The Impact of the Aukus Trilateral Security Pact on South Pacific Regional Security

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Abstract
The AUKUS Trilateral Security Pact is a form of collective security cooperation, and this study examines its effects on South Pacific regional security. To stabilize regional security in the South Pacific, which is a main target of China’s maritime ambitions, the authors emphasize the urgency of AUKUS’s presence. To shed light on the issue, the authors used the collective security concept to dissect the framework of cooperation, the motives of AUKUS, and the Security Dilemma concept to explain how geopolitical shifts affect the security stability of the South Pacific. This research employed qualitative methods with an explanatory type of research. In this type of research, the formulated hypothesis was tested to see how the variables under study affected one another. According to this research’s findings, AUKUS’s approach to military confrontation as a partnership for collective security actually encourages an aggressive coalition and poses a security risk, thereby increasing the likelihood of further conflict in the South Pacific region.

Keywords: AUKUS, Collective Security, Security Dilemma, South Pacific

1. Introduction

Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States (AUKUS) are a Trilateral Security Pact created by those nations. This cooperation aims to enhance the three countries' security and maintain security in the Pacific region. However, some countries consider that the presence of AUKUS in the region is actually a threat to regional security. Among the AUKUS Security
Pact’s cooperation, the agreement focused on developing nuclear-powered submarines for the Royal Australian Navy has drawn the attention of various nations. The AUKUS Security Pact also drew criticism and negative responses from several countries.

The South Pacific is a region of small island nations with vulnerable political stability, making them particularly susceptible to foreign intervention in trade and military activities. Among them are Fiji, Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands, New Caledonia, East Leste, Australia, New Zealand, and other small islands (Wardhani, 2015). On the other side, Australia is considered the most powerful country, a power center in the region, and the only country capable of influencing other countries. Thus, every activity and problem within the region is always under the supervision and influence of Australia’s foreign policy.

The South Pacific also becomes the prime target of China’s maritime expansion. Its mission is to ensure maritime security, particularly the security of trade passing through Pacific sea lanes (Wallis, 2012). China’s maritime ambitions are outlined in China’s Ocean Development Report, and the South Pacific is a new target for China’s maritime expansion.

Moreover, Australia’s acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines is one of the concerns raised in the AUKUS Security Pact as a major threat to the security of the South Pacific region. Hence, the emergence of AUKUS is deemed to create more competition and potential conflict, particularly for the South Pacific Region, which is remarkably close to Australia.

AUKUS is also a collective security alliance, hinting at the rise in military capacity of the three states associated with AUKUS. It is interesting because the Security Pact, which aims to maintain Pacific security, actually poses a Security Dilemma that threatens South Pacific security. As stated before, the South Pacific region is known to be relatively fragile and has become the key target of China’s maritime expansion. Consequently, the emergence of the new collective security alliance of AUKUS as a new force will positively worsen security in the South Pacific region. It will affect the geopolitics and security of the South Pacific region. Therefore, the authors decided to analyze the impact of the AUKUS Trilateral Security Pact on the geopolitics and security of the South Pacific region.

2. Literature Review

The authors conducted a study of previous research related to this research to avoid repetition of the research in previous studies. In addition, the literature review analyzes and enriches the research discussion and distinguishes it from the research being carried out. The previous research related to this study is as follows:

The first research was conducted by Mariane Olivia Delanova (2012) in the Journal Global & Policy, Vol. 5, No. 2, entitled “Dampak Pakta Pertahanan Trilateral AUKUS Terhadap Kondisi Regional Indo-Pasifik” [The Impact of the AUKUS Trilateral Security Pact on Indo-Pacific Regional Conditions] (Delanova, 2021). The research analyzed the impact of AUKUS and the responses of countries and international organizations in the Indo-Pacific region to the steps taken by AUKUS leaders. In her study, the authors see similarities in using the concept of collective security. However, suppose the author previously examined the impact of AUKUS and the responses of countries in the Indo-Pacific region. In that case, the authors in this research analyze how the AUKUS impacts the South Pacific region, which has long been a close relative of Australia and was not included in the discussion of previous studies. As such, previous research became a comparison and reference for the authors to analyze the impact and response
of countries in the South Pacific region in responding to the AUKUS agreement.

