

# Geopolitical Struggle in Indo-Pacific: A Case Study on AUKUS

DS Senarathna<sup>1#</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Defence and Strategic Studies, General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University, Ratmalana, Sri Lanka

<sup>#</sup>[sam.senarathna@gmail.com](mailto:sam.senarathna@gmail.com)

**Abstract** - Indo-Pacific region has become one of the key strategic hubs where geopolitical confrontations evolve and develop day by day. These confrontations are influenced not only by the regional stakeholders but also by the extra regional stakeholders in which they try to secure their geopolitical interests in line with their national interests under a balance of power approach. It is of utmost importance to understand the geopolitical struggle that persist between powerful countries in and out of Indo-Pacific region. This paper seeks to shed light on the newly formed security partnership: AUKUS under a geopolitical perspective and to highlight its influence to evolving Indo-Pacific region. Organic State Theory and Rimland Theory will be incorporated in the paper to critically analyse AUKUS as a case study in the struggle for power in geo-strategically significant Indo-Pacific region.

**Keywords** – Geopolitical Interests, National Security, Power

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Geopolitical Significance of Indo-Pacific Region -

Indo-Pacific region includes over half of world's population, has 60% of global GDP with 2/3 of global economic growth including supply chains and seven of the world's largest militaries. In considering the geographical significance, 65% of the world's oceans and 25% of land is there in this particular region (Whitehouse, 2022). By combining the countries and islands of the Indian Ocean and the

Pacific Ocean, the physical presence of Indo-Pacific has become very crucial and significant in terms of geopolitics in the modern international system. Consisted of world's biggest ports, airports and 20 out of 33 megacities in the world, Indo-Pacific has become a vital commercial hub (Eric, 2021). Due to ever increasing geopolitical significance, Indo-Pacific supports emerging economies and growth markets of globe including European companies.

The region includes newly developed regional and extra regional partnerships which include both state and non-state actors which directly impact for geopolitics of the region.

It is visible that new alliances and partnerships in the region are directly enhancing tension among regional players dragging Indo-Pacific into a security dilemma. From another stance, Indo-Pacific has become more vulnerable for traditional as well as non-traditional security threats due to power struggle and tensions among regional and extra regional state, non-state actors. Amidst these challenges, density of population, pollution, threat to biodiversity and climate, violations of international law, transnational organised crime, nuclear proliferation, insecurity of maritime borders etc. could be highlighted.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The research paper 'AUKUS Alliance: United States Strategic Interest in Indo-Pacific' written by Audry Anjani of Indonesian Defence University has

a limited scope related to AUKUS. It has focused on highlighting the strategic interests of USA toward Indo-Pacific region in terms of AUKUS and author has discussed American point of view in terms of securing their strategic interests in the region which reminds the geopolitical struggles in Indo-Pacific.

The recent research article 'AUKUS: The Changing Dynamics and Its Regional Implications' written by M Cheng to European Journal of Development Studies, has highlighted impacts of this new grouping to region of Indo-Pacific, specially the impact it will create for ASEAN, China and South Asia, East Asia etc. However, the aim of this research article is to critically analyse the impact of AUKUS to various stakeholders in international system. This research article will answer the questions; what are the views of different countries regarding AUKUS and what are the impacts of AUKUS in accordance with geopolitical theories and SWOT analysis.

### III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this research is qualitative method in which the case study was conducted using two geopolitical theories to analyse qualitative data.

#### *Theoretical Insights*

##### *1) Organic State Theory*

The term geopolitics in international relations refers to 'how politics play a role in geography and influences different geographic attributes such as political borders' (Arise, 2021).

