

A Constructivist Analysis of the Establishment of the AUKUS Security Pact and its Implications for Regional Stability in the Indo-Pacific

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Abstract

This article attempts to shed light on AUKUS formation based on constructivist perspective and its implications for regional stability in the Indo-Pacific. Using a qualitative approach with a case study method, this article found that the formation of AUKUS is strongly influenced by two fundamental elements of constructivism: identity and interests. Identity refers to the shared ideas among the Anglo-Saxon nations (including Canada and New Zealand). Nevertheless, New Zealand tends not to join AUKUS due to its commitment to non-proliferation, while Canada seems to contribute nothing to the nuclear submarine program. The interests of the AUKUS alliance are: the US desires to strengthen its hegemony in the Indo-Pacific and rebalance China's domination; the UK craves to become the first European country to enhance alliance cooperation in the Indo-Pacific after Brexit; and Australia's willingness to modernize its military capability and affirms its commitment to which allies it counts on in the future. The implications of establishing AUKUS might include: undermining the status quo in the region concerning a nuclear-free zone, weakening existing cooperation agreements and reducing mutual trust between traditional allies, and bringing catastrophe to the region by triggering an armed race.

Keywords: AUKUS; China; Constructivism; Indo-Pacific; Regional Stability

Abstrak

Artikel ini bertujuan untuk menjelaskan pembentukan pakta pertahanan AUKUS berdasarkan Perspektif Konstruktivisme dan implikasi pembentukannya pada stabilitas kawasan di Indo-Pasifik. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode studi kasus, artikel ini menemukan bahwa pembentukan AUKUS sangat dipengaruhi oleh dua elemen dasar konstruktivisme, yaitu identitas dan kepentingan. Identitas merujuk kepada share ideas diantara bangsa Anglo-Saxon (juga termasuk Kanada dan Selandia Baru). Meski demikian, Selandia Baru cenderung tidak bergabung dengan AUKUS karena komitmennya terhadap non-proliferasi, sedangkan Kanada tampaknya tidak berkontribusi dalam program kapal selam nuklir. Kepentingan aliansi AUKUS adalah: keinginan AS untuk memperkuat hegemoninya di Indo-Pasifik dan menyeimbangkan kembali dominasi China; keinginan Inggris menjadi negara Eropa pertama yang meningkatkan kerja sama aliansi di Indo-Pasifik setelah Brexit; dan keinginan Australia untuk memodernisasi kemampuan militernya dan menegaskan komitmennya kepada sekutu yang diandalkannya di masa depan. Implikasi dari pembentukan AUKUS adalah: melemahkan status quo di kawasan dalam konteks zona bebas nuklir, melemahkan perjanjian kerja sama yang ada dan mengurangi rasa saling percaya antara sekutu tradisional, dan membawa malapetaka ke kawasan dengan memicu perlombaan bersenjata.

Kata Kunci: AUKUS; Cina; Konstruktivisme; Indo-Pasifik; Stabilitas Kawasan

Introduction

Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States held a virtual meeting on 15 September 2021 and announced the formation of a trilateral security partnership known as 'AUKUS' (The White House 2021). Under this partnership, the United States and the United Kingdom will assist Australia in building a nuclear-powered submarine that is far better than conventional submarines. Indeed, nuclear-powered submarines offer several advantages such as high speed, difficult to detect by radar, diving for long durations (months), and being capable of firing missiles even though the Australian government has made it clear that it has no intention of acquiring nuclear weapons (BBC News 2021a). The announcement of the AUKUS defense pact was quite surprising because countries have been more likely to form economic partnerships than security alliances since the end of the Cold War. Although there has been no definite answer regarding the motive behind the formation of AUKUS, scholars like Puri (2022), Novita (2022), and Cheng (2022) observe that AUKUS was formed to deter Chinese domination and redistribute the US power and allies in the Indo-Pacific. Indeed, the rise of China is undeniable today, and Beijing is increasingly expanding its influence to embrace the world. It can be seen by the Chinese government's breakthroughs in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which tries to connect Asia with Europe and Africa, the Turnkey Project Management (TPM) scheme, and also the plans to build Chinese military bases in the South Pacific (Hoh 2019; Nadjiha 2020).