The second study was carried out by Muhammad Badry Muntasyir and Made Panji Teguh Santos (2022) in the Journal Ilmu Hubungan Internasional LIANO Volume 2, Nomor 1, entitled “Southeast Asia’s Geopolitical Dynamics in Responding to the Emergence of AUKUS” (Muntasyir et al., 2022). The study analyzed the geopolitical, defense, and security dynamics in the Southeast Asian region by looking at countries’ responses to the AUKUS treaty. Furthermore, their research provides solutions for ASEAN countries to bring this issue to a high-level conference to demonstrate their interest. In this study, the authors found similarities in analyzing the geopolitical dynamics of countries in the region to determine the extent of the impact caused by the AUKUS agreement. While the authors previously examined countries' responses in the Southeast Asian region, this study’s authors would examine the responses of countries in the South Pacific region. Therefore, the prior study served as a comparison and a point of reference for the authors to examine geopolitical dynamics in the South Pacific region in response to the AUKUS agreement.

The third research was written by Akmal Tawakal (2022) in the Global Insight Journal Volume 7, Number 1, under the title, “Dinamika Keamanan Indo-Pasifik dan Uni Eropa Terkait Aliansi AUKUS” [Indo-Pacific and EU Security Dynamics Regarding the AUKUS Alliance] (Tawakal, 2022). This previous research has discussed AUKUS as a regional alliance formed in response to the Security Dilemma caused by China’s increased military power. Furthermore, the author previously explained the shifting security dynamics in the Indo-Pacific region and the European Union. The current authors uncovered similarities in seeing AUKUS as a collective security alliance. Nevertheless, suppose the previous author examined the impact of AUKUS on the changing security dynamics of the Indo-Pacific and the European Union. In that case, this research’s authors examine the impact of AUKUS on changing security dynamics in the South Pacific region. Hence, previous research is used as a comparison and reference by the authors to assess the impact of AUKUS on changing security dynamics in the South Pacific region.

3. Research Method

This research applied qualitative research methods exploring the problems obtained through a literature review. The researchers employed descriptive studies through hypothesis testing using causal designs. According to Sugiyono, causal design is a causal relationship, so it can be interpreted that there is an independent variable (an influencing variable) in this case.

In addition, the type of research used by the authors was explanatory research. Sugiyono explains that explanatory research is a method that intends to explain the position of the variables studied and the influence between one variable and another (Sugiyono, 2011). In this type of research, the hypothesis formulated will be tested to determine the influence of the variables to be studied.

Moreover, qualitative data analysis is inductive, based on the data obtained, and then developed into a hypothesis. Based on the hypothesis formulated from the obtained data, the data were then sought repeatedly so that it could finally be concluded whether the hypothesis was accepted or rejected. Departing from the collected data and the accepted hypothesis, the hypothesis develops into a theory (Sugiyono, 2011).

The aim is to answer research questions about the impact of the AUKUS pact on security and geopolitical change in the South Pacific region. Furthermore, the researchers used secondary data from existing literature research, including books, previous research in journals, reports, official websites, articles, newspapers,
magnitudes, and other media that support research (Hasan, 2002).

4. **Theoretical Framework**

Neorealists recognize the value of alliances in fostering group security in dangerous situations. Neorealism also emphasizes the significance of possessing more power than other states and that power will lead to balance (Wende, 2022). To change the structure or posture of forces in response to shifting threats, security pacts can be formed. Other steps that can be taken to improve military capabilities qualitatively include conducting joint training, exchanging intelligence and military technology, structuring military facilities, increasing interoperability, and joint contingency planning (Brooks et al., 2016).

Therefore, the authors used collective security to dissect the motives, interests, and frameworks of cooperation of the AUKUS Security Pact and the impact that arose after its establishment. Collective cooperation is defined as an arrangement formalized in an agreement or organization where each member state is committed to providing a joint response to threats and violations of peace and protecting member states that have come under attack from other countries outside the organization (Claude, 1984). In addition, collective security operates on the principle of “all for one and one for all.” One of the basic assumptions of collective security is that member states within the collective security coalition will agree on which states are classified as aggressors (enemies) and seek to prevent aggression (Glaser, 1997) and will work together to prevent aggression.

