

AUKUS: A Manifestation of Balance of Power in the Indo-Pacific Region

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ABSTRACT: This research analyzes Australia's foreign policy in the context of the Trilateral Security Pact AUKUS (Australia, United Kingdom, United States) as a manifestation of the concept of balance of power in the Indo-Pacific region. Announced on September 15, 2021, AUKUS is a trilateral agreement to strengthen diplomatic, defense, and security relations among the three countries, with Australia receiving three Virginia-class nuclear-powered submarines from the United States. The Indo-Pacific, which is geographically and economically strategic, has become a focal point of global geopolitical competition, particularly with the rise of China's influence, perceived as a threat by the United States and its allies. Through AUKUS, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia seek to balance power in the region by enhancing military capabilities and defense technologies, in line with neorealist theory, which emphasizes the importance of security and power equilibrium in an anarchic international system. This study employs a descriptive qualitative methodology with secondary data analysis to understand the dynamics behind the formation of AUKUS and its implications for regional stability. The findings indicate that AUKUS is a strategic response to global and regional power balancing and reflects Australia's efforts to strengthen its position in facing security challenges posed by the rise of China.

Keywords: AUKUS, Balance of Power, Neorealism, Indo-Pacific.



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INTRODUCTION

In international relations studies, the international system refers to how states and non-state actors interact on a global level. This system is influenced by various factors such as power distribution, mutually agreed rules, and alliances between countries. One example of the international system dynamics is the Trilateral Security Pact known as AUKUS, involving Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. AUKUS is a trilateral agreement announced on September 15, 2021, between the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, under which Australia will receive three Virginia-class nuclear-powered submarines built by the US. As part of the agreement, the nuclear-powered submarines, to be named SSN AUKUS, will feature advanced technologies

surpassing conventional submarines' capabilities.

The main objective of AUKUS in the Indo-Pacific region is to highlight the vast potential of this area. The Indo-Pacific is a highly strategic region, both geographically and economically. Biogeographically, it covers an extensive area from the Indian Ocean to the western and central parts of the Pacific Ocean, including many countries. Due to its vast expanse, the Indo-Pacific has become a focal point in global discussions on maritime geopolitics, regional security, international trade, and environmental issues.(NIAZI, 2024) Moreover, this region offers critical international shipping routes, making it a significant hub for exporting and importing essential global commodities.

The Indo-Pacific, rich in resources and highly connected, attracts the attention of major powers seeking to secure their strategic interests in the region. As one of the world's key areas, the Indo-Pacific serves as a magnet for military power projection, which ultimately risks triggering an arms race and potentially escalating conflicts in the future. The Indo-Pacific holds immense strategic value for the United States, while China's presence and influence in the region are perceived as threats to US interests.

The United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia established the trilateral partnership known as AUKUS to maintain its dominance in the Indo-Pacific and counter China's influence. Through this agreement, the United States plans to strengthen its presence by deploying advanced nuclear-powered submarines to Australia, thereby reinforcing regional strategic alliances. This move is aimed at balancing power in the Indo-Pacific and asserting the United States' position as a key player in maintaining order and stability in the region while curbing China's ability to expand its influence (Purnamasari, 2023). The AUKUS agreement represents a trilateral collaboration to strengthen diplomatic, defense, and security ties among the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia. Its primary objective is to deepen cooperation across strategic areas, including the integration of science, industry, and advanced technology. Key focuses of AUKUS include enhancing capabilities in cybersecurity, artificial intelligence (AI), quantum technology, defense supply chains, and the development of underwater technology and long-range weaponry.(Dolan, 2024)

The formation of AUKUS is not merely a military collaboration but also a strategic step by hegemonic states to maintain their global dominance. The agreement is crafted as a strategy to address perceived threats posed by China, a country with growing influence on the international stage. Through AUKUS, Australia and its allies aim to prevent China from achieving dominance as a third global power, which could disrupt the global balance of power. Additionally, AUKUS is a tool to balance power in the Indo-Pacific. This region has become the center of geopolitical competition, where China continues to expand its influence through economic and military initiatives. Western countries, through AUKUS, seek to ensure regional stability by bolstering joint defense capabilities, particularly in advanced technology and maritime superiority (Utami, 2022).