The plans to construct a nuclear-powered submarine for Australia is a particular concern for countries in the region, especially ASEAN. As stated by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Indonesia, outside Southeast Asia, the Indo-Pacific, Indonesia perceives that the formation of AUKUS could stimulate regional tensions. It can certainly trigger an increase in the arms race and threaten regional security stability (CNN Indonesia 2021). However, not all countries in the region send a negative response to the formation of the AUKUS alliance. Singapore is one of the countries giving a positive impression on the establishment of the partnership, as conveyed by Prime Minister of Singapore Lee Hsien Loong that "it would contribute constructively to the peace and stability of the region and complement the regional architecture" (Southgate 2021). In the study of international relations, we can select many perspectives to analyze the case study of AUKUS. Accordingly, this article picks constructivism which emphasizes the socially constructed character of interests and identities of actors. Constructivism is an alternative theory or perspective that criticizes the dominance of neorealism and neoliberalism. Substantially, constructivism is a perspective that views everything that occurs in the world as a social

construction, “Constructivism sees the world, and what we can know about the world, as socially constructed” (Theys 2018).

This article attempts to shed light on the AUKUS formation based on a constructivist perspective and its implications for regional stability in the Indo-Pacific. The structure of this article is divided as follows. The authors first describe the method used in this article, followed by an explanation related to the literature review. Next, the authors enter into the discussion and analysis, and come up with a conclusion. By exploring the case study of AUKUS, this article is expected to contribute to development of the constructivist perspective in international relations.

Literature Review

AUKUS and Indo-Pacific

Cheng (2022) affirmed that the development of the Indo-Pacific should be based on peace and cooperation; not on prevention or the basic principle of balancing forces that can lead to confrontation. He criticizes Western countries that own great powers and adheres to narrow geopolitical concepts and unwillingness to recognize the rise of developing countries like China. Cheng described the formation of AUKUS as a Cold War mentality that could encourage an arms race and disrupt order in the Indo-Pacific. According to him, the formation of AUKUS was based on changes in the United States’ global strategy, distributing power and strengthening the military capabilities of its allies in the Indo-Pacific. Cheng also underlined that China perceived itself as a target for forming the AUKUS defense pact.

Geiger (2021) depicted the formation of AUKUS not only to counter China’s influence in the Indo-Pacific region but also to challenge China’s current military and nuclear rise. It will be realized by the transfer of technology through the construction of nuclear-powered submarines in Australia. He also stated that the AUKUS formation was a breakthrough to replace the previous regional agreement known as ANZUS (Australia, New Zealand, and the United States) in 1951. ANZUS’ existence had experienced problems after the announcement from the New Zealand government in 1984, which prohibited ships’ nuclear-powered or nuclear-armed use of New Zealand ports or entering New Zealand waters. In addition, Geiger underlined that the formation of AUKUS would also undermine the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) in the region supported by the Pacific States such as Comoros, Maldives, Seychelles, Cook Islands, Fiji, Nauru, Palau, Samoa, Tuvalu,

Vanuatu, New Zealand, and others.

On the other hand, Djalal (2021) endeavored to study the impact of establishing AUKUS on the region, especially ASEAN. He argues that ASEAN does not the target of Australian nuclear submarines, nor does it the object of defense and security cooperation under the AUKUS establishment initiative. The reason is that the United States and Australia are ASEAN dialogue partners and they have harmonious relationship so far. Djalal believes that the target for establishing AUKUS is China, given the growing power of Beijing. Nonetheless, China is less likely to develop formal alliances with other countries against AUKUS. Djalal further acknowledged that several ASEAN countries, such as Indonesia and Malaysia, had expressed their concern about the dynamics of AUKUS that could contribute to the instability of the Southeast Asian region.