In this case, the Trilateral Security Pact provides collective security for its member countries, Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The AUKUS Pact includes agreements to enhance their military capabilities and supply nuclear technology and fuel to support Australia’s nuclear-powered submarine manufacturing project (Prakoso, 2023). It, however, allowed for an increase in military capacity by the three countries involved in the alliance. Since the actions and reactions of the AUKUS alliance countries in response to China’s maritime ambitions in the South Pacific region showed the existence of a Security Dilemma between the AUKUS alliance countries and China, the authors used this concept to see the influence of the Security Dilemma on geopolitical and security dynamics in the South Pacific region.

In the Journal of World Politics published in 1978, entitled “Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma,” Robert Jervis explains that tools or instruments strongly influence the Security Dilemma to enhance national defense (Jervis, 2013). Hence, the military may be viewed as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it protects a country and provides security. On the other hand, it can harm the other country and create insecurity (Roe, 2016). Jervis also emphasizes spiral mode as an action-reaction measure in which countries are bound in an arms race in response to each other’s security and arms development needs. The spiral mode elucidates misunderstandings about the actions and intentions of the state. Although countries focused on security as a primary goal and did not intend to harm other countries, many countries chose to increase their military capabilities as a preventive measure to prevent possible attacks in the future (Wivel, 2017).

5. **Results and Discussion**

5.1 **The Emergence of the AUKUS Trilateral Security Pact**

Concerning the importance of long-term peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific, AUKUS leaders recognize that the future of every nation in the world may depend on a free and open Indo-Pacific region. It highlighted the increasingly strategic environmental competition in the Indo-Pacific region. On September 15, 2021, Australia and its allies, the United States and the United Kingdom, took another historic step to deepen their partnership by signing an AUKUS trilateral Security Pact.
AUKUS is regarded as a historic opportunity for its three member nations and partner nations to accomplish the security and stability of the region. AUKUS is also a pact expected to be the most effective strategy to resist emerging threats in the future.

Looking at China’s maritime ambitions as outlined in China’s Ocean Development Report 2012 and the elites’ ambition to build China as the center of maritime, geographically, the South Pacific region is a key target for China’s maritime interests. China needs to reassure its sea channels of communication in the South Pacific region to build military ports and alternate sea lanes in emergencies. China also considered the importance of maritime strategy and naval power for broader interests. The Second Island Chain is China’s plan to construct the Blue Navy project, a continuation of the militarized First Island Chain strategy centered on Japan, Taiwan, and the South China Sea. The main target of the Second Island Chain strategy is the southern Pacific region stretching from the Kuril Islands to the Ogasawara Islands to Guam to the Arafura Sea between New Zealand and Australia (Lee, 2021).

Referring to defense data released by the Global Fire Power think tank in 2021, China was ranked third in the world regarding military power, after the United States in first place and Russia in second place (Global Fire Power, 2022). China was also noted as having the greatest naval force in the world (Santoso, 2021). Meanwhile, in the South Pacific region, Australia, as a power center, had no aircraft carriers and only six submarines; until then, it was operated under outdated conditions and was considered unable to compete in the region’s growing strategic environment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Components</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Ranking</th>
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<tr>
<td>Total Ships</td>
<td>777</td>
<td>#1 World Rank</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aircraft Carrier</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>#2 World Rank</td>
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<tr>
<td>Helicopter Carrier</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td>Frigates</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>#1 World Rank</td>
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<tr>
<td>Destroyers</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>#3 World Rank</td>
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<tr>
<td>Corvette</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>#1 World Rank</td>
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<tr>
<td>Submarine</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>#1 World Rank</td>
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<tr>
<td>Patrol</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>#7 World Rank</td>
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Since 2013, Australia’s strategic planning has focused on the Indo-Pacific continuum, concerned with China’s military expansion along trade routes leading to Australia (Peyronnet, 2021). Australia emphasized its concerns at the 2020 update of its military defense policy, including employing cutting-edge military systems powered by advanced tech and using gray zone tactics (Brooke-holland & Curtis, 2021). This defense policy is a strategy for preventing threats with credible forces.

