

AUKUS: The Rise of Chinese Might and the US' Response

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ABSTRACT

The US-China rivalry has intensified in recent years, first with the Trade War under the Trump Administration and then AUKUS created under the Biden Administration. This article analyses the power rivalry in relation to AUKUS and its impact on countries within the Indo-Pacific. This article will analyse this power rivalry by using the concepts of the foreign policy of containment and the concept of security alliance. The research uses a qualitative descriptive method with primary and secondary sources, which is validated by triangulation of sources. The research questions led to the finding that the US-China power rivalry, as well as the creation of AUKUS, have created tension in the Indo-Pacific, where countries are, blatantly or softly, forced to choose a side. Such a situation also impacts how a country conducts its domestic and foreign policy, so as to not provoke one side over the other.

Keywords: *US-China Rivalry, AUKUS, Indo-Pacific, Regional Security*

Persaingan antara Amerika Serikat dan Tiongkok semakin menguat beberapa tahun belakangan ini. Persaingan yang sangat jelas terlihat adalah Perang Dagang yang terjadi di bawah kepemimpinan Presiden Trump lalu kemudian pembentukan AUKUS di bawah kepemimpinan Biden. Artikel ini bertujuan untuk mendeskripsikan persaingan antara kedua negara terkait AUKUS, serta dampaknya terhadap negara-negara di kawasan Indo-Pasifik. Permasalahan tersebut dianalisis menggunakan konsep kebijakan luar negeri pembendungan dan konsep aliansi keamanan. Metode penelitian yang digunakan adalah metode penelitian kualitatif deskriptif dengan sumber data primer dan sekunder berbasis teknik validasi triangulasi sumber. Hasil penelitian menemukan bahwa rivalitas Cina-US AUKUS membentuk ketegangan di Indo-Pasifik, di mana negara-negara di kawasan tersebut terpaksa harus memihak, baik dengan cara terang-terangan maupun secara halus. Keadaan ini menuntut negara-negara di Indo-Pasifik untuk dapat membuat kebijakan dalam negeri dan kebijakan luar negeri yang tidak memprovokasi salah satu negara tersebut.

Kata-kata Kunci: *Persaingan US-Tiongkok, AUKUS, Indo-Pasifik, Keamanan Regional*

The term Indo-Pacific has never been clear how it came to be known, but it is clear that the Indo-Pacific is rising in prominence, as clearly shown by the attention given by powerful states, such as China and the United States. China has for a while now extended its presence in the Indo-Pacific, especially relating to its nine-dash-line (NDL) claims in the South China Sea. The NDL covers almost all of the area of the South China Sea and overlaps with the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which has been accepted by 157 countries. As a result, China has overlapping claims with several countries in the region, such as the Philippines, Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, and Malaysia. In 2013, the Philippines brought the case against China to the Permanent Court of Arbitration, where the plaintiff eventually won the case. However, China seems not to mind the result of the case and still building artificial islands around the disputed area and buffing it up with military equipment, trying to fully implement anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) in the region. But more than that, through its String of Pearls strategy, China is also building the People's Liberation Army's military base in the region, where last year China is also in discussion with PNG and Solomon Islands. In economic cooperation, China's presence in the region is also real and powerful, especially under the Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI) cooperation. China has a comprehensive economic partnership with Indonesia, such as the Jakarta-Bandung fast train project (Kereta Cepat Indonesia-China/KCIC). China's behaviour in the region erased any doubts about its willingness to be an important actor.

As China's might is growing in the region, the US is beginning to pay close attention and marking the importance of the Indo-Pacific. The US began mentioning the Indo-Pacific in 2017 when it unveiled its National Security Strategy and called China a revisionist state that seeks to displace the US in the Indo-Pacific region (The White House 2017). In 2018, the US renamed the US Pacific Command (USPACOM) to US Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) (Paskal 2021). In 2019, the US made clear that the Indo-Pacific is the priority theatre of the US Department of Defense (US Department of Defense 2019). That same year, the US also began stressing the importance of a free and open Indo-Pacific, which now becomes its motto in the region followed by several other countries such as France. Under the Trump Administration, the US focused on countering China's influence in the economic sector and decided to impose heavy tariffs on China, to which China responded in kind. The result is what is now known

