specific criteria relevant to the research objectives. Due to the nature of qualitative research, the determination of a specific sample size is not applicable. Instead, the emphasis will be on selecting participants who possess relevant knowledge and experiences related to the research topic.

For data collection, Yin, R. K. (2014) focused on the steps related to data collection and emphasized the importance of “when, how, what, from whom, and how to analyze” data. For this study, an in-depth interview was conducted, and based on purposive sampling, a total of five informants from backgrounds closely related to the study were interviewed through in-depth interviews. In addition to the in-depth interviews, secondary data were also collected to support and assist the study in identifying patterns or differing outcomes throughout its progression. The secondary data included published journals, documentation, speeches, news articles, and all related materials gathered from 2021 up to the present date.

Results

AUKUS Implications For ASEAN's Regional Security

AUKUS is a strengthened trilateral security partnership announced jointly by the leaders of the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom on September 15, 2021. Its initial areas of cooperation include undersea capabilities, quantum technologies, artificial intelligence, and cyber security. The most notable aspect of the agreement was the U.S. and U.K.'s decision to support Australia's acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines (SSNs). The announcement of AUKUS immediately reverberated across global political and policy circles. France reacted angrily, as Paris had been excluded from the negotiations, and its existing contract to supply Australia with diesel-powered submarines was abruptly canceled. China also strongly criticized

the pact, with a Foreign Ministry spokesperson calling the SSN collaboration “extremely irresponsible,” claiming it undermines global nuclear non-proliferation efforts and heightens regional tensions and the arms race (Xinhua, 2022).

Several U.S. allies in Asia, including South Korea and Japan, expressed support for AUKUS. The European Union and its member states offered mixed reactions—some voiced disappointment over the secrecy of the negotiations, while others reaffirmed their commitment to the transatlantic alliance (Marafona, 2021). Meanwhile, ASEAN and its ten member states have become a focal point of discussions surrounding AUKUS for several reasons.

First, ASEAN has long sought to position itself as the central actor in regional security dialogues by hosting key forums such as the East Asia Summit, ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting Plus, ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and ASEAN Ministerial Meetings with dialogue partners. Preserving its relevance in regional security architecture is a priority (E-International Relations, 2025). In this context, the trajectory of AUKUS—a minilateral security arrangement—cannot be entirely divorced from ASEAN’s response. Second, Southeast Asia has produced some of the most critical reactions to AUKUS. Malaysia and Indonesia, for instance, expressed serious concerns, while other states remained silent or offered implicit support. These positions may evolve over time, making it essential to examine the factors shaping regional attitudes toward AUKUS.

Third, ASEAN has become strategically significant for major powers amid intensifying geostrategic competition in the Indo-Pacific. How Southeast Asian governments navigate the growing rivalry between China and the U.S.-led security alliance—symbolized by AUKUS—will influence the region’s strategic landscape. Finally, Australia’s nuclear-powered submarines are expected to operate primarily in Southeast Asian waters, particularly the South China Sea. Consequently, AUKUS’s ability to deter China will depend heavily on regional responses (Li, 2022).

Despite varying national positions, one year after its announcement, ASEAN appears to have cautiously accepted AUKUS as a new reality. The grouping now faces two major challenges: managing the escalating U.S.-China rivalry with prudence and preserving ASEAN’s unity and centrality amid the emergence of this new trilateral security arrangement. ASEAN’s reluctant acceptance underscores that AUKUS will introduce significant changes to Indo-Pacific security dynamics. While AUKUS may struggle in the short term to achieve the deterrence and balance envisioned by its founders, indications suggest it could expand its influence by fostering partnerships and practical cooperation with other regional actors, including ASEAN members. Strategic alignments in the region may become increasingly competitive and polarized as U.S.-China rivalry deepens (Storey, 2023).

The revival of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD)—comprising the United States, Japan, Australia, and India—has been another major development in recent years. Since 2017, QUAD members have intensified collaboration to counter China’s influence through military exercises, technology standards (e.g., 5G), COVID-19 assistance, and climate initiatives (Medcalf, 2022). Nevertheless, AUKUS represents a more consequential shift in regional security relations than QUAD. Many view its formation as a clear signal of Washington’s heightened strategic commitment to addressing challenges posed by China’s rise, particularly

in the Indo-Pacific. This marks a significant recalibration of U.S. alliance strategy in Asia, making ASEAN's response critical (Medcalf, R, 2022).