In this regard, the AUKUS cooperation framework includes agreements to strengthen military capabilities, such as information sharing, cyber, intelligence technology, quantum, cruise missile purchases, and undersea power. Furthermore, AUKUS’ core project is to build a fleet of nuclear-powered submarines for Australia (The White House, 2021). The treaty is intended to protect their ally, Australia, from China and maintain regional security stability.

Two weeks before the AUKUS announcement, Australia had secretly negotiated with the US and the UK for months, but it still reconfirmed to France its intentions to continue with the submarine contract with French company Naval Group (Panda, 2022). However, Australia claims that French submarines will be unable to compete, alleviating their concerns over the last few decades. Extending the contract with France will only prevent Australia from implementing the capabilities required for a fleet of post-Collins conventional submarines until 2050 (Cheng, 2022).

AUKUS cooperation is thus expected to pave the way for deeper defense industry cooperation between the US and the UK. This program is one of the initiatives to uphold regional security stability. To achieve this security stability, AUKUS will expand its contribution to its growing network of Indo-Pacific partnerships. Behind the noble ideals promoted by AUKUS leaders, it is undeniable that the organization’s existence is also motivated by concerns about China’s growing influence in the Pacific.

As a result, AUKUS decided to modernize Australia’s defense system with nuclear-powered submarines. Australia also recognized that China’s presence in the South Pacific could jeopardize regional security and its position as a power center. Nevertheless, establishing AUKUS is intended to protect the interests of Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom.

The United States initiative to create AUKUS appears to be pursuing a strategy of forming an alliance structure in the region, particularly the initiative paving the way for Australia to possess nuclear submarines as leverage to balance China militarily (Kurt et al., 2023). Meanwhile, Guam Port, the largest major port of the United States Navy, is located in the South Pacific, and China’s growth in the Indo-Pacific is considered an unstoppable rise that is very difficult to avoid. From this vantage point, it is extremely simple to comprehend how AUKUS fulfilled the interests of the United States.

The UK’s participation in AUKUS cooperation is viewed as an attempt to improve its appearance in the Indo-Pacific region, which is one of the prospects for “Global Britain” post-Brexit (Panda & Swanstrom, 2021). By assisting Australia in maintaining regional stability, the UK hoped to demonstrate its commitment to the Indo-Pacific region (Brooke-holland & Curtis, 2021). The slope is the United Kingdom’s foreign policy strategy for strengthening security and the economy. As a result, AUKUS is a win-win situation for all parties.
Finally, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia must recognize China as an aggressor endangering regional security. Therefore, establishing AUKUS can be interpreted as an attempt to suppress China’s development in military sectors (Panda & Swanstrom, 2021). The inclusion of Australia in this cooperation is nothing more than a US strategy to promote its strategic objectives in the South Pacific. To prevent China from developing maritime ambitions, the United States also needs genuine regional partners to support its goals and objectives (Kurt et al., 2023). Because of its strategic position in the South Pacific, Australia is both an ally and a pawn that has acquired the ability to realize its interests.

Additionally, Australia recognizes the existence of competition between China and the United States in the Pacific region. Consequently, Australia is having trouble adjusting to power imbalances in the region (Ilham & Adamy, 2022). Therefore, involving the great powers of the United States as allies to balance out the power of China seems to be the most powerful method to achieve balance in the region.

As previously mentioned, the largest initiative under AUKUS is to provide and prepare a fleet of nuclear-powered submarines for the Australian Navy (Peyronnet, 2021). The United States and the United Kingdom, which have operated nuclear-powered submarines for decades, will ensure their technology is safe and will not harm or threaten any party. They pledged to uphold and carry out non-proliferation obligations and will continue to do so.

5.2 AUKUS Collective Security Cooperation Framework in the South Pacific Region

Collective security is a term used to replace the Balance of Power System. Following World War I, strategic efforts were established to achieve international peace. Collective security systems were deemed more appropriate for establishing a new world order (Claude, 1984). The new system provided the mechanism to prevent or suppress a country’s aggression against another by posing a credible threat of collective power to potential aggressors through military pressure. This idea was to develop under the presumption that a nation capable of aggression would not be afraid unless the combined great powers of the states confronted it.