In international relations, various perspectives or theories exist, including neorealism. Neorealism argues that the international system is anarchic, meaning no central authority or global government exists.(Powell, 1994) Power and authority, therefore, rest with individual states based on their capacities. Neorealism emphasizes that states gain power by strengthening their security and resilience, aligning with AUKUS's focus on developing defense and military capabilities. One key

assumption in neorealism is that states cannot fully understand the intentions of other states, which can lead to anxiety among them. This uncertainty often causes states to feel threatened by the military buildup of others. This concept is known as the security dilemma, where the security measures of one state can make others feel less secure. In such situations, states strive to rebalance power to avoid falling behind others, a process referred to as the balance of power (Buana et al., 2023). Using a qualitative descriptive method and focusing on the international system Level of Analysis (LoA), this study examines Australia's foreign policy in the context of the AUKUS Trilateral Security Pact. Through this case study analysis, the author and readers are expected to gain deeper insights into the dynamics of international politics, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region.

Previous research has extensively discussed the role of AUKUS in strengthening military alliances and its impact on security dynamics in the Indo-Pacific. However, there is a lack of studies explicitly examining Australia's foreign policy in the context of AUKUS through the lens of neorealism. This research addresses this gap by analyzing how AUKUS reflects neorealist principles in Australia's foreign policy, such as the security dilemma and balance of power.

Previous research Suparman (2024) analyzed the United Kingdom's participation in AUKUS, focusing on its unique position outside the Indo-Pacific region and the motivations driven by national role conceptions and prescriptions. The study emphasized the UK's strategic approach to global security cooperation and its implications for regional stability, particularly in addressing challenges in the Indo-Pacific. While Suparman highlighted the UK's perspective, this research focuses on Australia's foreign policy within AUKUS, examining its alignment with neorealist principles, such as the balance of power and security dilemma, offering a complementary view of the trilateral pact's dynamics.

Previous research Batudoka (2023) examined the impact of the AUKUS Defense Pact on Indo-Pacific security, focusing on its influence on regional defense technology, military cooperation, and foreign policy. Using a realism approach, the study highlighted how AUKUS's establishment, notably its plan to develop nuclear-powered submarines, has raised security concerns and intensified the security dilemma, especially for China and some ASEAN countries. While their research emphasized the broader regional implications of AUKUS, this study explicitly analyzes Australia's foreign policy within the pact, aligning it with neorealist principles such as the balance of power and security dilemmas, thereby providing a complementary perspective on the pact's strategic dimensions.

This research analyzes Australia's foreign policy in the context of the Trilateral Security Pact AUKUS (Australia, United Kingdom, United States) as a manifestation of the concept of balance of power in the Indo-Pacific region. It aims to understand the dynamics behind the formation of AUKUS, examine its implications for regional stability, and demonstrate the relevance of neorealist theory in explaining power balancing and security strategies in an anarchic international system.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive methodology to examine the formation of AUKUS through the framework of neorealism. Neorealism argues that the anarchic nature of the international system drives states to prioritize security and power, often through strategic alliances. AUKUS, as a trilateral security pact, reflects this behavior by showcasing how states respond to structural pressures to balance power against perceived threats. The absence of a central authority in international relations creates a security dilemma, where military advancements by one state are viewed as potential threats by others. AUKUS serves as a strategic response by Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom to counterbalance China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific, reinforcing neorealism's premise that alliances are essential for recalibrating power dynamics in an anarchic system.

The study relies on secondary data sources, including government documents, investigative reports, academic studies, and media articles, to analyze the motivations and implications of AUKUS. According to Miles and Huberman (1992), descriptive data analysis consists of three stages: data reduction, data display, and drawing conclusions or verification (Sari & Ningsih, 2023). Data reduction involves selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and transforming raw data from written field notes. The next step is data display, which organizes or structures information systematically. This method identifies patterns, relationships, and causal links, emphasizing how the structural conditions of international anarchy incentivize states to form alliances like AUKUS. The findings highlight how neorealism's theoretical principles practically manifest in state behaviors, providing a comprehensive understanding of the strategic considerations behind the AUKUS pact. (Shihundu, 2024)

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Level of Analysis/International System Analysis by Waltz (1959)

The study of International Relations (IR) is a discipline that examines international actors, both state and non-state, in the global arena, encompassing various key elements within its scope. Given the unlimited variables of interaction dynamics, the rapid flow of globalization, and the limitations of IR scholars in analyzing global phenomena comprehensively, this field necessitates analytical tools or theories to avoid the fallacy of composition or ecological fallacy. Scholars are required to identify appropriate "analytical tools" to understand an issue systematically. As emphasized by J. David Singer in his work *The Level-of-Analysis Problem in International Relations*, In any area of scholarly inquiry, there are always several ways in which the phenomena under study may be sorted and arranged for purposes of systemic analysis. Whether in the physical or social sciences, the observer may focus on the parts or the whole, the components or the system (Donnelly, 2019).