In analysing the geopolitics, Friedrich Ratzel has introduced Organic State Theory which gives the idea that, political entities, such as countries, behave in a way not too dissimilar from that of living organisms. As such, 'countries behave like organisms in that they seek nutrition to survive. The nutrition in the country's case is land (physical) territory. As an example, it was used by Adolf Hitler to justify his

ruthless expansion of Nazi Germany' (Arise, 2021) the organic theory, political entities struggle to expand their territory in terms of expanding their power and survival in the similar manner where a living organism pursues nourishment from food to survive. Based on these ideas, AUKUS can be interpreted in a manner where the members involved are trying to increase their living space and influence to secure their own geopolitical interests as well as their national power and security. As an example, US military bases are situated in Indo-Pacific; Diego Garcia and they will be further expanded via AUKUS.

##### *2) Rimland Theory*

Alfred Thayer Mahan, a US Naval Officer and a Historian has first emphasized that sea power is superior to land power. In 1944, Spykman introduced the theory in his book 'Geography of Peace' by considering geographical features as important determinants of foreign policy. There he argues that sea power is more important than land power by mentioning that sea power has faster movement, greater accessibility and 2/3 of the world's population. He has convinced that 'it is a combination of land and sea powers controlling the rimland that would in all probability control the essential power relations of the world'. (Aris, 2021) Furthermore, the theory implies that who controls the rimland rules Eurasia; who rules Eurasia controls the destinies of the world (Aris, 2021).

As such, the Rimland Theory can be applied to AUKUS where, the partnership seeks to expand sea power and capabilities of the members. As an example, Australia will counter Chinese expansion in South China Sea via AUKUS by claiming ownership of the sea for themselves as well. More specifically, he argues that, to survive, a political entity requires nourishment to gain political power.

## *AUKUS*

AUKUS is a new trilateral military partnership and a historic security deal which was announced on 15 September 2021. This strategic partnership collaborates United States of America, United Kingdom and Australia enabling Australia to build nuclear powered submarines for the first time. The new partnership was announced by Prime Ministers, Scott Morrison of Australia, Boris Johnson of United Kingdom, and President Joseph R. Biden of USA. The three members have claimed that the main goal of this tripartite alliance is to protect and preserve security and stability in Indo-Pacific under a rules-based international order. However, they have also claimed that AUKUS partners will share ‘military capabilities and critical technologies, such as cyber, artificial intelligence, quantum technologies, and undersea domains’ as well (Jamal & Samuel, 2022).

When considering the term AUKUS, some media commentators have depicted it as a new alliance with the idea of a defence pact. But security analysts have portrayed it as a new trilateral military and a political alliance. Similarly, some analysts have mentioned the alliance as an Asian NATO which will highly influence for geopolitics in Indo-Pacific region. As such, it is the only newly emerging multilateral military alliance in Asia-Pacific region in the past three decades. Although AUKUS countries do not mention specifically that they will counter Chinese expansionism in Indo-Pacific via this security agreement, it is clear that one objective of giving Australia with nuclear powered submarines is to have deterrence against Chinese geopolitical authoritative behaviour in the region. Furthermore, it is expected that this agreement will create a considerable cost and technical challenges for the partners. However, it has been estimated that Australia will be able to deploy at least eight nuclear submarines from 2030-2040.

It is also expected that USA and its allies will have to make challenging decisions about where to build AUKUS in Australia. The group is also conscious on the response of China regarding the pact as there is a possibility of China in increasing security cooperation with North Korea and Russia. (Bert, 2022). It is noticeable that, with this new grouping, Australia will become the seventh country in the world with nuclear powered submarines becoming a major symbol of military power in the region. From the other hand, AUKUS depicts Biden administration’s foreign policy vision of expanding US alliances and partnerships.

## V. PRESENT STATUS

In considering the present status of AUKUS, in February 2022, the Exchange of Naval Nuclear Propulsion Information Agreement was implemented enabling AUKUS partners to share naval nuclear propulsion information trilaterally. In terms of nuclear stewardship, combined teams from three countries have visited sites in Australia to baseline its nuclear stewardship, infrastructure, workforce, industrial capabilities and requirements. Similarly, initial steps are underway to ensure that Australia has a workforce with necessary skills, training, and qualifications to build, operate, and sustain conventionally-armed nuclear-powered submarines. Apart from these, three partners will use their advanced capabilities, undersea capabilities, quantum technologies, artificial intelligence and autonomy, advanced cyber, hypersonic and counter-hypersonic capabilities, electronic warfare etc. (Whitehouse, 2022).