Van defined collective security as a system brought together by several countries in a cooperative effort to ensure their nation’s security. In line with that, Joshua S. Goldstein described collective security as a framework for cooperation to preserve the security of independent states affiliated with the coalition (Ebegbulem, 2007). Collective security offers new cooperative solutions to Security Dilemma. The collective security system is thought to provide a more effective counterbalance to the aggressor while encouraging trust and cooperation.

In this case, the AUKUS is considered collective security since the cooperation framework is centered on security, defense systems, and military power development. Anxiety over China’s maritime expansion and the rise of its influence, which endangers regional security stability, is a major factor in the significance of the emergence of AUKUS (Muntasyir et al., 2022). AUKUS aims to promote security, stability, and peace in the Indo-Pacific region. AUKUS, on the other hand, seeks to protect its member state, Australia, in the South Pacific region from the threat of China being perceived as an aggressor (Delanova, 2021).

As previously asserted, the largest project in the AUKUS collaboration is the preparation and provision of nuclear-powered submarines for Australia. The submarines’ base of operations will be in Adelaide, South Australia (Prakoso,
The world made a big deal out of this accord and considered this cooperation highly contentious despite their insistence that this project is safe and pledge to keep up with their non-proliferation commitment. However, there is no guarantee of future threats. Thus, this discourse triggered a mixed response in the South Pacific region.

Through the AUKUS partnership, the United States and the United Kingdom will escort Australia to have at least eight fleets of nuclear-powered submarines to replace the conventional diesel-electric-powered (SSK) Collins Class ships developed by France (Cheng, 2022). Following the United Kingdom, Australia will be the second country to receive nuclear propulsion technology from the United States (Panda & Swanstrom, 2021).

The success of this project can be ensured with the assistance of technology from Britain and America, which are world leaders in nuclear development. The success of this project will also expand Australia’s defense reach to an ocean-range expeditionary force by 2040 (Peyronnet, 2021). The nuclear-powered submarine program will last 18 months, including preparatory consultation periods, element selection, production, security, non-proliferation measures, and nuclear supervision and safety to ensure each country fully complies with its commitments under the non-proliferation treaty. They will also ensure that all programs meet stringent verification standards in partnership and consultation with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to verify that all programs adhere to strict verification criteria to comply with international non-proliferation regulations (The White House, 2021).

Moreover, the changes in Australia’s foreign policy can impact geopolitical conditions in the region because it initiated the establishment of regional organizations such as the PIF and is the only country capable of handling regional issues, such as the 2006 coup in Fiji. Furthermore, Australia is a major donor that helps the development of South Pacific countries through financial assistance to strengthen trade, build infrastructure, improve government and military capabilities, and develop natural resources (Dugis, 2015).

The decision by Australia to take a serious approach to deal with changes in the strategic environment by improving the defense system at sea by developing nuclear-powered submarines has gained attention from the international community. Some countries argue that this agreement will only encourage an arms race, increasing the risk of conflict in the region. Several other countries emphasized the agreement’s impact on nuclear non-proliferation efforts (Brooke-holland & Curtis, 2021).

The International Atomic Power Agency (IAEA) monitors the implementation of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The NPT is a multilateral treaty to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons, including three elements: non-proliferation, disarmament, and peaceful use of nuclear energy. However, there is no prohibition on developing nuclear weapons. Under Article I of the NPT, it is stated that “nuclear-weapon states pledge not to transfer nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices to any recipient or in any way assist, encourage, or induce any non-nuclear-weapon state in the manufacture or acquisition of a nuclear weapon” (NPT, 2010). The NPT clearly requires non-proliferation to prevent the spread of nuclear development by nuclear-weapon states to countries that have not yet developed nuclear weapons.

In addition, Article II of the NPT states that “non-nuclear weapon states are not to receive nuclear weapons from any transferor and are not manufacture or acquire them” (NPT, 2010). Since the NPT includes non-proliferation, every country without nuclear weapons must refuse shipments of explosive weapons manufacturing
materials directly or indirectly. As a result, a country without nuclear weapons is also committed to maintaining peace by refraining from developing nuclear weapons. AUKUS is thus a source of concern for the international community because it is thought to diminish the non-proliferation agreement.