The discussion of levels of analysis in International Relations (IR) studies has evolved since the late 1950s, mainly when Kenneth Waltz (1959) published his work *Man, the State, and War*. In this work, Waltz introduced three "images" or levels of analysis used as independent variables to explain actor behavior (the dependent variable) in the context of a state's decision to go to war. The three "images" include the individual, the state, and the international system (Lopez & Johnson, 2020).

Waltz examined the natural features of individuals or state leaders as factors influencing state interactions. The "state image" highlights internal aspects such as domestic policies and national identity, while the "international system image," according to Hudson and Day, is regarded as the most stable and comprehensive level for understanding interaction patterns holistically due to its ability to generate generalizations and predictions (Soltani et al., 2014). Waltz argued that the anarchic nature of the international system compels states to adjust their political positions.

In 1960, J. David Singer introduced the term level of analysis in his review of Waltz's *Man, the State, and War* (1959), a concept later adopted by Waltz to formulate the definition of the international system in his subsequent work, *Theory of International Politics*. Initially, Waltz described the international system in general terms without specifying how it influenced state behavior. (Quinn & Gibson, 2017) This perspective was later refined with the argument that the international system significantly impacts state behavior, such as balancing power, without referencing the specific interests of individual states. The behavior of states on the international stage can thus be understood without considering internal characteristics or personal factors. This approach focuses on the characteristics of the international system, such as the distribution of power and the global power structure, which influence how states act. Waltz sought to explain state behavior primarily based on power distribution or capabilities within the international system rather than being influenced by internal factors like domestic politics, culture, or ideology (Dugis, 2018).

Waltz's contributions to International Relations (IR) theory are inseparable from neorealism's assumptions about international anarchy and polarity. As a theory inspired by the realist paradigm, neorealism consistently focuses on states' primary role in maximizing power (the struggle for power) within an anarchic international structure. The absence of a central authority governing inter-state relations creates uncertainty (insecurity), where states engage in an arms race to achieve power supremacy, ensuring their survival. In an anarchic environment, polarity refers to the presence of one or more dominant powers in the international community. According to Asal et al. (2019) in *System, State, or Individual: Gaming Levels of Analysis in International Relations*, power polarity can be categorized as unipolar, bipolar, or multipolar. Unipolarity is the dominance of a single superpower that hegemonizes the international system (Wardhani, 2021).

In a unipolar system, weaker states strive to survive through alliances and negotiations, as exemplified during the Gulf War. The absolute hegemony of the United States in this context was demonstrated through its military strategies aimed at maintaining its dominant position for economic and political interests. A bipolar international system, on the other hand, was exemplified by the Cold War, characterized by a rivalry between two major powers: the United States and the Soviet Union. (Tunsjø, 2018) These two powers were in opposition yet sought to preserve system stability by considering the consequences of initiating conflict with one another. Unlike the bipolar system, Mearsheimer argued that system stability through power balancing is not limited to the presence of two dominant powers. He posited that political stability is more likely in a multipolar system with more than two superpowers. Similarly, Asal et al. (2019) suggested that in terms of global power distribution, bipolar order is more stable and conducive to global stability compared to unipolarity or multipolarity. In a unipolar context, superpowers tend to experience a decline over time due to the emergence of counterbalancing forces formed by alliances of weaker states. Conversely, multipolar order is more likely to increase global instability because of the complex

competition and tensions among several major powers.

Neorealism Theory and the Formation of AUKUS

Kenneth Waltz's neorealism theory emphasizes that the anarchic structure of the international system compels states to seek security and survival by maintaining or increasing power. Within this framework, the formation of AUKUS can be explained through the international system-level analysis, highlighting global power distribution and polarity dynamics as primary determinants of state behavior.