## VI ANALYSIS

### *Views of Member Countries*

1) Australia - As the member getting direct benefits of AUKUS, Australia views it as ‘a forever partnership for a new time between the oldest and most trusted of friends’ (Cheng, 2022). Australia

is a middle power in the region, but it has a long term prevailing identity dilemma of being neither East nor West. It is considered that its body is in Asia, but its soul is in Britain and America as they are most trusted friends. Therefore, it is expected that AUKUS will help her to expand her power by transforming the country's domestic economy in the region. Recently, Australia has decided to get rid of its dependence on resource export to China.

Therefore, Australia has significantly increased its investments, manufacturing, defence industry and exports with western countries. As an example, Australia has been able to receive high-end military technology from US in areas such as hypersonic missiles and military drones. (Cheng, 2022).

2) USA - As the only island in the world facing both Pacific and Atlantic oceans, the country has geopolitical interests towards Indo-Pacific since years and they have adopted different strategies such as Free and Open Indo-Pacific, aligning with QUAD etc. to expand their power in the region. AUKUS is one such initiative where USA will export and transfer nuclear technology to rally its followers with the intention to command the seas while maintaining strategic dominance in international affairs. Although USA is in the understanding that such a move will ignite an international uproar, and there will be voices raised from the region itself, she is determined to gain geopolitical advantages from Indo-Pacific.

According to the security analysts, AUKUS is a focal point in US global strategy because, US has understood that Chinese rise in Indo-Pacific and Eurasia is difficult to counter. Moreover, the "comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination" between China and Russia, two Eurasian land powers, is hard to shake. Additionally, the disparities between US and Europe has broadened whereas former President Trump and

Brexit mark the end of the era of sea power controlling continental European affairs since Industrial Revolution, and Europe led by land powers of Germany and France is bound to resist the ordering of the US and increasingly pursue "independence" for its own interests. (Cheng, 2022)

3) United Kingdom - After withdrawing from European Union, Britain has now entered into new initiatives to secure her geopolitical interests in the region as well as in the extra regions. To strengthen its influence in international affairs, UK willingly take part in AUKUS alliance. Similarly, it urgently needs a "white alliance" to recover itself due to setbacks in Anglo-American relations under Trump administration and the rupture of cultural cognition in US. (Cheng,2022)

#### *Response by Other Countries*

1) France - In 2016, an agreement was signed of 66 billion dollars to provide submarines from France to Australia. Therefore, with cancellation of the deal, France has stated its mistrust and she has begun to negotiate new relations with China. 'Like all European countries, France is concerned with security of Asia and for free passage of goods and personnel through the waters of South and East China Seas. By limiting French influence in shaping Asian security system, USA has essentially taken unilateral leadership to determine the balance of power in the region and military strategy that would be pursued to contain China' (Kolodziej, 2021). So, it is clear that US has already missed a powerful strategic partner from Europe increasing the complexities.

2) China - As a leading power in Indo-Pacific, China sees AUKUS as a threat with a destructive impact to its own geopolitical periphery as well as to the international peace and stability. Further, China is in the idea that regional security dilemma will be increased as nuclear powered submarine is an embodiment of military capability.

Chinese government sees AUKUS as an alarm on countering its new developments specially in South China Sea. Also, they are in view that AUKUS is a circle which keep aside China and would evolve as an Indo-Pacific NATO.

3) ASEAN - As a source of powerful regional integration, ASEAN has always adopted a strategy of great power balance to keep stability within the region. But now, these countries would be caught in a security dilemma because of AUKUS. From one hand, it could intensify arms race in the region. It needs to be notified that as the situation in South China Sea has begun to intensify, many nearby countries have modernised their naval forces. As an example, since the beginning of 21st century, the ASEAN members: Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam and others have already introduced conventional powered submarines and other types of surface vessels from Germany and Russia to face future threats.

