

AUKUS: A SECURITY PARTNERSHIP IN ADDRESSING US - CHINA STRATEGIC COMPETITION IN SOUTH CHINA SEA (SCS)

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Abstract - This article examines the postulation of US - China strategic competition spectrum in South China Sea brought about by the initiation of AUKUS on 16 Sept 2021, a security partnership between Australia, United Kingdom and US. China's military and economic hostility in South China Sea has prompted the US and like-minded allies to initiate AUKUS to further enhance and consolidate their stand thus ensuring free access to common domains, maintaining stability, capable of deterring aggression and strengthen its alliances. This article highlights and assess the urgency/need of AUKUS as a security partnership in the midst of US - China strategic competition in South China Sea. It applies a qualitative method using empirical evidence from primary and secondary data, performs content analysis from journal, document from credible and academic websites to proof the evidence validity before forming solid conclusion of the article findings. Summary conclude that AUKUS is an indispensable security partnership in mitigating China's South China Sea assertiveness thus 'bulwarking' China towards security stability in South China Sea. This paper also suggests through empirical evidence that AUKUS is a causal in the escalation of US - China strategic competition in the South China Sea.

Keywords: AUKUS; Security Partnership; US - China Strategic Competition; South China Sea

INTRODUCTION

It is imperative to look at South East Asia for us to postulate the situation of South China Sea where the strategic competition is brewing. South East Asia has expanded rapidly into a new era with a promising and enduring economic growth outlook (Tahir & Huda, 2023). According to Economic Outlook, South East Asia has transformed the area into a potential economic theatre that entices global economic superpowers like China and US to construct business model initiatives such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership and Belt and Road Initiatives. The economic tie formed by these large powers instils a feeling of economic competition in the area, causing South East Asia states to be wary. Recently, the economic strategic struggle between China and US was decisively won by China when the US withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership and became unable of advancing their agenda (United States Trade Representative 2017). The inability of the United States to live up to its commitments when it signed the accord in 2016 is a clear indicator that it lacked the economic power of China to pursue such efforts, so undermining regional confidence (Paramita & Kakali 2017).

In the current geopolitical environment, South East Asia is becoming US - China "testing ground" and South China Sea as the "boxing ring". Big power politics has taken centre stage in the 21st century pitting the US and China (Huda et al., 2022). Both big powers are vying for as much strategic influence as possible in order to become the dominating force in the area. Given a consequence, South East Asia nations are unable to decide which side to support, as each nation has distinct national interests and economic outlooks. Adopting a neutral stance between US and China produces unease and conflicts, despite the fact that both options provide economic advantages. Long-term, the game of "choosing sides" would generate unsettling tension among the members. The South China Sea makes it difficult to find a comprehensive solution to the contentious situation with China. As littoral nations adopts a passive stance and lacks the military capability to oppose



China, China is able to assert dominance over South East Asia. In addition, the South China Sea issue remains contentious that requires a balancing act or mechanism to mitigate the strategic competition.

AUKUS BACKGROUND

State of war, the normal condition of life in the international system, is most robustly explained and sensible. In the classic 'On War', Carl von Clausewitz further infers that the 'character of war' changes, but the 'nature of warfare is enduring.

“Si vis pacem, para bellum”

Publius Flavius Vegetius Renatus

The above means, "If you want peace, prepare for the war". The above quote eloquently encapsulates the fundamentality of the matter at hand. AUKUS, since its calling into the global realm, has become a pretty sensational paradox. The host was serious, whereas the receiving end considered the pact a habitual joke. As the deal is still in motion, much of its literature is still in its infancy. However, it is appropriate to address the question with substantial references.