Given their emphasis on ASEAN's neutrality and centrality in regional security matters, member states such as Malaysia and Indonesia are likely to oppose AUKUS. They would probably perceive AUKUS as a threat to ASEAN's long-standing principles of non-alignment and non-interference in the security affairs of its members. Rather than viewing ASEAN as a collection of nations aligned with external military powers, these countries regard it as a platform for regional unity and cooperation. Indonesia, one of ASEAN's largest and most influential members, has consistently underscored its commitment to neutrality and its strong adherence to the organization's principles of non-alignment and centrality. Indonesia's foreign policy is driven by the desire to avoid entanglement in superpower rivalries (Ha, H. T, 2021)

Although Indonesia is concerned about China's growing military presence, particularly in the South China Sea, it prefers diplomatic and multilateral engagement over joining a military alliance that could draw the region deeper into U.S.-China competition. This preference for a non-confrontational approach is reflected in Indonesia's emphasis on ASEAN-led mechanisms such as the East Asia Summit (EAS) and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM), which prioritize dialogue and cooperation. Similarly, Malaysia has consistently supported ASEAN's neutral and peaceful stance, avoiding military arrangements that could provoke instability in the region. Malaysian leaders fear that AUKUS might escalate military tensions and undermine ASEAN's efforts to maintain harmony and peace.

Malaysia places high value on principles of peaceful conflict resolution and mutual respect. Its leadership remains cautious about any agreement that could weaken ASEAN's role as the primary forum for Southeast Asian dialogue. Consequently, Malaysia is more likely to advocate for diplomatic engagement rather than military confrontation as a means of addressing regional security challenges.

Analyze how AUKUS could pose challenges ASEAN regional security

In the post-Cold War era, ASEAN assumed responsibility for guiding several regional institutions to reduce competition among extra-regional powers. When no major state was willing to take the lead in establishing security cooperation, ASEAN stepped in to fill the gap. This proactive approach was reflected in initiatives such as the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia, the Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN), and the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ), through which ASEAN leaders sought to advance their own norms and objectives in managing relations with major powers.

However, concerns about ASEAN's ability to maintain its pivotal role in regional security multilateralism have grown significantly in recent years. These concerns stem from the sharp escalation of strategic rivalry between the United States and China, as well as the emergence of several minilateral arrangements, including the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD). ASEAN leaders have expressed frustration over their inability to set the agenda at key regional forums such as the East Asia Summit and to mediate great-power competition effectively. Signs of internal discord among ASEAN members on issues such as the South China Sea disputes have further weakened the organization's cohesion. The rise of AUKUS represents an even more serious challenge to ASEAN's leadership role in regional security (Hutagalung, S. 2024)

When Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison announced AUKUS, ASEAN was mentioned only briefly, with Morrison stating that the pact “will complement Australia’s network of strategic partnerships, including with our ASEAN friends”. This remark underscores the reality that ASEAN faces formidable challenges in addressing regional strategic issues. It also signals to the international community that major developments in the regional security architecture can occur without ASEAN’s involvement. For example, the United States and Australia—two key players—formed the trilateral security pact without prior consultation with ASEAN or ARF partners, delivering a significant blow to the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), which was designed to provide an inclusive platform for dialogue on regional security matters (Ankersen, 2022). Indonesia has expressed deep discomfort at being rendered “publicly redundant” (Sambhi, 2023).

These challenges manifest in three key dimensions. First, the United States and its regional allies have adopted a hard balancing strategy toward China and show little interest in relying on ASEAN’s normative influence, as evidenced by minilateral security arrangements such as AUKUS. Second, AUKUS seeks to deliver tangible results and effective responses to regional security challenges more efficiently than ASEAN institutions, owing to its smaller and more agile membership. These dynamic risks accentuating the existing strategic incoherence within ASEAN (Ha, H. T, 2022). Third, AUKUS undermines the “ASEAN Way,” which emphasizes informality, inclusivity, dialogue, consensus-building, and peaceful conflict resolution (Ronodipuro, 2021). A decline in ASEAN’s normative authority and prominence could trigger a vicious cycle: member states have traditionally supported ASEAN because it enables each to play a larger diplomatic role. If ASEAN’s influence erodes, disparities among its members may deepen, further weakening the organization’s unity. ASEAN’s cautious and hesitant response to AUKUS reflects these concerns about threats to its centrality.

AUKUS poses a direct challenge to ASEAN’s centrality in regional security dynamics, particularly because of its military orientation. ASEAN has long championed a security framework grounded in non-interference, peaceful dispute resolution, and multilateralism. In contrast, AUKUS is a trilateral military pact aimed primarily at countering China’s growing military presence in the Indo-Pacific. This emphasis on military deterrence risks undermining ASEAN’s efforts to maintain an inclusive security architecture that accommodates all regional stakeholders, including China. The provision of nuclear-powered submarines to Australia under AUKUS could be perceived as provocative by Beijing and may trigger an arms race in the region (Li, M., 2022)

ASEAN states, which generally prioritize diplomacy and stability, could find themselves caught between competing interests of China and the U.S.-led bloc, thereby compromising their ability to act autonomously (Chong, 2025) The exclusion of ASEAN from AUKUS’s security arrangements diminishes its role in shaping the Indo-Pacific security landscape, reducing its capacity to maintain strategic autonomy. This exclusion risks creating a polarized environment in which ASEAN members feel pressured to align with either China or the Western bloc, undermining their traditional neutral stance (Caldero, 2024)

ASEAN’s position as a diplomatic leader in the Indo-Pacific is therefore under serious threat. Through platforms such as the East Asia Summit (EAS) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN has long sought to maintain its centrality by fostering inclusive dialogue among

major powers. AUKUS, however, is perceived by some ASEAN members as a military-focused alliance that challenges ASEAN's authority. Countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia fear that AUKUS will heighten regional tensions and erode ASEAN's commitment to stability. ASEAN's conventional approach of neutrality and consensus-building risks being overshadowed by AUKUS's emphasis on military deterrence (Storey & Choong, 2023).