as the Trade War. When President Biden came to office, he started his 100 days in office by concluding the Afghanistan withdrawal. Instead of marking the decline in US foreign policy, it was only the beginning of theatre change. Under Biden Administration, the US focus on countering China's influence in the Indo-Pacific, especially in terms of defence and security. He started his term with a test with the Hunan Island incident, where a US EP-3 reconnaissance airplane almost collided with a Chinese J-8 interceptor jet, which resulted in the death of the J-8 pilot and the detainment of all 24 personnel of the EP-3 after an emergency landing in Hunan Island. Luckily, the US and China deescalate the situation and China then released all EP-3 crew. However, it will not be the end of the tension between both parties. The US Navy and the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) repeatedly had battles of will in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Straits. On the diplomatic level, both parties also openly oppose the other's conduct, so much so that even NATO, which has so far focused on the European Eastern flank threat, suddenly made a statement in June 2021 declaring China as a threat, especially in terms of military modernization.

Under Biden's Administration, the US did not just maintain the Trump-era trade tariff policy, but the US also bolstered its security alliance in the Indo-Pacific. In September 2021, the US led an initiative called AUKUS, as an abbreviation of the countries involved (Australia, the UK and the US). This trilateral security alliance is nothing less of a historic moment, as one of the security agreements under AUKUS is the exchange of knowledge and technologies from the US and UK to Australia in order to provide the latter with at least eight (8) nuclear-powered submarines (SSN). Australia is not a nuclear proliferation country and neither the US nor the UK has ever shared this technology before, not even with India which has been asking the US for one (India Today 2021). This deal, on the other hand, tore up the previous deal Australia made with the Naval Company, without informing the latter. France felt blind-sided and Jean-Yves Le Drian even called it "a stab in the back" (The Guardian 2021). As a long-time ally of the US, it is not an exaggeration that France was shocked to have never been informed of such an alliance prior to its announcement. The diplomatic relations between France, the US, and Australia somewhat became cold and look similar to the Trump era of diplomacy. Indo-Pacific is home to ASEAN, so having such technology in their backyard in the near future sparked various responses from ASEAN members. Singapore did

not seem bothered by AUKUS, however, Indonesia and Malaysia have expressed concerns about the potential of an arms race and the environmental effects of nuclear-powered submarines.

It is clear that the Indo-Pacific is tempting great powers to play a hegemonic game in the region, dragging along countries nestling in the Indo-Pacific. Such a game inevitably invokes the questions of the impacts of power play in the Indo-Pacific, as we would want to avoid what had happened in the Middle East and Ukraine from also appearing here, namely proxy war. Although none of the AUKUS states mentioned China by name, no one doubts that AUKUS is created as a way to counter China's presence in the Indo-Pacific. Michael Shoebridge (2021) wrote that the move that Australia, the UK, and the US have made is a sign of the changing world, namely the rise of China. Shoebridge explained that the aggressive moves made by the Chinese in the Indo-Pacific compelled AUKUS to change the military balance in the region away from China and to raise the cost of Beijing using military power and intimidation to achieve its ends. The focus of AUKUS is the goal of providing Australia with eight (8) nuclear-powered attack submarines, where at least one will be ready by 2040 and, if possible, more by that year. This is a significant change in the US nuclear program as the US and the UK never shared this technology with other states since they entered the US-UK nuclear partnership in 1958. Shoebridge analyses that AUKUS is a supplementary alliance to QUAD and Sydney Dialogue, meant to send a message that Australia and the US see the need to add real weight to counter the rise of China's presence in the region.