AUKUS is a trilateral security partnership between Australia, UK and US. Its goal is to provide nuclear-powered submarines to Australia for deployment in the Indo-Pacific region where South China Sea lies. The significant deal for Australia to have its nuclear power submarine with better capability, endurance, and within reach to deliver more firepower options to address China's assertiveness in the South China Sea. The AUKUS will supplement past US security partnership and regional strategic partners, such as the Five Eyes and the QUAD, strengthening diplomacy, global governance, health security and intelligence sharing. The media has primarily misinterpreted the AUKUS agreement as an "alliance", which has filtered down to popular opinions and, unhappily, some security analysts who should be more discriminating. President Joe Biden referred to AUKUS as "a new phase of trilateral security cooperation" in his joint announcement. In contrast, this deal is a new era of Australia's trilateral defense partnership, as stated by the Australian Prime Minister. The Australian Navy is reportedly interested in buying at least eight nuclear-powered submarines. However, it is unknown whether it will seek BAE System Astute-class submarines from the UK or Virginia-class submarines from the US. The project costs an estimated ninety billion Australian Dollars, with the first boat in the water by the end of the decade. In fifty years, the US has been willing to share its submarine technology with Australia. So, Australia will be the seventh country to operate nuclear-powered submarines after the US, the UK, France, China, India, and Russia.

Why nuclear-powered submarines? The acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines will significantly strengthen the Australian Navy. These submarines are renowned for their endurance and have much more advanced capabilities than conventional ones. The agreement shall cover submarine capabilities, quantum technologies, artificial intelligence and cyber capabilities. Even though the declaration included no explicit mention of China, experts believe the agreement was driven in part by Washington, Canberra and London's desire to secure their interests in the Indo-Pacific region in the face of China's growing regional dominance. The joint statement announcing the AUKUS security partnership referred to Australia, the UK, and the US shared concerns about Beijing's military development in the region. The UK observed the Indo-Pacific as a center of geopolitical security contest and will create a new challenge in the following decades.

AUKUS, on the other hand, is not a mere memorandum of understanding on the exchange of nuclear submarine technology, with Australia obtaining and fielding eight of those 'peak predator' deterrent weapons. AUKUS fundamentally also includes four vital areas for future military force amplifiers, as mentioned above. These AUKUS emphasis areas are crucial for the three states and Indo-Pacific security for the next three to twenty years. Signaling the second significant emerging Indo-Pacific focused multilateral marginalization is another AUKUS's second fictitious aim on the Australia-Japan-US-India Quadrilateral Security Dialogue. The QUAD's objective is primarily about 'public goods' that interconnects the area in promoting transparent and honest values and conduct. It is about hard-edged security cooperation to discourage Beijing's leaders from pursuing their objectives through military force and intimidation. AUKUS is a crucial complement to the QUAD and



an essential component of a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific to the extent that it increases the fighting capabilities of Australia, the UK and the US, consequently shifting the Indo-military Pacific's balance away from China.

Nevertheless, Australia pledges its active participation in the present Indo-Pacific region's regional frameworks for diplomacy and security and economy, including APEC. AUKUS, on the other hand, is a statement that, as with the QUAD, Australia and the US perceive a critical need to bolster a balancing policy with actual weight. While conversation and collaboration are necessary, without credible deterrence and a substantial counterbalance, a dialogue will accomplish nothing, and genuine cooperation will be limited. AUKUS never intended to replace the broad and successful Five - Eyes intelligence collaboration between Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the UK and the US. The said intelligence relationship overlaps significantly with AUKUS's technological priority areas. Advanced intelligence skills must include a working knowledge of artificial intelligence, cyber, and quantum technology. However, since the Five - Eyes relationship in those technical domains is primarily focused on intelligence, and most of the cooperation takes place behind highly confidential limits, techniques within this domain do not naturally leak into the Five Eyes military or national security institutions. In principle, AUKUS members understood this and established AUKUS as a mechanism for their respective forces to advance more quickly without relying on the intelligence community.

The French ambassador said that excluding France regarding our values and respect shows a lack of coherence and regret. A hot angered denouncing as "a stab in the back" of the French Foreign Minister describing that Australia has torn up its submarine deal with them worth more than fifty billion euros. The announcement of AUKUS is a worthy deal that allows his security partnership members to share or transfer their advanced technologies and build in Adelaide with close cooperation of the partnerships. They were reports beginning of this year that Canberra was seeking to walk away, wanted out due to demand and issues, not compliance. Cybersecurity is raising concerns about the security of its Australian project after DCNS has compromised. The budget blowout almost doubled to switch the Barracudas from diesel to nuclear power technology to fifty billion Australian dollars. Timeline plagued the submarine project to extend multiple major contract milestones; thus, the Australian government was a hold-up in signing an agreement over disputes about warranties and technology transfer. Lastly, jobs' deal over local industry involvement with ninety per cent local had revised to sixty per cent and was pushing back lower.