AUKUS from International Relations Perspective and Justification for Constructivism

Drivas (2021) attempts to explain the AUKUS phenomenon by using the Neorealism perspective. In this regard, he argues that international politics and security influence the formation of AUKUS. Based on the assumptions of Kenneth Waltz, the founding father of Neorealism, Drivas considers the dynamics of the current international system have pushed world politics into an unpredictable, multipolar era, “it’s all about politics because it’s all about security first.” According to Drivas, AUKUS is nothing more than a new era of regionalism based on the Realist view. Using Waltz’s argument, we can say that AUKUS is a form of response from three significant forces to the structural changes occurring, where the Indo-Pacific is the most relevant geographic epicenter of the world today.

On the other hand, Hilal (2021) explores the consequences of forming AUKUS from The ‘Idealism’ Perspective by using the theory of the German philosopher Immanuel Kant. Kant’s democratic peace theory is considered vital because it appreciates the role of ethical principles and ideals in the policy development of democratic countries. This theory promotes democratic peace, which means that democratic countries will not go to war against one another. It happens because they adhere to the same principle, international peace, and cooperation, which forms mutual trust between them. From this standpoint of mutual trust, Hilal argues that France’s anger can be justified. Indeed, the US did not inform France about forming a new alliance, and Australia was also considered to make its unilateral decision. In other words, France believes the

the formation of AUKUS is a breach of trust and an act of betrayal that should not occur between allies.

Several other scholars attempt to perceive AUKUS from a constructivist perspective. Standfield (2021), for instance, observes that racial factors have shaped perceptions of threat in Australia, encouraging the country to a process of national identity construction. Bruyn (2022) also recognizes common identity as the basis for alliance formation but later combines this perspective with the realist and liberal approaches. Yet, these two works of literature have not been able to explain the AUKUS phenomenon from a detailed and comprehensive constructivist perspective, which focuses on the character of the interests and identities.

The previous reference, Drivas, tends to use the current thought of realism, which focuses on state behavior based on material aspects (military power). Likewise, Hilal adopted an Idealism approach by emphasizing aspects of mutual trust and cooperation between allies. Therefore, another stream of thought is required, focusing on non-material variables such as norms, culture, identity, and ideas in explaining actor behavior (AUKUS), the constructivism view. This study will use constructivism to explain the formation of AUKUS and its implications for the region. Phillips (2007) argues that constructivists can be identified by two fundamental characteristics that are socially constructed, which are actors' interests and identities.

Phillips further explains that these two characteristics play a pivotal role in better understanding how the fundamental normative and institutional transformations are reforming world polity. On the flip side, Weber (2010) built her understanding of constructivism by considering the assumption proposed by Alexander Wendt, one of the leading constructivist IR theorists of the 1990s and early 2000s, emphasizing "anarchy is what states make of it". She underlines that identities and interests in international politics are not stable – they have no pre-given nature – and the identities change accordingly based on interests.

Research Method

This article employs a qualitative approach with a case study method. Qualitative research is a descriptive research method that uses analysis, refers to data, and is analyzed using theory associated with case studies. According to O'Leary (2004), a case study method concentrates on a comprehensive explanation and analysis of a single situation or case, including an individual, group, episode, event, or any other unit of social

life organization. The strength of case studies is that it focuses on one case, thereby offering one set of boundaries for the study. The formation of the AUKUS pact is selected as a case study in this article. The data were collected through library research, which aims to collect secondary data from books, journals, reports, official government websites, and other relevant internet sites.

Data were analyzed by using three stages of qualitative analysis: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification (Miles et al. 1994). a) Data reduction is conducted by summarizing, selecting the main points, and focusing on important things related to the AUKUS case study or relevant information. b) Data display is intended to collect structured and structured information that gives the possibility of concluding. c) Conclusion drawing or verification is the result of research that answers the research focus in the AUKUS case study based on the results of data analysis.