This writing is different in that this paper uses a foreign policy of containment (FPC) proposed by George F. Kennan, in which he proposed the idea that an actor deemed hostile in international politics has to be contained through a series of foreign policies (Latrides 2005). The we first used this policy during the Cold War to curb the influence of the Soviet Union, be it in military and/or economic terms. The way to contain a designated actor could be in a way of alliance or an agreement. At the time, the US feared that once a country fell to communism, the surrounding countries would fall as well. Hence, the US deemed it necessary to counter any influence the Soviets had, which led to proxy wars in many regions. Such a policy could be seen these days in the Indo-Pacific. With the growing influence China has in many countries in the region, both economically and militarily, the US began its countermeasure by containing China in its own sphere. AUKUS is

the concrete form of such a policy, where the geographical location of the three countries with their strategic military placements could curb the PLA. At the same time, it would also provide a strategic location to better the interoperability of military dominance that could swiftly respond to any threat in the region, including from China. The AUKUS could also explain through the views of the security alliance in a world of anarchy. As proposed by Martin Wright (1978), an alliance serves to reinforce the security of the allies or to promote their interests in the external world. In order to better defend oneself against a powerful state, a country usually forms an alliance with another country that has a common threat. In other words, such an alliance is valued by the ability to provide one another with military assistance, which in turn influences a state's behaviour. Applying this concept in AUKUS, this alliance would enable Australia to expand its military security from littoral to blue navy capability. In return, it would also guarantee that the pact could joint venture to curb China's influence in the region and provide a swift response if any conflict were to break out.

Based on the explanation in the background section, this article concluded the research question of "How is the power rivalry between the US and China within the AUKUS framework, and what are the impacts on the Indo-Pacific?" This research seeks to analyze the US-China power rivalry within the AUKUS framework and the impacts on the Indo-Pacific. The result of this research seeks to find: 1) The process of China's transition from economy to military and its influence in the Indo-Pacific Region; (2) The US response through the AUKUS security alliance to the power of China in the Indo-Pacific region; and (3) the Impact of the China-US AUKUS power rivalry to Indo-Pacific regional security.

China's Rise from Economy to Military

Assessing the international political stage, there is no doubt that the world is witnessing the rise of The People's Republic of China (PRC). During the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, China took a somewhat laid-back approach to its foreign policy with its famous dictum of "hide your strength, bide your time (韜光養晦、有所作為)". Deng was not keen to put China on the world stage but rather focused on building soft diplomacy with other states, including

the United States. In 2013, President Xi launched an ambitious One Belt, One Road (OBOR) policy, which was later renamed Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI). According to its website, BRI is a transcontinental long-term policy and investment program that aims at infrastructure development and acceleration of the economic integration of countries along the route of the historic Silk Road. It aims to better the infrastructure so that trade will move along more easily than before. Countries under this agreement will receive funding to build infrastructures such as railroads or airports. This highlights PRC's focus on trade, which is not surprising given that China has become a strong economic power. China's trade deal has reached many countries, including the United States and the European Union. China was the top exporter of merchandise trade in 2020, accounting for 13 percent of the world's total (up from 12 percent in 2019), totalling 2,323 billion US dollars (WTO 2021). In 2021, China overtook the US as the EU's biggest trading partner (BBC 2021). This is an important point to make, considering that PRC suffered from the US-China Trade War and the Covid-19 Pandemic. PRC does not just have its eyes on the land-based route but also on the sea route, as pointed out by its Maritime Silk Road initiatives. This would be in line with CCP's goal to make China a prosperous nation by 2035.

PRC's economic success does not just lift its citizens out of poverty and make it a prominent player in international politics, but it also helps in the modernization of its military aspect. For some time, it seemed that PRC's goal is to boost the economic sector and soft power diplomacy, but as it turns out, it also has its eyes for keeping up with the hard power rivalry. In 2017, President Xi called for the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to complete ongoing force modernization efforts by 2035 and become a world-class military capable of fighting and winning wars in any theatre of operations by 2050 (RAND 2020).

In line with its Maritime Silk Road initiatives, PRC has been modernizing its People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) capabilities, such as developing cruisers, destroyers, and submarines capable of carrying ballistic missiles (O'Rourke 2008). China has also successfully made its own aircraft carrier (warship), first in 2012, the Liaoning, and last year it unveiled its latest, most advanced aircraft carrier Type 003 Fujian, making it the third aircraft carrier that PLAN owns (Al Jazeera 2022). PRC is currently operating 25 warships and is also reportedly restarting mass production of Type 052 Destroyers (Luyang III) at the Dalian Shipyard, China

(The Global Times August 2022). PRC's massive expansion of its naval capabilities is said to be in line with its development of the blue-water navy "to match the country's international status and better defend its interests" (The Global Times 2022). This means that PLAN's presence would not just be to the extent of the brown-water navy or to the extent of the South China Sea, but further beyond such as in the Indo-Pacific.