The AUKUS itself will undermine the European Union (EU) and BREXIT Dream. The French perceived breach of trust and were angered by what AUKUS for EU and BREXIT posed as a threat. The AUKUS partnership may view the US siding the UK in the European separation. Thus, the AUKUS deal is any BREXIT dream, to insult a big reveal that ultimately rolled out its new Indo-Pacific strategy. President Trump called the EU the US's greatest global foe. Indonesia and Malaysia fear the submarine deal will exacerbate regional tensions and an arms race. Moreover, trilateral security partnership will bolster a new game-changing and pivotal conflict. Hence, after the BREXIT, the US still wants the UK, not the EU, engaged as its critical military partner, including the QUAD security partnership members.

SECURITY PARTNERSHIP IN ADDRESSING STRATEGIC COMPETITION

Is there a possibility of an introduction of NATO liked, US led partnership to balance China influence in South China Sea? A big question pondering the mind of many analysts when discussing recent affairs in South China Sea geopolitics development particularly, in assessing US possible response to counter China aggression in the South East Asia region. Captain Daniel Myers USN (2020) views, China manifestation of its military and economic dominance in the region, would force the US to recalibrate its current bilateral defense arrangements with its regional allies as they are deemed inadequate to safeguard its allies and other states' sovereignty in China pathway. He concluded, "A modern IAF and Indian participation in a quadrilateral alliance with the United States, Australia, and Japan provides a key opportunity to deter Chinese aggression and help restore peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific." (Myers, 2020). Moreover, QUAD framework that



thrived under President Trump is expected to continue and strengthen under President Biden to include economics partnerships apart for existing defense alliance, thus, intensified QUAD into multifaceted direction rather than just a defensive direction (Akanksha, 2021). Akshay Narang (2020) asserts similar-minded states, New Zealand, South Korea and Vietnam would be encouraged to join this strategic group and it is a matter of time before QUAD becomes a formal, collective security mechanism.

This view is consistence with the Trumps administration hegemonic strategy that incorporate a significant viewpoint of great power competition (Andrew, 2021) by expanding and reinforcing security alliances, partnerships and relationships to pursue its free and open objective as stated in the 2018 US National Defense Strategy. President Biden, after addressing the US State Department, reemphasized, his predecessor's outlook of the growing likelihood of "extreme competition" with China despite his initial contention of "working with Beijing when it's in America's interests to do so." (Daniel, 2021). Experts believe this refer to current "hub-and-spoke" partnership strategy with inclusion of new regional partners to mitigate China assertiveness. Could this pave way for integration of military forces of US allies and littoral states under one command?

This article analyses the urgency and rationale for and against the institutionalized of a formal security partnership under the leadership of the US in countering the increasing aggression of China, both militarily and economically, that threaten the national interest of regional states around South China Sea and the hegemonic of the US which adds to the ever present strategic competition.

PAST SECURITY PARTNERSHIPS

The region have experienced several formal and informal defense security partnerships, be it at regional, multilateral or bilateral level that came about mainly to address common threat in the form of ideological or military coercion by other states in order to preserve security and stability. In defense, security partnerships take the form of formal agreements between two or more states and include the clause of aiding and supporting each other when one or more of them are intruded by foreign forces. It is slightly differed from partnership that is less formal and normally involve commitment to cooperate with each other in fostering better relation militarily. Both setups would engage in joint exercises, exchange of expertise, sharing of intelligence and other exchanges to strengthen interoperability and readiness in facing any eventualities. Some of these regional military security partnerships involving the U.S and its regional allies in Indo Pacific including Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO); Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO); ANZUS; FPDA, Five Powers Defence Arrangement and QUAD, Quadilateral Security Dialogue.

SEATO is a military security partnership formed by the U.S., the UK, France, Australia, New Zealand, Pakistan, Burma, Thailand and the Philippines in 1954 to contain and fight communism in the South East Asian region (Adityanjee, 2021). It provided collective defence against external coercion in its member soil and was dissolved on June 30, 1977 after its members lost interest and refused to pay their annual contribution. From geo-politic perspective, SEATO is a failure.