Anarchy in the International System and Alliances

The anarchic structure of the international system creates a condition where no supranational authority can guarantee the security of all states. This gives rise to the *security dilemma*, where one state's efforts to enhance its security are perceived as threats by others. In the Indo-Pacific context, China's growing military and economic influence generates significant threat perceptions for Australia and its allies, motivating the establishment of strategic alliances like AUKUS (Keohane, 2019). Neorealism explains that anarchic states tend to form alliances as a mechanism for *external balancing* to maintain equilibrium. AUKUS, in this case, aims to counterbalance China's dominance in the Indo-Pacific region through military and technological cooperation, including acquiring nuclear-powered submarines. (Kumar, 2024) This alliance reflects the *external balancing* strategy predicted by neorealism, where states that perceive a threat form coalitions to maintain the balance of power.

Polarity and State Behavior

The current international system is multipolar, with major powers like the United States, China, and Russia vying for influence. According to Waltz, a multipolar structure tends to be less stable than a bipolar one due to the involvement of multiple actors requiring management. In this context, the formation of AUKUS represents states' efforts to create stability through strengthened bilateral and trilateral relations while reducing reliance on the complex multipolar structure.

Balance of Power

The balance of power is derived from one branch of structural neorealism, namely defensive structural realism. This perspective was proposed by Robert Jervis (1978) and Kenneth Waltz (1979), who focused on power distribution and accumulation. Jervis argued that the anarchic nature of the international structure drives great powers to enhance their security by increasing military capacity. In other words, this condition indirectly places weaker states vulnerable due to fears of military threats from other states. This phenomenon is known as the *security dilemma*, in which others perceive a state's military buildup as a threat. (Glaser, 1997) The occurrence of the

Cold War significantly inspired IR scholars to critique classical realism, which predominantly focused on human nature.

Neorealism is a theoretical perspective that explains how states act in the international arena, emerging because classical realism could not fully account for dynamics such as the Cold War. Classical realism assumes that states constantly strive to increase power as part of human nature. In contrast, neorealism argues that the structure of the international system compels states to compete for power. One of the key concepts in neorealism is the balance of power, which posits

that states seek to prevent any single state from dominating others. If one state becomes too powerful, other states tend to form alliances or enhance their military capabilities to maintain the balance of power. (Walt, 2009)

In defensive realism, states focus on maintaining their security (self-help) without aggressively seeking to become more potent than other states. Instead, they aim solely to protect their national interests, and through these actions, a balance of power naturally forms, ensuring that no single state dominates. Neorealism views the international structure as anarchic, requiring states to prioritize survival. This condition creates the necessity for more than one superpower in the global political system to establish a balance of power (Ogunbanjo, 2021). According to neorealist perspectives, the balance of power is a situation where multiple superpowers play a role in shaping the dynamics of the international system. Waltz argues that a balance of power can be achieved when two conditions are met: the existence of an anarchic international order and the presence of state units striving to secure themselves from threats.

Based on the concept of balance of power, states strive to balance power by forming alliances or increasing capabilities to prevent domination by a single country. This theory is further enriched by the view that states balance against the most powerful country and against those considered the most significant threat. Factors such as geographic proximity, offensive capabilities (ability to attack), and perceptions of other states' intentions are key in determining the threat level. In the concept of balance of power, two main strategies states employ to balance power are internal balancing and external balancing (Türkcan, 2021). Internal balancing refers to a state's efforts to enhance its economic performance and military strength to face threats independently. This strategy can be carried out through military modernization, investment in domestic defense industries, and improving economic output. On the other hand, external balancing is a strategy where states join coalitions with other countries to confront shared threats. While internal balancing is considered more effective, states opt for external balancing if internal capacity is insufficient. (Chan, 2013)

Analysis of the Level of Analysis (LoA) in the International System on Australia's Foreign Policy and AUKUS (Australia, United Kingdom, United States)

The AUKUS agreement has sparked intense discussions among international political observers, as this partnership is seen as a response by Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States to China's hegemony in the Indo-Pacific region. The rivalry between the U.S. and China in the Trade War dragged Australia and the U.K. into a trilateral security pact officially announced on September 15, 2021 (Türkcan, 2021). The AUKUS agreement is a commitment by the three countries to deepen cooperation in diplomatic, security, and defense fields, which has been in place since World War II, with the three countries having a complex history of relations. Australia,

initially a British Commonwealth country, has developed a close relationship with the United States since establishing the ANZUS (Australia, New Zealand, United States) defense alliance in 1951. Meanwhile, the United States and the United Kingdom have been military allies since wartime. One of the most significant points of this agreement is the commitment of the three countries to collaborate militarily, particularly by "equipping" Australia with nuclear-powered submarines. This commitment makes Australia the seventh country in the world to operate nuclear-powered submarines.