The massive modernization of the PLA includes the development of modern technologies, such as 5th generation fighter jets, Chengdu J-20, and combat drones, Gongji-11. Assessing the PLA's Operational Concept, we could see that they have understood the importance of modern technology since 1993, with its doctrine of "Local Wars Under Modern, High-Tech Conditions." Then again in its 2004 doctrine of "Local Wars Under Informatized Conditions" and 2015 doctrine of "Informatized Local Wars" (RAND 2020). One of the things being pursued by the PRC is the development of a Hypersonic Glide Vehicle and fully developed anti-access/area-denial capabilities (A2/AD). Modernization of PLA is not without cost. PRC's defence budget is steadily rising from 1990 until 2022 and is projected to keep on rising to fulfil the goal of total military modernization and the blue-waters navy (Statista 2022). In 2021, its defence budget was 293.35 billion US dollars, making it the second biggest spender on a military budget after the US and accounting for 43% of total regional spending in 2021 in Asia (IISS 2022).

PRC's dominance in the economy and military is on par with its geopolitical goal. The South China Sea has been the hotspot of tension after PRC's NDL claim. Despite international outcry and the decision of the Permanent Court of Arbitration, China keeps building artificial land in the area, buffed up with its weapon system (The Guardian 2022). Furthermore, PRC is also keen on building military bases in other countries or at least trying to get access to their military base. It has managed to build a military base in Djibouti, East Africa (Foreign Policy 2022). Last year, a leaked security deal draft between Solomon Island and PRC sparked an uproar because this draft contains a clause that stipulates that Solomon Island would request assistance from Chinese police, armed police, military personnel, and other armed forces. This means that PLA could gain access to a naval base, sparking fear that it could then be granted a permanent naval base in the Pacific. Despite denying this allegation, last year there was an "incident"

on Solomon Island when they did not respond to the US coast guard vessel's request to dock and refuel (Reuters 2022).

The US Response to China in the Indo-Pacific Region: The AUKUS Security Alliance

Since the Cold War ended, the United States of America has been the hegemonic power in international politics. Its economy and the military sector were prominent, as well as its involvement in major conflicts in all parts of the world. Arguably, that position has never been challenged, except for a few tit-for-tat with Russia. In the early days of the PRC's economic turnover, the US maintained a friendly relationship with PRC, including under the Obama administration. That condition changed under the Trump administration when Trump designated PRC as an evil greedy country that was allegedly the cause of the loss of US manufacturing jobs and intellectual property (Brookings 2020). This was what started the Trade War, whereupon Trump's administration had imposed tariff on goods from China, and PRC retaliated by doing the same thing to US goods. This is the start of another deteriorating Sino-US relationship.

When Joe Biden won the presidential seat in the US, one could make an assumption that he would take a different approach to US' relationship with China. He does. But not for the better. Where Trump designated China's economy as a sore in his eye, for Biden it is the military. The Biden administration's first big foreign policy was when he decided to keep the complete withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan (The New Yorker 2021). It is not that the US has quit the hegemonic power play, instead, it is the start of another US pivot to Asia. To make it clear, the US presence in Asia, and the Indo-Pacific in general, is not new and uncommon. The US has stationed its military presence in the Indo-Pacific, such as the USINDOPACOM as well as long-standing military diplomacy with countries in the region, and has numerous security alliances with countries in the Indo-Pacific, such as the Five Defence Arrangement between Australia, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore, and The United Kingdom, and/or the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) between the United States, Australia, India, and Japan, which initially began as a joint military exercise but then created its own vision of the Indo-Pacific. As if these are not enough, President Biden concocted another security alliance

in 2021, which arguably became his second biggest foreign policy after Afghanistan.