ANZUS, an active security partnership until today involving the U.S, Australia and New Zealand started on September 1, 1951 to undertake joint effort to preserve the security, safety and peace in the Pacific. It is a security "consultation" partnership without dictation of obligation for its members to provide military support to each other. ANZUS treaty was invoke once in 2001 to support US war on terror, a retaliation for 9/11 attacks on US soil.

CENTO a security partnership comprising UK, Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Pakistan with financial help from the US, was first formed in 1955 to prevent the influence of Russian communism in Middle East. The partnership was ineffective from the beginning to counter the Soviet ideological threat and stop its expansion into the region. It also failed to fulfil its commitment to aid Pakistan during its with India in 1965 to 1971. Finally, an annoying interference from Turkey and the UK that was unbearable to the other member states and limited funding from the US saw CENTO collapsed in 1979 (Vikram, 2021).



FPDA, an active, unique consultative multilateral defense arrangement established in 1971 comprising of UK, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore and Malaysia is core purpose of providing external defense to Malaysia and Singapore if attack by external forces. FPDA has since its inception provided its member with valuable opportunity to develop each other national defenses through numerous capacity and capability building including training, joint exercises that enhances interoperability and communication. It has provided effective psychological deterrence posture that complemented Malaysia and Singapore defense strategy.

QUAD is an international maritime coalition comprising the US, Japan, Australia and India to respond and provide humanitarian aid to victims of the massive tsunami disaster along coastlines of the Indian Ocean in 2004 (CNN, 2004). A rather, “loose dialogue” grouping, than a security partnership until today, despite covering extended and broader international and regional agenda including tackling security, trade, economic, and health issues. Japan purposed a democratic identity for the grouping, whereas India is comfortable with its functional cooperation, while the Australian has been reluctant to give the group a “formal alliance” impression (Sheila, 2021). Recently, the QUAD member states have become more aligned in their views and concern over China assertiveness and assert their openness to define a more productive future cooperation. On November 2020, Ex-MALABAR exercise in Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea, participated by all four navies creating pathway for more formal cooperation, consistence with Washington desire, the grouping transformation into NATO-style partnership (Shuvu, 2020). In March 2021 QUAD leaders’ virtual meeting convened by President Biden attended by Japan, Australia and India’s prime ministers, see the formation of working groups on climate change, supply-chain resilience and technology cooperation.

RATIONALE FOR SECURITY PARTNERSHIP

Security expert and policy maker has mixed view whether or not to pursue the vision of a US led security partnership to counter common regional threat bring about by China aggressiveness. Even though, the Chinese leadership repeatedly stressing its expansionary initiatives, the BRI is to spur economic development linkages across Indo Pacific to Europe and their military expansion program is develop adequate capability and capacities, to pursue its own national interest in a non-confrontational nature, regional states but the US is still skeptical.

SUPER POWER DETERRENCE POSTURE

Most expert argued, security partnership establishment facilitates the need of smaller regional states for a superpower on theirs back to provide counter balance and deterrence against China threat. By referring to NATO, an example of institutionalized security partnership, Article V of the organization underpins this stand. This principle of collective defense is the best offering for smaller states particularly those entangled in dispute with China on overlapping territorial claims in the South China Sea, besides poorer states and heavily in debts due to BRI. Having regional security partnership around the vicinity of South China Sea with a combined forces’ capacity and capabilities that are at par if not better than the threat forces is crucial in providing effective deterrence. Furthermore, it plays a significant role in engaging with greater chance of defeating threat if a conflict extended into all-out war. For instance, the invocation of Article V of the Washington Treaty by NATO, less than 24 hours after 9/11 terrorist attack have resulted in NATO active participation in engaging and defeating terrorists’ organization by launching its first military operations beyond Euro-Atlantic border, in aiding its member, the US in mitigating the threat (NATO, 2021).

