

Analysis of the Security Impact of AUKUS on the South China Sea: Based on Defensive Realism Analysis

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Abstract: The formation of the AUKUS alliance (comprising Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States) represents a pivotal development in the geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific region. Formed with the objective of countering China's growing influence through the sharing of advanced technology, including nuclear-powered submarines, the alliance signals a significant shift in the regional geopolitical landscape. This paper employs a defensive realist lens to analyse AUKUS, examining its strategic motivations and regional security implications, particularly in the South China Sea. The research investigates how, despite its ostensible defensive intent, AUKUS is perceived by China as a provocation, thereby intensifying the security dilemma. Furthermore, the study assesses the United Kingdom's perspective on AUKUS as a vital instrument for sustaining its global influence in the post-Brexit era. This paper identifies a plethora of technical, logistical, financial, and diplomatic challenges confronting the alliance.

Keywords: AUKUS, International relations, Defensive realism, China.

1. Introduction

The AUKUS (Australia-UK-US) alliance represents a significant shift in the geopolitical landscape of the Indo-Pacific region. Formed in response to the growing influence and assertiveness of China, the AUKUS alliance aims to enhance the security and defence capabilities of its member states through the sharing of advanced technologies, including nuclear-powered submarines. This strategic partnership is grounded in the principles of defensive realism, which posits that states prioritize survival and security in an anarchic international system. This paper examines the formation and implications of AUKUS through the lens of defensive realism, with the aim of elucidating the motivations behind the alliance and its impact on regional security dynamics, particularly in the context of the South China Sea. In addition, the analysis will explore the perceptions and reactions of key actors, such as China and the UK, as well as the potential limitations and challenges facing AUKUS.

2. Defensive Realism

The theoretical perspective of defensive realism postulates that states, operating within an anarchic international system devoid of a central authority, prioritise the survival and security of their respective entities [1]. This theoretical framework posits that the pursuit of power is not inherently

aggressive but a necessary means to ensure state security. The analysis commences with the definition and characterisation of a security dilemma, whereby states' self-help measures to secure their own safety inadvertently threaten others, thereby creating a cycle of mistrust and fear. For example, an anarchic state necessitates the implementation of self-help measures to ensure survival or security, which in turn gives rise to uncertainty and fear. This fear serves to fuel power competition, thereby perpetuating the security dilemma. The potential consequences of this security dilemma include inadvertent conflicts or wars, which represent a tragic outcome where efforts to enhance security ultimately lead to greater insecurity.

The defensive realist approach is well-suited to analysing the AUKUS alliance, as this pact can be viewed through the lens of states seeking to maintain equilibrium in the face of perceived threats. The alliance may be regarded as a collective security measure in response to the growing influence and assertiveness of China in the Indo-Pacific region. In accordance with defensive realism, the members of AUKUS are not inherently seeking to exert dominance but rather to deter potential aggression and safeguard their strategic interests [2]. This perspective provides an explanation for the rationale behind the formation of military alliances and the enhancement of defensive capabilities, which are perceived as stabilising factors rather than aggressive postures. Furthermore, the inherent mistrust and strategic calculations among states in the region, as predicted by defensive realism, can elucidate the ongoing security dynamics and the potential for an arms race or military escalation.

3. The South China Sea Situation

As of 2024, the situation in the South China Sea remains highly complex and dynamic. This maritime region continues to be one of the most contentious areas, significantly impacting China-ASEAN relations. The South China Sea has become a frontline for military and security competition between China and the United States. The United States has increased its military presence and activities in the region, emphasising freedom of navigation and overflight [3]. This has been perceived by China as a direct challenge to its territorial claims and security. In this context, a significant development has been the formation of AUKUS, which aims to bolster the military capabilities of its members, particularly Australia, through the sharing of advanced technologies, including nuclear-powered submarines. This partnership is perceived as a direct response to China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific, intensifying the security dilemma in the region. The United States and its allies argue that AUKUS will enhance collective defence capabilities and ensure a balance of power in the region [4]. However, China sees this as a strategic containment effort that will heighten regional tensions and prompt an arms race [5].

The Philippines' policy in the South China Sea, which has been heavily influenced by U.S. support, has also added to the tensions. The U.S. has been leveraging its alliances and partnerships, including the Quad (U.S., Japan, India, and Australia) and AUKUS, in order to strengthen its strategic posture [6]. In response, China has been reinforcing its sovereignty claims in the South China Sea and enhancing its military capabilities, including building up and fortifying outposts on disputed islands and reefs [7]. The Chinese government has stressed the importance of strengthening evidence chains and narrative control to bolster its claims and counter external challenges. In response to the challenges posed by the United States and smaller multilateral mechanisms, the United States has been forming flexible, targeted coalitions to address specific security issues. These alliances, such as the Quad and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, aim to increase pressure on China by strengthening the maritime surveillance and operational capabilities of regional allies [8].