In September 2021, the US launched another alliance in the Indo-Pacific, namely AUKUS. This is a strategic defence alliance between the three countries, ranging from defence technologies, undersea capabilities (Undersea Robotics Autonomous Systems), quantum technology (technologies for positioning, navigation, and timing), artificial intelligence, advanced cyber, hypersonic and counter-hypersonic capabilities, and information sharing to the one that sparked the most uproar: nuclear-powered submarines (SSN) for Australia to replace the aging Collin-class submarines (White House 2021). Initially, Australia signed an agreement with the Naval Company (partly owned by France) to develop conventional diesel-electric attack class submarines (SSKs) with a total value of 35 billion USD (Defense News 2021), so the new security pact surely terminated this deal. Despite being a longstanding ally of the three countries, France has never been informed of the upcoming AUKUS deal, and France's then Foreign Minister, Jean-Yves Le Drian called it "a stab in the back" (The Guardian 2021).

The plan to provide Australia with nuclear-powered submarines is colossal, given that Australia is a non-proliferation country. In the beginning, there was a misconception that the submarines will be equipped with nuclear missiles. It will not. At least not so far. Although, it is worth noting that the nuclear-propelled technology used by the US and the UK uses Highly Enriched Uranium (HEU). HEU enables the long usage of energy, as it could last for a submarine's lifespan. In strategic terms, this would mean that no foreign entities (in this case the US and the UK) would have an excuse to mingle in the submarines once they are in service. Meaning it would guarantee the state's secret and its naval security. In contrast, Low Enriched Uranium (LOU) would require a replacement, as it cannot last a submarine's lifespan. A nuclear-powered submarine is prized over its capability to submerge for a long period of time and its stealthiness. A stealth submarine could easily move around, in this case in the Indo-Pacific, and could even position itself close enough to the shoreline of a country. Within such a distance, if it launches missiles, an air defence system would be hard to detect them and even with a countermeasure, there is still a high possibility of a successful hit (Achvar 2022).

The China-US AUKUS Rivalry and The Impact on Indo-Pacific Regional Security

The first implication regarding AUKUS is the submarine that will be provided for the Royal Australian Navy. There are two types of nuclear-powered submarines, one using LEU and the other HEU. As mentioned above, AUKUS will be providing Australia with the latter. Using HEU is not without implications. The most worrying thing is the fact that HEU could easily turn into an atomic bomb. The AUKUS countries have pledged to let the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) conduct regular inspections of the submarines. This is a sweet promise; however, the implementation is rather complicated. A submarine on deployment will be away for a period of time, at least three months away. During that time, anything could happen. A country could go rogue and turn it into a weapon, hence a danger to the stability of the region (Reuters 2021).

Another implication of providing Australia with HEU-powered submarines is the possibility of turning back years of effort toward non-proliferation. Countries that long wanted a nuclear plant, be it for electricity but are banned to do so, such as Iran, would make this an excuse to continue their nuclear program. Perhaps other countries would also be tempted to have nuclear-powered submarines, such as the Saudi. To then forbid other nations from pursuing nuclear programs would be hypocritical, to say the least, and dangerously jeopardize the non-proliferation effort.

AUKUS has also highlighted the escalation of the rivalry between the US and PRC. The AUKUS countries have never mentioned China by name, but no one doubts that this security alliance is a way to contain PRC's moves in the region (Shoebri 2021). The US has repeatedly mentioned the goal of a free and open Indo-Pacific, that being a brush of PRC's NDL dispute and A2/AD capabilities. Australia itself is a close ally of the US with a perfect location to deter PRC in the Indo-Pacific. As per the White House statement on AUKUS' progress, it has two lines of effort: first, to supply Australia with nuclear-powered submarines at the earliest possible date and, second, to develop and provide joint advanced military capabilities to promote security and stability in the Indo-Pacific region (White House 2022). Without a doubt, PRC's military dominance is now having another powerful defence alliance in the Indo-Pacific. As mentioned before, the US-Sino relationship has gone cold for quite some time now. The same case has been

going on with the Australia-Sino relationship over the trade agreement. Things went south when Australia refused to allow Chinese Huawei to implement a 5G network in Australia, to which PRC retaliated by imposing import restrictions (East Asia Forum 2022). AUKUS is salt to the wounds for the PRC. As reported by the Guardian, a Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson said the three countries were in the grip of an “obsolete cold war zero-sum mentality and narrow-minded geopolitical concepts” and should “respect regional people’s aspiration [...] otherwise they will only end up hurting their own interests” (The Guardian 2021). This new security alliance is an additional pain to the relationship between PRC and the West.