However, as the nuclear submarines possess strong cruising ability with a high navigational speed, they can usually be equipped with nuclear missiles in which, their offensive, lethality and deterrence are not comparable. Therefore, ASEAN will be at a security dilemma on its two neighbours: Australia and China (immediate neighbour and unique economic and trade partner) and, the members will face challenges in relying upon collective defence in seeking common security. Therefore, they need to focus more on securing the territorial integrity and sovereignty of individual states based on their geopolitical as well as national interests.

In furthermore analysing viewpoints of neighbouring countries in the region, some have expressed mixed reactions towards AUKUS. Malaysia, Philippine and Indonesia have implied that AUKUS will increase regional arms race specially in South East Asia while

increasing South China Sea disputes. Cambodia has expressed its concern on issues that AUKUS will cause for commitment of international community on nuclear non-proliferation. Specially, United Nations Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons has prohibited Australia from manufacturing or acquiring nuclear weapons whereas naval reactors are exempted from nuclear safeguards.

Therefore, other countries are in suspicion that Australia will exploit this loophole by using fuel used to power the submarines' reactors to develop nuclear arms as well. However, in contrast, Manila's Secretary of Defense Delfin Lorenzana and Foreign Minister Teddy Locsin has stated that Australia has every right to strengthen its defense. In addition, Thailand, Singapore, and Vietnam have also stressed that each country is responsible for their own security but those measures should not cause any harm to region. Another point to be noted here is, there is a possibility of expanding AUKUS to other powerful Asian countries such as Japan, India and South Korea.

In moreover considering the impact of AUKUS, it will influence other security alliances in the region such as ANZUS and Five Eyes Intelligence Alliance. In this scenario, US is in the idea that South Korea should also be included in its Five Eyes Intelligence where other members are Australia, UK, Canada and New Zealand. In this year there has been a renewal of a military pact between USA and Philippines which allows US troops to be stationed in Philippines. Another unilateral Five Power Defence Arrangement includes Australia, UK and New Zealand alongside Malaysia and Singapore. All these groupings clearly indicate how USA and other powers try to secure their geopolitical interests in Indo-Pacific under Organic and Rimland theories.

In analysing AUKUS under a geopolitical perspective, SWOT analysis could be employed where strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats could be discussed with a broader understanding.

#### *Strengths*

Being considered as Indo-Pacific version of NATO, security analysts are in the idea that AUKUS has changed the institutional architecture of Indo-Pacific. After implementing Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy and being a part of the emerging Quadrilateral Security dialogue, USA has rebooted Pivot to Asia Strategy of Obama administration and Biden administration has furthermore broadened their geopolitics from Asia to Indo-Pacific. From one hand, it could be considered a strength whereas the region will receive benefits of technology to strike a balance of power amidst the powerful regional players. From other hand USA will use AUKUS as a geopolitical strategy to weaken the power of China where as they use NATO to expel power of Russia in Europe.

Apart from AUKUS, USA, UK and Australia are close security partners where their strategic thinking, military interoperability are at a high level. Their co-operation is old since ages where they co-operated during World Wars, Gulf War, coalitions in Iraq and Afghanistan as well. However, 'US, UK and Australia are seen as champions of what they refer to as 'rules-based' liberal world order and upholders of democracy and human rights. Thus, when Morrison speaks of a "forever partnership", this is not an idle rhetoric' (Wilkins, 2022). Therefore, it is expected they will strongly align with each other in future as well.

Focusing on other strengths, benefits of a nuclear submarine fleet are, it could defend shipping lanes from Persian Gulf to the North Pacific Ocean and they can travel at a faster speed in comparison to conventional submarines and stay on station for a

longer period of time. The members aim to safeguard undersea fibre optic cables that provide military and civilian communication for West, because as both China and Russia own cyber and submarine technology, there is a possible threat of tapping these cables, snooping and collecting valuable data. It will help them to protect security of their undersea cables.