Discussion and Analysis

Identifying Actors

This article attempts to identify the actors involved in the AUKUS case study in the Indo-Pacific region by dividing it into two major parts: primary and secondary actors. The primary actors are countries directly involved in the AUKUS trilateral security partnership: the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia. These three countries have fought together in various battles during the first and the second world wars and became the strongest alliances during the cold war. In addition, they are also involved in contemporary partnerships such as The Five Eyes (FVEY), the G20, and so on.

Secondary actors refer to countries indirectly involved in the case study of AUKUS or those experiencing the impact of the AUKUS formation, including France, China, and Indo-Pacific countries stretching from the Pacific coastline to the Indian Ocean (See Figure 1). France is clear enough as an actor who was disadvantaged by the existence of AUKUS because Australia unilaterally canceled the submarine it had been agreed with France back in 2016. France also perceives the AUKUS pact as a 'stab in the back' from Canberra (Staunton & Day 2022). China considers the establishment of AUKUS aiming to stem its influence in the South China Sea and the Indo-Pacific in a broader context. China has criticized the AUKUS pact as 'extremely irresponsible' and 'narrow-minded' (BBC News 2021b). Indo-Pacific countries also feel the impact of the formation of AUKUS with the fear of the emergence of an 'arms race' and the fading commitment to

maintaining the region as a nuclear-free zone. Next, this article will look at the formation of AUKUS from a constructivist perspective.

Examining AUKUS from the Perspective of Constructivism in International Relations

Social constructivism focuses on human consciousness or actor awareness of their place in world affairs. Constructivism examines the most critical aspect of international relations as the social aspect (Jackson & Sorensen 2005). Two key ideas of constructivism are relevant in this paper: first, the belief that shared ideas rather than material forces determine the structures that unite humankind. Second is the view that the identities and interests of actors are determined more by shared ideas than by natural factors. It means that the actions of each actor are not solely determined by their motives, reasons, and interests but are more shaped by interactions between individuals in the surrounding environment (social, political, economic, cultural structures, and so on).

The formation of the AUKUS defense pact is not only for strengthening security or military defense; it is rather an idea constructed from the identity of the three main actors. Suppose the view regarding the security dilemma is induced by positivism from empirical facts. In that case, the US should not only be threatened by North Korea and Iran's nuclear weapons but also by Israel and British nuclear. In fact, the US is only threatened by North Korea and Iran's nuclear, not by the UK and Israel. It implies the security dilemma is a construct of ideas, not the induction of empirical facts. Another example is why are European countries integrated into the European Union? It is due to their interpretation of the threats that can be avoided by cooperating in the region. Thus constructivism explains the reality of international relations, which they consider as a share of ideas from actors in the empirical realm of this world.

Historically, only two countries Europeans viewed as global powers were called 'Anglo-Saxon' nations: Great Britain and the United States. Anglo-Saxon is a term used historically to describe the Germanic community who migrated to the island of Britain between the 5th century CE and the time of the Norman Conquest (1066) (Britannica 2021). Walter Mead once stated that Britain and the United States were very concerned with the balance of power in certain parts of the world and the evolutionary development known as the 'world order' (Wang 2021). Given the rise of China with a different culture and politics from the current hegemonic ruling power, the Anglo-Saxon nation then comes with every effort to align its power with allies or other partners who have the same identity or values

to contain China and its domination. In short, the formation of AUKUS is a shared idea between the trilateral security partnership. Considering geopolitical conditions and effectiveness, Australia joined AUKUS due to its crucial role as a significant player in the Indo-Pacific. In addition to Australia, the US, and the UK, the Anglo-Saxon also includes Canada and New Zealand. However, New Zealand seems difficult to be approached, given its commitment to non-proliferation, while Canada does not have something to contribute to a nuclear submarine program (Heisler 2021).