AUKUS openly took advantage of the NPT agreement. Because the AUKUS agreement only involves the supply of nuclear-powered submarines to the Australian navy but does not involve the transfer of nuclear weapons to Australia (Brooke-holland & Curtis, 2021), contextually, AUKUS does not cross the red line of the NPT. Nevertheless, by doing this, Pandora’s box of proliferation has been unleashed (Cheng, 2022). Although nuclear submarines are not nuclear or explosive weapons, they have the potential to carry nuclear weapons and provide platforms for the delivery of weapons of mass destruction.

The nuclear materials utilized in nuclear submarines have military ramifications. Under Article III of the Treaty, “non-nuclear-weapon states pledge to accept IAEA safeguards to verify that their nuclear activities serve only peaceful purposes” (NPT, 2010). The IAEA’s constant monitoring of all nuclear materials to guarantee they are not used to make atomic bombs may occasionally make an exception for nuclear material used as material from nuclear submarines. To avoid weakening the nuclear non-proliferation treaty regime, they must engage in difficult negotiations regarding material usage.

To ensure each country’s full compliance with its commitments under the non-proliferation treaty, AUKUS identified four essential factors for maximizing the provision of conventional weapons in nuclear-powered submarine projects to Australia in a letter to the Director-General on July 21, 2022, including (IAEA, 2022):

1. Australia will not pursue uranium enrichment for nuclear fuel.
2. Australia will have a complete and welded power unit, so the nuclear material will be extremely difficult to move and shape to construct the power unit. Furthermore, the nuclear materials used in the reactor will be highly embroidered, allowing them to be used directly in the production of nuclear weapons without the need to process chemicals that are not owned and will not be sought.
3. Australia has confirmed that it has engaged the IAEA directly and regularly in verifying the non-diversion of nuclear fuel from Australian nuclear-powered submarines.
4. Australia will continue to work with the IAEA on transparency measures outside of the submarine project to maintain international trust in the project’s zero nuclear use or activities.

In general, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) reports that monitoring the use of nuclear materials in Australian submarines will be difficult but not impossible. The Director-General has also conducted direct negotiations and consultations with the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom on implementing safeguards following the safeguards of each treaty in the context of naval nuclear propulsion under AUKUS.

Some argue that collective security does not always solve problems. There are some issues with the collective security system because it leads to a larger approach to military confrontation (Ebegbulem, 2007). Furthermore, there is always the risk that alliances formed for collective security goals may be the foundation for a more aggressive coalition. The AUKUS partnership formed by the collective security objectives can also serve as the foundation for a more aggressive coalition with a military confrontation approach; the AUKUS agreement
is criticized as being unable to solve the problem in the region (Ebegbulem, 2007), particularly in the collaboration to provide submarines to Australia.

5.3 The Impact of Security Dilemma on South Pacific Geopolitical and Security Dynamic

The primary concern with this security cooperation is how it will affect the strategic region in the future. Will it benefit all areas equally, or may it spark an arms race that creates a Security Dilemma? John Mearsheimer noted in his discussion of the regional security model that each nation faces a “Security Dilemma” when deciding how to respond to perceived external threats (Hadiwinata, 2017). Each country responds to the Security Dilemma according to the perceived threat perception. As a result of this situation, two regional security models emerged: “Defensive Realism” and “Offensive Realism (Posen, 1993).

Security Dilemma refers to situations of reaction where a state’s activities, such as an increase in military might, endanger another country's security and are met by equivalent responses (Glaser, 1997). This situation led to the decision to form the AUKUS Trilateral Security Cooperation, in this case, when Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States were threatened by China’s maritime expansion in the Indo-Pacific region.

Further, Robert Jervis made a sophisticated statement about the Security Dilemma, which is the difficulty distinguishing between defensive and offensive postures and weapons (Jervis, 2013). The combination of anarchist international structures, Chinese influence, and China’s fast-escalating military power due to its maritime expansion agenda contribute to the Security Dilemma. The uncertainty about China’s true intentions results in a never-ending cycle of potentially fatal action reactions that can only be mitigated by more credible restraint in signaling defensive intentions (Brooks et al., 2016). AUKUS’s trilateral security cooperation is a practical solution to concerns over China’s expanding developments.