4. Offensive Effect on China

From the perspective of defensive realism, the AUKUS security pact is perceived by China as an offensive manoeuvre. This perception is fundamentally due to the dynamics of security dilemmas and power perceptions inherent in international relations. In accordance with the tenets of defensive realism, states operating within an anarchic international system devoid of a central governing authority are compelled to rely on self-help strategies in order to ensure their survival and security [1]. This frequently entails the amassing of power and the establishment of alliances, which, despite being designed with a defensive objective in mind, can result in heightened levels of insecurity and suspicion among other states.

An application of this theoretical framework to the AUKUS pact demonstrates why China perceives this alliance as offensive. AUKUS represents a strategic partnership designed to counterbalance China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific region, particularly through military collaboration and the sharing of advanced defence technologies. From the perspective of defensive realism, China views AUKUS as a direct threat to its regional dominance and security. It interprets the alliance's defensive measures as preparations for potential aggression. Furthermore, the introduction of nuclear-powered submarines to Australia has served to intensify this perception, significantly enhancing the offensive capabilities of the AUKUS members and thereby shifting the regional power balance.

The paradoxical nature of security strategies in an anarchic system serves to elucidate China's perception. Efforts to secure oneself can inadvertently provoke insecurity and conflict. This demonstrates how AUKUS, while intended to deter aggression and maintain stability, might instead escalate tensions and foster an arms race. The cyclical nature of action and reaction in the security dilemma demonstrates how AUKUS enhances the military capabilities of its members in a manner that threatens China's strategic interests. This prompts a pre-emptive counterbalance to perceived threats.

Consequently, the establishment of AUKUS is perceived by China as an offensive act, given that it aligns with the pattern of security dilemmas described by defensive realism. The alliance, which purports to serve defensive purposes, has the effect of enhancing the military capabilities of its members in ways that threaten China's strategic interests. This has led to a cycle of mistrust and potential conflict [5].

5. Defensive Effect on the UK

From the perspective of defensive realism, the formation of AUKUS represents a defensive strategy for the United Kingdom. It is grounded in the need to ensure the country's security and to maintain its global influence in the context of a post-Brexit world. The tenets of defensive realism posit that states operate in an anarchic international system where the paramount concerns are survival and security [2]. In such a system, states must rely on self-help mechanisms, which often involve the formation of alliances and the enhancement of military capabilities in order to deter potential threats. For the United Kingdom, the formation of AUKUS represents a strategic move to bolster its defence posture in the Indo-Pacific region, which has gained significant geopolitical importance [9].

In the wake of the United Kingdom's departure from the European Union, the country's international strategy, encapsulated in the "Global Britain" concept, has necessitated a shift in focus towards the Indo-Pacific region [10]. This shift is intended to sustain the UK's global influence and economic interests. The South China Sea, a vital maritime route with substantial strategic value, is a focal point in this shift. The UK's increased military presence and strategic partnerships in the region are not merely a response to China's rise; they are also a means of securing the UK's own strategic interests. This strategy is consistent with defensive realism, which emphasises the necessity of

maintaining a balance of power to prevent the emergence of a dominant force in any given region of the globe.

The UK's involvement in AUKUS also reflects its commitment to reinforcing the transatlantic alliance with the United States, which remains a fundamental aspect of its foreign policy. The historical and strategic ties between the UK and the US have long been pivotal in shaping global security dynamics [10]. The UK's participation in AUKUS represents a reaffirmation of its commitment to supporting US-led initiatives aimed at ensuring regional stability and security. This alliance serves as a deterrent against any aggressive actions by regional powers, thereby maintaining a balance of power that prevents conflict and ensures a stable international order.

Furthermore, the UK's participation in AUKUS can be interpreted as a response to the growing uncertainty and potential threats posed by China's assertive policies in the South China Sea [11]. The concept of defensive realism posits that the enhancement of military capabilities and the formation of strategic alliances are necessary measures to mitigate the threats. The deployment of advanced defence technologies, such as nuclear-powered submarines through AUKUS, is intended to provide a credible deterrent against any unilateral actions that might destabilise the region. This strategic posture ensures that the UK and its allies can protect their interests without directly engaging in conflict.

6. Limitations of AUKUS in the South China Sea

Despite its enormous potential, AUKUS faces numerous challenges and limitations that could impede its effectiveness and long-term success.