The US policy in the Indo-Pacific resembles its policy during the Cold War era, namely the containment policy (Latrides 2005). At the time, George F. Kennan proposed that in order to prevent countries from falling into communism, it should conduct a policy of containment, whereby the US will counter the influence of the Soviets and contain it in its territory. AUKUS is similar to that effort to counter Chinese influence in the region and contain it in its own territory. AUKUS also serves to reinforce the security of the allies or to promote their interests in the external world, in accordance with the alliance concept proposed by (Wright 1978). AUKUS would enable Australia to expand its military security from littoral to blue navy capability. In return, it would also guarantee that the pact could joint venture to curb China’s influence in the region and provide a swift response if any conflict were to break out. The downside of this alliance and containment policy is that it forces other countries to take a side, one way or another. This situation is similar to that of the Cold War Era when US-Soviet tension brought the whole world into their battle for influence. The recent and most obvious one was what happened on Solomon Island. When the leaked draft went public, the US did not hesitate to give its stark warning that under no circumstances that Solomon Island shall have such dependence on PRC, which is arguably what caused the cold relationship between the US and Solomon Island as shown by the incident last year when Honiara did not respond to the US coast guard vessel’s request to dock and refuel (Reuters 2022). This power rivalry could be seen in the Pacific, especially in Fiji (Naibaho 2022). The location of Fiji is important as a hub between America and Asia. So important Fiji is for the US that they invest heavily in Fiji, despite the fact that it lacks natural resources (Naibaho 2022). Fiji is also a recipient

of Foreign Military Financing (FMF) to equip its military and participates in the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program, which sends Fijian officers and senior enlisted personnel to professional military education and leadership development courses in the United States (US State Government).

Indonesia realized the importance of Fiji that last August 2022, Indonesia and Fiji successfully held the first-ever Indonesia-Fiji Defence Dialogue in Suva, Fiji. Indonesia itself also provides aid for Fiji. Indonesia's intention with Fiji is not with the intention of asking for an alliance as Indonesia holds a non-alignment policy (Naibaho 2022). However, PRC has also been building diplomacy with Fiji, realizing its importance in the Pacific. PRC has worked long and hard to win over Fiji by sending aid and making it one of the countries under the BRI agreement (The Guardian 2022). In return, Fiji sees PRC as a friend, not a foe. Avoiding losing the influence of Fiji to the PRC, the US has been working hard to reassure Fiji and the Pacific in general of its presence, such as when the US Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken, visited Fiji last February to meet with Fiji pro-China Prime Minister, Frank Bainimarama, as a way to persuade him to lean more towards the US instead of China (The Guardian 2022). PM Bainimarama was unfortunately hospitalized in Australia and was not able to meet Blinken.

As mentioned, Indonesia holds a non-alignment policy ever since the Cold War Era. Being one of the countries in the heart of the Indo-Pacific and having a strategic geographical location, that is between two oceans and two continents, Indonesia holds a special position in the rising tension between the US and PRC. Traditionally, the strongest ally for Indonesia in the economic and defence sector was the US. For a long time, the US has dominated Indonesia in all sectors, even in soft diplomacy such as cultural diplomacy. However, in the past years, the situation has changed. Indonesia has become one of the countries under the BRI agreement, such as the project to build the rapid train line between Jakarta and Bandung. In terms of trade, China continued to be Indonesia's most important trade partner throughout 2020. A total of 19.5% of all Indonesian exports were shipped to China, followed by the US (11.4%) and Japan (8.4%) (CEIC 2022). In the military sector, the US is still dominating with its annual joint military exercise with Indonesia, Garuda Shield. US-manufactured weapon systems also still dominate Indonesia. The rivalry is not over. PLA has been establishing defence diplomacy with Indonesia, such as Training

Officers as well as grant programs, which show how Indonesia is being pursued by both sides, trying to win over Indonesia's influence (Naibaho 2022) (Denly 2022). It is, therefore, Indonesia's task to balance the power rivalry between the two powers, and it is not an easy task to do.