The claim that Australia’s nuclear-powered submarines will not be armed with nuclear weapons may be true, and this agreement may be part of Australia’s defensive plan to maintain national security. However, the primary goal of AUKUS is to provoke China, and as a result, Australia’s possession of nuclear-powered submarines through the AUKUS coalition is regarded as a threat to neighboring countries. This offensive action opens the door to an arms race between AUKUS and China, which may increase the risk of conflict.

The United States and the United Kingdom cooperate in supplying nuclear fuel and technology, which enables Australia to have high-speed submarines that are more difficult to detect than conventional fleets of ships (Tsuruoka, 2021). Nuclear-powered submarines can dive for months and fire long-range missiles, allowing Australia to conduct longer patrols in the region to destabilize China’s powerful military defense system (Nick, 2021). Thus, AUKUS is perceived as the meeting point of China’s maritime ambitions.

According to China, the AUKUS agreement concerns more than sovereign states’ independent development and research into nuclear materials for military submarines. From the point of view of China, this is the first time a nuclear-armed country has openly transferred an illegal nuclear weapon to a non-nuclear-armed country. They have not provided substantive information about the cooperation with the IAEA since the inception of AUKUS (China Embassy, 2022). It demonstrated that AUKUS purposefully concealed some information while advancing cooperation.

The Chinese government then said this would set a bad precedent for the international community. This cooperation will encourage
other nuclear-armed countries to transfer weapon materials to non-nuclear countries, and non-nuclear countries will follow in Australia’s footsteps to obtain nuclear weapons, causing the international nuclear non-proliferation regime to collapse. Furthermore, AUKUS will fuel the arms race and heighten regional tensions. Zhao Lijian, a spokesperson for the Chinese Foreign Ministry, stated that the AUKUS Trilateral Security Pact had undermined regional peace and stability and that its existence would only exacerbate the arms race and undermine international non-proliferation efforts. According to China, the US will never tire of moving its allies around like chess pieces against China (Singh, 2021).

Although AUKUS is committed to expanding its contribution to the Indo-Pacific region’s network of partnerships, the South Pacific region views trilateral cooperation as a threat that could jeopardize the Pacific community’s commitment to keeping the Pacific nuclear-free (Iis.fisipol, 2021). It is because the existence of AUKUS has touched the weak points of the region’s countries.

Given the trauma suffered by the Pacific region due to nuclear weapons testing conducted by the United States, France, and the United Kingdom from the 1940s to the 1990s, it is natural that the region adheres to the nuclear-free concept. Even in 1952, Australia was subjected to nuclear weapons tests conducted by the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union (Iis.fisipol, 2021).

Australia insisted that the nuclear power used in submarine reactors was extremely safe. However, Australia has overlooked that it has shared a strong commitment to preserving the South Pacific’s nuclear-free zone beyond what is stated in the Non-Proliferation Treaty. As a result, the South Pacific is deeply concerned about Australia’s decision to collaborate with AUKUS. In addition, AUKUS aims to suppress China’s development in the South Pacific rather than maintain regional security and stability by creating a superpower through collective cooperation, which is considered more dangerous and can increase the likelihood of conflict because it indirectly turns the South Pacific into a battleground between AUKUS and China.

Since the AUKUS Trilateral Cooperation Pact was officially announced, there has been a rise in strategic partnerships in the South Pacific region. President David Panuelo of the Federated States of Micronesia publicly welcomed the agreement, noting that AUKUS represents no seismic shift or shift in commitments and will make FMS and the entire South Pacific region safer. Meanwhile, Vanuatu’s opposition leader expressed disappointment with Australia’s decision on the Pacific’s future. According to the Secretary-General of the Pacific Conference of Churches, Australia is not acting in the best interests of Pacific families.

Related to that, New Zealand is firmly committed to the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty and insists that Australia’s new nuclear-powered submarine will not be permitted on its territory. Furthermore, the Solomon Islands stated that it opposes any militarization on its territory that threatens regional peace and international stability (Powles et al., 2021). To show its opposition to AUKUS cooperation, the Solomon Islands established a new security partnership with China.