Taking Anglo-Saxon identity into account remains decisive in shaping AUKUS. Indeed, although there are indigenous Australians (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders), the majority of ethnic backgrounds today are dominated by British (67.4%), followed by Italian (3.8%) and German (3.7%), while Native Australians are only 3% (Pariona, 2019); not to mention the history of the British (colony) settlement in Australia in 1788 (Gapps 2018). By the same token, the United States also has a long history of state formation, where 13 American colonies established during the 17th were of English origin; yet the ethnicity of the current population has diverse. The construction of AUKUS, which is very thick with Anglo-Saxon nuances, was also commented on by the Chinese Foreign Ministry Director for Asian Affairs Liu Jinsong, who called AUKUS a 'race-based clique' (Sutter & Huang 2022).

Apart from having the same identity, these three main actors also have mutual interests in the region. The involvement of the United States in AUKUS is obvious to strengthen its existence and reinforce its hegemony in the Indo-Pacific region. It is to respond to the rise of China and to ward off China's influence in the Indo-Pacific, such as the plan to build Chinese military bases in Vanuatu and Solomon Islands (Torode & Wen 2018; Bucci 2022). Satoru (2021) believes that three elements encourage the involvement of the Biden government in the Indo-Pacific: balancing, order-building, and management of competition with China. The balancing act was carried out by maximizing the participation of the United States with its allies in the region (Australia) through the AUKUS defense pact.

The UK also has interests in AUKUS, although many have questioned

Britain's intentions in the defense pact. The first interest is that the UK intends to expand its involvement after Brexit and become the first European country to have the 'broadest and most integrated presence' in the Indo-Pacific. It can be seen in the UK's Integrated Review, the UK's blueprint for Global Britain published in March 2021, where the term Indo-Pacific is mentioned 30 times. The second is related to how to increase cooperation with regional allies. The Integrated Review speaks not only of Britain's special relationship with the United States but also of its close partnership with Australia. The third interest is that the UK desires to develop technology with the US and Australia to secure undersea cables by harnessing artificial intelligence and quantum communications. It is a response to China and Russia, which also invest in cyber technology and submarines (Wright 2021).

On the other hand, Australia's interest in increasing its military capabilities through AUKUS is attractive because it is a non-nuclear weapon party to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and a signatory of the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty. This status becomes an excuse to question Australia's commitment to its nuclear non-proliferation. Although PM Morrison emphasized that Australia is not seeking to acquire nuclear weapons and will comply with its international and regional commitments, the non-proliferation community believes that the loophole exempting naval reactors from nuclear safeguards can open up opportunities for the use of uranium to make nuclear weapons (Kapetas 2022). From this standpoint, we can see a change in Australia's interests in the region, which aligns with the constructivist view conveyed by Weber (2010) that interests in international politics are not stable. To sum up, Australia seeks to modernize its military capability and affirms its commitment to which allies it counts on in the future. In the following, the authors will look at the impact of the formation of AUKUS in the Indo-Pacific.

AUKUS and its Implications for the Regional Stability in the Indo-Pacific

The formation of AUKUS certainly reaped the pros and cons of the international community with various considerations and arguments. The discernible impact emerging from the appearance of AUKUS was a status quo change in the Indo-Pacific region regarding a nuclear-free zone. Indeed, the existence of AUKUS will normatively weaken the desire of Indo-Pacific countries to make their territory free of nuclear devices. Even though they were not directly involved in the formation of AUKUS (secondary actors), these countries also felt the impact caused because the Australian nuclear-powered submarine may undoubtedly make an expedition in the

Indo-Pacific water. New Zealand has even announced a ban on Australian submarines from entering its territorial waters, considering its longstanding nuclear-free policy (McClure 2021).

Fry (2021) argued that AUKUS weakened Australia's Pacific family when Prime Minister Morrison announced the trilateral security partnership. The most compelling reason is that it would undermine the deep commitment of the Pacific community to maintaining the Pacific nuclear-free. As stated by Kiribati President Taneti Maamau, the proposed Australian nuclear submarines pose a threat to the region and bring back awful memories. "Our people were victims of nuclear testing... we still have trauma... with that in mind, with anything to do with nuclear, we thought it would be a courtesy to raise it, to discuss it with your neighbors" (Fry 2021). In Southeast Asia, Indonesia and Malaysia have expressed their disagreement with the plan to enable Australia to obtain nuclear-powered submarines. They argued that the possession of nuclear-powered submarines would offer the prospect of acquiring nuclear weapons in the future, which would be a disaster for the region (Chin 2021). Given that Australia ratified the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons in 1973 and the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty in 1998, it should not have joined the AUKUS.