Moreover, ASEAN members striving to maintain balanced relations with both China and the West will face mounting pressure to choose sides, limiting the organization's ability to fulfill its impartial role in regional security governance. By excluding ASEAN, AUKUS risks marginalizing critical regional dialogues and diminishing ASEAN's influence over key security issues. Preserving ASEAN's centrality is essential for sustaining stability and cooperation in the Indo-Pacific (Storey & Choong, 2023).

Ultimately, AUKUS presents ASEAN with both significant challenges and potential opportunities. On one hand, the alliance threatens ASEAN's neutrality by fostering a more polarized security environment. Key ASEAN states such as Malaysia and Indonesia have voiced concerns about the risk of militarization and escalating tensions. On the other hand, AUKUS could incentivize ASEAN to strengthen its own security mechanisms, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM). By actively engaging with AUKUS members, ASEAN can seek to align regional security arrangements with its core principles of non-interference and peaceful coexistence. Taking the lead in discussions on regional stability would allow ASEAN to leverage its diplomatic networks and ensure that AUKUS's influence in the Indo-Pacific is managed in a way that benefits the entire region (Li, M., 2022)

ASEAN's strategic autonomy faces a serious challenge from the AUKUS alliance, particularly if it accelerates the militarization of the Indo-Pacific region. For decades, ASEAN has championed an inclusive regional security architecture that promotes participation from all states, including China, without the constraints of military alignment. However, AUKUS's exclusive focus on countering China risks deepening regional divisions and undermining ASEAN's long-standing principles of neutrality and non-alignment. This development could exacerbate existing security concerns for many ASEAN members. As nuclear-powered submarines and other advanced military technologies gain prominence, ASEAN's commitment to peaceful conflict resolution and cooperative security may be compromised (Hutagalung, 2024)

The emergence of AUKUS could also create pressure on ASEAN states to align with either China or the U.S.-led bloc, thereby eroding their ability to exercise genuine autonomy in foreign policy decision-making. Furthermore, AUKUS is likely to generate a security dilemma, compelling regional states to enhance their military capabilities in response. Such an arms buildup would directly contradict ASEAN's non-confrontational and cooperative security principles (Chong, 2025) This trend toward militarization threatens ASEAN's reputation as a champion of peace and stability, particularly at a time when the region faces urgent non-traditional security challenges such as pandemics, transnational crime, and climate change. Addressing these issues effectively requires ASEAN to maintain its independence and prioritize collaboration over division (Hutagalung, 2024).

Conclusion

ASEAN must adopt a proactive and strategic approach to address the challenges posed by AUKUS, balancing the evolving security dynamics of the Indo-Pacific with its foundational principles of neutrality, regional unity, and multilateralism. Preserving ASEAN's centrality in regional security discourse should remain the bloc's foremost priority. The emergence of AUKUS highlights the limitations of ASEAN's existing mechanisms, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), in managing complex issues like great-power rivalry and the South China Sea disputes. To remain relevant and effective, these mechanisms must be strengthened and adapted to facilitate dialogue and cooperation among all regional actors, including major powers. By prioritizing inclusivity and confidence-building measures, ASEAN can reaffirm its role as a vital platform for addressing regional security challenges.

Simultaneously, ASEAN should enhance its internal security and defense cooperation to bolster strategic autonomy. Initiatives under the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC) Blueprint should focus on deepening intra-bloc military collaboration, intelligence sharing, and joint maritime patrols. Building such capabilities would enable ASEAN to exert greater control over its security environment and reduce dependence on external actors. This approach would reinforce ASEAN's image as a stabilizing force while preventing it from being overshadowed by exclusive alliances such as AUKUS.

In order to overcome these obstacles, ASEAN must work to maintain its unity by promoting agreement on matters of regional security. It will be essential to strengthen its security architecture by establishing more visible conflict prevention tools and improving the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM). To maintain peace in the Indo-Pacific, ASEAN should also work to create a more welcoming security environment that encourages positive communication between all parties involved in the region, including China.

Furthermore, ASEAN should address non-traditional issues like climate change, cybersecurity, and economic resilience in addition to more conventional security concerns. These fields present chances for ASEAN to take the lead and innovate, and they are becoming increasingly important to regional stability. ASEAN may expand its agenda and lessen the chance of being marginalised by programs like AUKUS, which mainly concentrate on military issues, by emphasising overall security.

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The authors reported no conflicts of interest for this work and declare that there is no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this

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