AUKUS’ efforts to provoke China have further escalated tensions between the two. Manasseh Sogavare, the Prime Minister of the Solomon Islands, revealed in front of the parliament on April 20, 2022, that his government had signed a security agreement with China. China referred to the AUKUS Trilateral Security Partnership as a callous one,
warning of a return to a “cold war” mentality that would undermine regional stability efforts. From a broader geopolitical standpoint, the Security Pact was a direct response to establishing or raising a larger Indo-Pacific security grouping.

On the other hand, so far, China has constructed 20 bases in the South China Sea’s Spratly and Paracel Islands (amti.csis.org, 2022). Fortification continues, despite Beijing’s claims that it will not continue militarization. There is a fear that something similar will occur in the Solomon Islands. In an interview with Sky News, Australia’s Defense Minister, Peter Dutton, stressed the threat of Chinese expansion and the importance of increasing vigilance against China. Beijing might act swiftly to secure the region under the new accord as long as a friendly and accommodating government runs Honiara.

According to the leaked document, China does ship visits, performs logistical replenishment, and has stopovers and transitions in the Solomon Islands with the consent of those countries (Liu, 2022). The agreement allows for Chinese troops and warships in the South Pacific and a Beijing-controlled military base (Graham, 2022). So far, Australia and New Zealand have opposed the deal, followed by several other countries.

This agreement may indirectly provide China with an island-chain foothold that could be used to block vital shipping lanes. In response to the ratification of the Solomon Islands-China Security Pact, Washington decided to reopen its embassy in Honiara after 29 years (Guardian staff with agencies, 2022). According to United States Secretary of State Antony Blinken, the decision to reopen the US embassy in the Solomon Islands was made to counter China’s growing influence and its maritime ambitions in the South Pacific region. The United States and the United States have long developed nuclear weapons, and Australia plays an important role in the region.

AUKUS pledged to continue conducting non-proliferation obligations and contributing to the South Pacific’s security stability. Nevertheless, some South Pacific countries, including New Zealand, Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands, and Fiji, are disappointed by Australia’s decision to join AUKUS. It is believed that efforts to build nuclear-powered submarines will severely harm non-proliferation treaties.

As a result of their inability to react to the various parties' increased military capabilities, AUKUS and China continue to face a Security Dilemma. The Security Dilemma’s ambiguous conditions cannot be referred to as peaceful. The ongoing security conundrum exacerbates multilateralism in the Pacific. In addition, the current security situation exacerbates Pacific multilateralism.

6. Conclusion

Based on the description above, the AUKUS Trilateral Security Pact is a collective security cooperation aimed at countering China, which is considered the aggressor. The agreement covers security and enhanced military capabilities through cooperation in the security field, such as information sharing, cyber, intelligence technology, quantum, cruise missile purchases, and undersea power, with the main project being the development of a fleet of nuclear-powered ships for Australia. Because of the debate over providing nuclear submarines to Australia, the deal quickly gained international attention.

AUKUS exists to determine threats by using a military confrontation approach, emphasizing the significance of defending Pacific security from the threat of China’s growing influence and its maritime ambitions in the South Pacific region. The United States and the United States have long developed nuclear weapons, and Australia plays an important role in the region.

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AUKUS is also said to have disregarded an agreement to protect the South Pacific nuclear-free zone. It is believed that AUKUS has brought the region under the threat of a security conflict between AUKUS and China. Further, AUKUS’s presence brought about geopolitical shifts and security instability in the South Pacific, ultimately harming Pacific multilateralism.

Additionally, the goal of AUKUS of maintaining the South Pacific’s security stability appears to be merely a cover for the three countries to pursue their interests. Alliances formed to achieve collective security goals can also serve as the foundation for a more aggressive coalition. The United States, China’s true rival, felt compelled to counter China’s growing influence in the South Pacific region. Meanwhile, Australia regards AUKUS as a necessary step toward having nuclear-powered submarines. Regarding the United Kingdom, AUKUS is the best platform to enhance and assess the scope of nuclear technology development. Therefore, the presence of AUKUS in the region will only increase the risk of conflict because AUKUS is viewed as a form of provocation against China to carry out more aggressive actions.

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Vol. 7. No.1 June 2023

106 |
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