Another impact is that the existence of AUKUS weakens existing cooperation agreements in the region and erodes mutual trust between traditional allies. The most disadvantaged secondary actor in this case study is France. Indeed, AUKUS undermined France's ambition to play a leading role in the Indo-Pacific. With the power of sharing Anglo-Saxon identity and the offer of nuclear-powered submarine technology, AUKUS encouraged Australia to cancel the deal with France. However, there are several considerations for the cancellation, one of which is from the operational aspect – where nuclear submarines last longer than conventional ones. The Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments observed that a conventional submarine based in Perth could operate for only eleven days in the South China Sea, while a nuclear-powered submarine performs for over two months (Duchâtel 2021).

AUKUS also weakened the ANZUS treaty established by Australia, New Zealand, and the United States in 1951. Perhaps it is because of the effectiveness of the ANZUS and the security guarantee provided. Shortis (2021) argues that ANZUS does not offer Australia security protection, nor does it make Australia safer. By the same token, Gillespie (2021) observes that New Zealand seems to be removed from ANZUS and replaced with the UK. Given New Zealand's longstanding nuclear-free policy, it is understandable the country is reluctant to join AUKUS.

In short, the formation of AUKUS may create gaps and mistrust for traditional allies: France and New Zealand.

The following impact is that AUKUS may bring catastrophe to the region by triggering an armed race. Indeed, Cheng (2022) describes the provision of nuclear-powered submarines for Australia as a 'new round of arms race in the Indo-Pacific region', while Oue (2021) indicates the forming of AUKUS as a declaration to fight a "new Cold War" with China. Although it was not mentioned explicitly at the time of the announcement of the formation of AUKUS, China is undoubtedly the main target of constructing this defense pact. It is due to concerns about China's rise, China's aggression in the South China Sea, and China's increasingly significant dominance in the South Pacific. From China's point of view, the establishment of AUKUS will create instability in the region because it stimulates countries to upgrade their weapons systems. As Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian said, AUKUS "gravely undermine regional peace and stability, aggravate arms race.." (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Australia 2021). In short, the formation of AUKUS has indirectly challenged China's dominance in the Indo-Pacific, which might trigger an arms race, either between Australia and China or with other countries in the region.

Conclusion

Using a constructivist perspective on international relations, this article has analyzed the formation of AUKUS and examined its implications for regional stability in the Indo-Pacific. Two critical elements of constructivism highlighted in this case study are related to identity and interests. Identity refers to the Anglo-Saxons, where Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States share many historical, cultural, social, political, and legal similarities. These three countries are trying to form shared ideas in order to achieve their interests and security. Apart from Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, Anglo-Saxon also covers Canada and New Zealand. These two countries, however, tend not to join AUKUS because of the commitment to non-proliferation (New Zealand) and because there was no contribution to the nuclear submarine program (Canada).

Meanwhile, the interests of the three AUKUS countries include: 1) The United States intends to strengthen its existence and hegemony in the Indo-Pacific as a response to China's domination in the region. In short, the US attempts to rebalance China's power. 2) The United Kingdom desires to be the first European country to have a strong influence in the Indo-Pacific post-Brexit, strengthen cooperation with allies, and develop artificial intelligence and quantum communications technology with Australia and

the United States. 3) Australia seeks to increase its military capabilities in the region and affirms its commitment to which allies it counts on in the future. This article also summarizes the implications of establishing AUKUS in the Indo-Pacific; they may include changes to the status quo in the region in the context of a nuclear-free area, weakening existing cooperation agreements in the region and undermining mutual trust between traditional allies, and bringing catastrophe to the region by triggering an armed race.

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