The responses of AUKUS from other countries are varied. ASEAN, as an association at the heart of the Indo-Pacific, has been divided in its responses. Officially, ASEAN made no statement regarding AUKUS, but Singapore and Vietnam support the pact, whereas Indonesia and Malaysia expressed concern over the start of an arms race and undermining regional security (Cheng 2022). The Philippines' national security establishment welcomed AUKUS, though President Duterte shared the concerns of Malaysia and Indonesia, and Thailand stayed silent (Choong 2021). The West has dismissed the idea that AUKUS will start an arms race, but this does not give reassurance to the countries mentioned. This is an example of how the West often fails to understand the psychological factor of the Southeast Asian countries. As most countries in Asia have endured at least some form of colonization, it formed this way of thinking in these countries that they will defend their sovereignty at any cost, so a country, especially one that is dominated by Caucasians, building nuclear-powered submarines will not be an easy pill to swallow. Such a rivalry in their background will raise their tension (Bahari 2022). In short, though the US repeatedly stated that ASEAN centrality is crucial for the stability of the region, the AUKUS deal has done nothing but that.

The long-standing ally of the US, France, was also hurt by AUKUS, so much so that recalled its ambassadors from the US and Australia, whereas Jean-Yves Le Drian even called it "a stab in the back" (Tertrais 2021). Moreover, the deal also triggered a question mark from the EU. Considering AUKUS did not notify nor engage the EU before the announcement, despite being a long-standing ally of the US, shows that the EU could no longer rely on the US (Panda 2022). AUKUS has put transatlantic ties in disorder and changed the EU's perspective. Panda also noted how some countries worry that AUKUS will promote an arms race in the area, relating to the agreement of nuclear-powered submarines being built by the pact. Panda noted that despite AUKUS and Quad, there is still space for the EU in the Indo-Pacific and that all parties need to involve in the advocacy of a rule-based, democratic, and open maritime order, which is vital to ensuring a united stand against authoritarian and

unilateral actions by states that threaten the stability of the Indo-Pacific.

Conclusion

The US-China power rivalry has spilled over from the economic sector to the defence sector. The main theatre is the Indo-Pacific. PRC once suffered, but then was able to lift its people out of poverty. Then under President Xi, PRC moved from the “hide your strength, bide your time” dictum to expanding PRC’s influence in all parts of the world under the Belt and Road Initiatives. This condition was countered by the US under Trump Administration which then led to a Trade War between the two countries. This signals the start of a downturn in the US-China relationship. PRC with its newly found dominance also seeks to modernize its military sector and it is colossal. It was able to build all kinds of advanced weapon systems such as 5th-generation fighter jets and its very own aircraft carriers. The US then made a counter-measurement through AUKUS, a trilateral security alliance between Australia, the UK, and the US. This alliance seeks deeper and stronger ties within the security and defence sector that includes providing Australia with at least six (6) nuclear-powered submarines (SSN). AUKUS also emphasizes the importance of an open and free Indo-Pacific. The reactions of this security alliance are varied, and even ASEAN made no joint comment. This is another major downward turn in the US-China relationship.

Assessing the situation, this article finds some recommendations to sustain the security and stability in the Indo-Pacific. It is true that every country holds sovereignty over its domestic policy, so PRC has every right to grow its economic influence and PLA’s massive modernization. However, it is important that such a policy is followed by a commitment to uphold international law, such as The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), and then to uphold human rights values in a transparent manner, such as the case of Xinjiang. This is important so PRC would not be seen as an aggressive actor but as a partner.

As for the United States, the conduct of alienating an actor under the pretext of upholding democratic values has proven fatal in the past. The USSR was an example of that. In order to maintain the stability of security, law, and governance in the Indo-Pacific,

the US needs to establish a friendlier foreign policy toward PRC so as to not escalate the tension even more. Diplomacy and soft power would de-escalate the tension and would not alienate PRC even more than it already is. ASEAN as the strongest partnership in the region needs to cooperate more in harmony to lower the tension in the Indo-Pacific. This year, Indonesia will hold the Chair of ASEAN, so this would be a momentum to build stronger partnerships so that ASEAN would not be forced to choose a side, but rather able to be the catalyst of stability.

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