The trilateral AUKUS defense pact is a reaction to China's aggression in the South China Sea (SCS) conflict. Since the 1990s, China has unilaterally expanded its territorial claims using the nine-dash line, resulting in territorial disputes with several Southeast Asian nations, including Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei Darussalam. The potential for open military conflict between China and Southeast Asian countries has created security instability in the Indo-Pacific region. For the U.S., the rise of China is seen as a strategy that threatens its interests in the Indo-Pacific. The formation of AUKUS reflects an initiative by the three countries to collectively strengthen military power to maintain peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region.

In line with the concept of balance of power and external balancing, the AUKUS pact serves as an example of external balancing led by the U.S. to create a power balance where they can collectively address the perceived threat from China. On the other hand, Australia's policy of joining this pact is seen as a bold move to strengthen its strategic position amid geopolitical uncertainty and the intensifying rivalry between the U.S. and China. By joining AUKUS, Australia risks damaging its diplomatic relations with China, its primary trading partner. This situation is reflected in one significant step taken by Australia—the official ban on the Chinese company Huawei from participating in the development of Australia's 5G network in 2018. This decision is considered one of the leading causes of tension in the bilateral relationship with China. The tension escalated when then-Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison called for an international investigation into the origins of the coronavirus. This call aligned with former U.S. President Donald Trump's stance, who often blamed China for the pandemic.(Boylan et al., 2021) In reaction to these actions, China launched an economic sanction campaign to limit the import of Australian goods such as wine and barley and imposed high tariffs on these products.

In an anarchical international structure, countries must prioritize their security. Strengthening military power and capacity becomes a primary goal for nations based on realist views to face challenges in the contemporary era. Australia's policy to shape a more favorable security environment through the AUKUS partnership illustrates this. Australia's decision to join AUKUS can be concluded as a strategy to assert its position, demonstrate its desire to play an active role in regional security, and address the security challenges posed by the rise of China's military power in the Indo-Pacific region. Through AUKUS, Australia gains access to advanced military technologies, including nuclear-powered submarines, which can enhance its defense capabilities. The policy of joining AUKUS can be seen as a response to changes in global dynamics. In the Indo-Pacific region, China's dominance in various aspects, both militarily and economically, has raised concerns among Indo-Pacific countries about the significant influence China wields. Australia, as a nation in the Indo-Pacific, is aware that China's aggression could extend to its territory. With this awareness, Australia is working to improve its military capabilities.

CONCLUSION

International Relations (IR) studies require analytical tools to understand complex global dynamics. Kenneth Waltz's levels of analysis of individual, state, and international systems provide a framework for understanding state behavior. Neorealism, derived from his work, emphasizes that international anarchy forces states to seek security through power and alliances. This theory explains how states, without central authority, form alliances for external balancing to counter threats.

Australia's participation in the AUKUS defense pact is a prime example. The agreement, formed with the United Kingdom and the United States, aims to counter China's hegemony in the Indo-Pacific region, with Australia leveraging access to nuclear submarine technology to strengthen its military and safeguard its national interests.

While this study provides a strong analysis of AUKUS through the lens of neorealism, there are some limitations. First, the focus is on the Indo-Pacific region, limiting its applicability to other areas where geopolitical dynamics may differ. Second, the research is based on a current snapshot of the geopolitical landscape, which may evolve as alliances shift or new powers emerge. Lastly, the neorealist framework's focus on systemic factors overlooks the significant impact of domestic political environments, particularly in democratic states like Australia, which may influence foreign policy decisions.

To address these limitations, future studies could broaden the scope by examining how neorealism explains alliances in other regions, such as Europe or Africa, where the balance of power may function differently. A longitudinal analysis could provide deeper insights into how alliances like AUKUS evolve in response to changing threats and political shifts. Additionally, integrating domestic factors with the international system by combining neorealism with theories like liberalism or constructivism would offer a more comprehensive understanding of state behavior and the formation of alliances in the global arena.

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