6.1. Technical and Logistical Challenges

One significant drawback of AUKUS is the technical and logistical complexity of developing a nuclear-powered submarine fleet for Australia. The construction of nuclear submarines represents an immensely challenging engineering feat, requiring precise specifications and the implementation of rigorous standards of safety and maintenance [9]. The Collins-class submarines, which are conventionally powered, already place significant demands on Australia's naval capabilities. The transition to nuclear propulsion involves a steep learning curve and significant investment in infrastructure and training. Furthermore, the possibility of encountering cost overruns and delays, as evidenced by the French Attack-class programme, poses a significant challenge to the timely realisation of AUKUS's objectives.

6.2. Political and Diplomatic Implications

Nonetheless, the political and diplomatic implications of AUKUS present additional constraints. The agreement has already resulted in a deterioration of relations with France, which saw its \$66 billion submarine contract with Australia abruptly terminated in favour of the AUKUS agreement [12]. This diplomatic fallout serves to illustrate the potential for AUKUS to disrupt existing alliances and create new geopolitical tensions. Furthermore, the reactions to AUKUS in the region have been diverse. Countries such as Japan and New Zealand have expressed support, while others, such as Indonesia and China, have expressed concerns about the potential for an arms race and regional instability [13]. The delicate balance of maintaining strong ties with existing allies while navigating new diplomatic challenges represents a critical aspect of the strategic implementation of AUKUS.

6.3. Financial Constraints

From an operational standpoint, the successful deployment of nuclear submarines under AUKUS is contingent upon sustained and significant increases in defence spending by Australia. The United States Navy's experience with nuclear submarines, including the Submarine Safety Program (SUBSAFE), illustrates the high costs and stringent safety standards required to operate and maintain a nuclear fleet. The Australian Defence Budget, which was approximately \$39.5 billion in 2020, may be insufficient to cover the long-term expenses associated with developing a nuclear submarine programme [11]. This financial constraint may impede Australia's capacity to achieve the ambitious objectives set forth by AUKUS, potentially resulting in delays and setbacks.

6.4. Operational Coordination

Moreover, the strategic effectiveness of AUKUS depends on the seamless integration of Australian, U.S., and U.K. naval capabilities. The sharing of sensitive nuclear propulsion technology and operational expertise necessitates a high degree of trust and coordination among the three nations. It is therefore of the utmost importance that the necessary level of collaboration is established and maintained over the decades-long lifespan of the programme if the programme is to be a success [11]. Any lapses in communication or commitment could have the effect of undermining the alliance's ability to present a unified and formidable front against potential adversaries.

It is imperative that AUKUS addresses the broader strategic implications of its formation. AUKUS represents a significant shift in U.S. and allied military strategy in the Indo-Pacific region, with a particular focus on countering China's assertive maritime actions. Nevertheless, the agreement gives rise to questions regarding the long-term viability of such an assertive strategy. The possibility of an arms race and increased regional tensions may ultimately have a detrimental impact on the stability and security that AUKUS aims to achieve. While AUKUS has the potential to significantly enhance the military capabilities of Australia and its allies in the Indo-Pacific, it is also subject to a number of substantial limitations. These include technical and logistical challenges, financial constraints, diplomatic repercussions, operational coordination, and broader strategic implications. To address these limitations, it is necessary to adopt a meticulous approach, to make sustained investments, and to engage in robust diplomatic efforts. These measures must be taken in order to ensure that AUKUS fulfils its intended purpose without exacerbating regional instability.

7. Conclusion

The formation of AUKUS represents a significant strategic shift in the Indo-Pacific region, with the objective of countering China's rising influence through enhanced defence capabilities. Meanwhile, AUKUS is confronted with a number of significant challenges. The construction of a nuclear-powered submarine fleet for Australia is a technically and logistically complex undertaking, requiring significant investment in infrastructure and training. The diplomatic fallout with France and the disparate regional responses also illustrates the precarious equilibrium that AUKUS must maintain in order to navigate the evolving geopolitical landscape while preserving the existing alliances. The operational success of the alliance is contingent upon the implementation of increased defence spending, the seamless integration of naval capabilities, and the establishment of robust coordination among the AUKUS members. The potential for financial constraints, communication lapses and strategic misalignments to undermine the effectiveness of the alliance must be acknowledged.

An aggressive posture towards China has the potential to exacerbate regional tensions and trigger an arms race. To address these limitations, it is essential to adopt a meticulous approach, maintain consistent financial support, and engage in proactive diplomatic efforts to guarantee that AUKUS fulfils its intended purpose without contributing to regional instability. AUKUS has the potential to

significantly enhance regional security; however, it must navigate technical, financial, and diplomatic challenges in order to achieve its goals effectively. By forging a strategic alliance, AUKUS can play a pivotal role in fostering a stable and secure Indo-Pacific future.

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