Further, Australian government sees AUKUS as a way of addressing and securing the degrading security environment in Indo-Pacific region. It also wishes to perceive expected security interests of becoming a country with nuclear powered submarines to further develop strategic partnerships with Japan and India along with other regional states.

#### *Weaknesses*

It is obvious AUKUS has some weaknesses in terms of its arrangement. First, in considering the announcement of AUKUS by its members through a joint press release, Morrison has mentioned it as 'an enhanced trilateral security partnership' whereas, Biden has pronounced it as a 'new phase of the trilateral security cooperation' and Boris Johnson has used the terminology 'new trilateral defence partnership'. Therefore, it is clear that during these different interpretations, no one has used the term alliance or treaty convincing that they focus on solving matters related to security and defence coordination in the indo pacific area and not forming a trilateral treaty alliance or an Asian NATO.

Based on above facts, AUKUS lacks the definition of a military alliance or a pact as it does not contain a formal security treaty between members. As an example, Article V of NATO treaty mentions on provision for collective defence. Due to absence of a direct provision in this nature for AUKUS, it has

failed to be qualified as an alliance according to analysts.

Next, AUKUS members need patience despite any political governance change in coming years, consistency in funding, issues related to management, programming, pressure from outside etc. Considering environmental concerns, Morrison has said that 'Australia has no plans to acquire nuclear weapons and this proposal will remain consistent with Australia's longstanding commitment to nuclear non-proliferation'. (Patricia, 2021). This indicates that Australia will ensure obligations as a non-nuclear weapons state with International Atomic Energy Agency. However, US and UK submarines currently use 93 to 97% of HEU which is the level of enrichment for Uranium in nuclear weapons (Patricia, 2021). Therefore, use of these substances may cause impacts to environment. According to NPT, each state party to the treaty should not source special fissionable material, equipment or material especially designed or prepared for processing, use or production of special fissionable material to any non-nuclear-weapon state for peaceful purposes which applies to Australia as well. However, as International Atomic Energy Agency has no authority to supervise nuclear materials used in nuclear submarines, it creates a situation for Australia to build nuclear weapons as it is rich in uranium reserves. As an example, Australia has a history of making atomic bombs where the first British nuclear tests were conducted in Australia. If US and UK transfer technology of uranium enrichment to Australia for nuclear fuel, environmental concerns will rise impacting international security and stability.

#### *Opportunities*

This partnership is a good opportunity for US as it marks a massive shift in US global strategy where the redistribution of its forces in Indo-Pacific takes place

empowered with military capabilities. In considering QUAD, Japan may also wish to seek nuclear submarine technology in future under a US-Japan alliance or USA- Japan- Australia partnership. USA will explore possibility of expanding AUKUS to other Indo-Pacific countries to broaden their geopolitics in the region.

Idea of Minilateralism could be derived in further analysing opportunities of AUKUS for Australia. Whilst being a member of QUAD and AUKUS, the country targets for a minilateral security co-operation between a small group of like-minded countries with common shared values and interests. Further, Australia wishes to fill the gaps it faces in ANZUS, ASEAN Regional Forum etc. by strengthening another layer of regional security architecture.

#### *Threats*

In examining possible threats and challenges of AUKUS, first, it will disturb regional integration and order of Indo-Pacific region as well as the international security due to potential escalation of arms race, nuclear threat and as such, Australia will be isolated from Asia and Europe specially due to views of France, ASEAN, China and also, negativities come from the country itself; former Australian Prime Minister Keating pointed out that it was a disgrace for Morrison government to pin Australia's future on US. (Cheng, 2022).

As other examples, in 1995 the Treaty of SEANWFZ was signed by ASEAN members to establish South East Asian region as a region free of nuclear activities including ban on manufacture, testing, having control over and possession of nuclear weapons in Southeast Asia. However, AUKUS by openly providing nuclear submarine technology would disturb this nuclear non-proliferation regime. Although nuclear submarine is not a nuclear weapon or a nuclear explosive device, it can carry nuclear weapons and deliver weapons of

mass destruction. There are only six countries in the world with nuclear submarines: US, Russia, China, UK, France and India and all of them have nuclear weapons. As nuclear submarines are inseparably linked to nuclear weapons, Australia could produce nuclear weapons in future by endangering the strategic balance.

Influence of China is the greatest threat that AUKUS will face in future. As the partnership expects to counter Chinese expansion specially in South China Sea, it predicts possibility of a collective security deterrence by China, Russia and even North Korea in near future escalating the geopolitical struggle in the region.

#### *Conclusion*

Views of different states and stakeholders regarding AUKUS clearly support to analyse Organic State Theory as well as Rimland Theory where countries engage in a geopolitical struggle to ensure their survival in the international system. Based on their varied national interests, power seeking as well as geopolitical interests, countries try to get the maximum advantage into their side amidst any challenge. It is clear that AUKUS marks a significant dimension in geopolitics where balance of power and collective security will be questioned in near future.

Specially countries like India, China, Japan, Russia, France as well as North Korea will have direct impacts amidst this power struggle which will affect whole international system. However, Indo-Pacific has become the most dynamic region in the world and a major engine driving world economic growth. Peace, development and cooperation are the shared visions of the Indo-Pacific region. Therefore, to achieve this goal, actors in the region, especially great powers, must abandon Cold War mentality, military

deterrence, armed confrontation and escalating arms race by disrupting regional order.

#### REFERENCES

- Beyza, U. *Kerry, B.* et al. (2021 September 16). Is the AUKUS alliance meaningful or merely provocation? *Chathamhouse*. Retrieved from <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/09/aukus-alliance-meaningful-or-merely-provocation>
- Bert, C. (2022). The Australia, United Kingdom, United States (AUKUS) Nuclear Submarine Agreement: Potential Implications, *The FORCES Initiative*, Purdue University, College of Liberal Arts
- Cheng, M. (2022). AUKUS: The Changing Dynamic and Its Regional Implications, *European Journal of Development Studies*. *ejdevelop*, ISSN:2736-660X, DOI:10.24018 /ejdevelop.2022 .2.1.63
- Jurnal, D. P. (2022). AUKUS Alliance: United States Strategic Interest in Indo-Pacific. *Nomor1*, Volume 8, E-ISSN 2746-8496, Faculty of Defense Strategy. The Republic of Indonesia Defense University
- Lewis, P. (2021). Is the AUKUS Alliance Meaningful or Merely Provocation?. *Chathamhouse.org*. Retrieved from <https://www.chathamhouse/2021/09/aukus-alliance-meaningful-or-merely-provocation>
- Lotus, A. (2021 May 31). Organic State Theory (Friedrich Ratzel). *UPSC Geography*. Retrieved from <https://lotusarise.com/organic-state-theory-friedrich-ratzel-upsc/>
- Lotus, A. (2021 Jan 25). Heartland and Rimland Theory. *UPSC Geography*. Retrieved from <https://lotusarise.com/heartland-and-rimland-theory-upsc/>
- Mellissa, Z. (2021 October 10). Aukus alliance: What is it, what does it have to do with China, and why is France angry?. *South China Morning Post*.



Retrieved from  
<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3151700/aukus-alliance-what-it-what-does-it-have-do-china-and-why>

Whitehouse. (2022 April 05) FACT SHEET: Implementation of the Australia – United Kingdom–United States Partnership (AUKUS). *Whitehouse.gov*. Retrieved from

Thomas, W. (2022 April 20). Is AUKUS really an ‘Alliance’?. *Institute of South Asian Studies*. Retrieved from  
<https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/is- aukus-really-an-alliance/>

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/04/05/fact-sheet-implementation-of-the-australia-united-kingdom-united-states-partnership- aukus/>