DETERRENCE OBLIGATION TO SOUTH CHINA SEA LITTORAL STATES

Critical argument relates to US commitment in providing security assistance to key allies, in South East Asia that constantly threaten by China maritime assertiveness and airspace encroachment. If left unchecked and deter would transform into serious threat to regional stability and impacted the balance of power. The Chinese has been using its ‘anti-access and area denial’, (A2/AD) strategy



with the support of an array of weapons installed at strategic forward bases in the region. It also barred the Japanese Self-Defense Forces (JSDF), ROK, Taiwan, the Philippines and U.S. naval forces from nearing some disputed territorial water with potential interdiction of others from using critical maritime and trading routes with its ballistic missiles, surface and sub-surface vessels, offensive space and cyberspace assets (Nathan, 2012). For instance, in 2013, China announced its 'Air Defense Identification Zone', (ADIZ) covering Senkaku Islands and Socotra Rock airspace, creating unnecessary overlapping zones in the area risking the occurrence of destabilizing event. According to Ronald O'Rourke, China A2/AD strategy mobilizes aircraft carrier battle group supported with modern submarines, destroyers, frigate and corvettes with variety missiles system including "anti-ship ballistic missiles (ASBMs), anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCMs), land-attack cruise missiles (LACMs) and surface-to-air missiles."

ENSURE FREE AND OPEN SOUTH CHINA SEA

Proponents argued, the US needs strategic regional allies to enable logistical support especially ports and airfields for its forces during any deployment or engagement in its effort to preserve 'free and open' region. China with its "String of Pearls" strategy, has secured several strategic choking points along major maritime route, providing effective and timely re-supply of fuels, rations and ammunitions to its forward forces besides providing maintenance and repairs for its assets. Similarly, the US aircraft carrier battle group would require a chain of supply and support bases in the region to support prolong operations. Security partnership is the answer and it also enable the US to establish its forces in member states, considered strategic as forward bases, in providing effective deterrence and defensive capabilities while waiting for re-enforcement during conflict.

Recently, the US Indo Pacific Command received \$2.2 billion funding under "Pacific Deterrence Initiative" to provide effective deterrence towards US national interest, Guam defense upgrade with sophisticated air and missile defensive systems while, looking for suitable strategic locations around the Pacific to construct new facilities with radar, surveillance and communication systems besides installing ground-based missiles to enable dispersion of US forces against China threat (Tom, 2021). These bases give additional maintenance and refueling capabilities and alleviate the tyranny of distance, a major restrictions of US forces' ability to react to China threat.

PRESERVATION OF US HEGEMONY

Moreover, argument for regional security partnership centered at preservation of US dominance as hegemony by integrating regional allies' capacity and capabilities into a single formidable force under U.S. command while having more options of strategic basing for its logistical and maintenance supports. A security partnership undoubtedly, produce a potent forces than the U.S. forces in Indo Pacific, in term all spectrum, personnel, military capital assets, strategic missiles deployment sites to project effective deterrence against China aggression. With the combine of AUKUS and US military assets capacity, the strategic partnership would have a solid projection of deterrence posture capabilities and if technological advancement and naval and air combat experience are factor in, the outcome would greatly give the alliance competitive edge. Allies situated at strategic location along key maritime route and SLOC, would provide the U.S. forces with extended basing facilities and logistical support to enable continuous operation within the region particularly the contested water in East and South China Sea. For example, the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), signed on April 2016 with India, gave the US access to a network of strategic Indian Armed Forces' military bases and logistical hubs along the India Ocean from the Straits of Hormuz to Straits of Malacca (PACE, 2013). Ashton Carter announced, "the Indian and U.S. armed services are now operating together by air, land, and sea, collaborating on humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, and maritime security and agree in principle to share and exchange logistics." However, it does not include the basing of troops of both the countries on each other's soil since it is by virtue a logistical agreement.



Moreover, security partnership contributes positively towards financing of US forces operations as demonstrated by Japan and Korean bilateral defense agreement, as repayment for the stationing of US assets and forces to project deterrence force against external threats. It also gives the US additional punching power towards the possibility of China, Pakistan and Russia defense cooperation upgrading from Shanghai Cooperation Organization, in countering US move to ensure regional balance of power. Analyzing China-Iran bilateral cooperation, the inclusion of Iran in the coalition cannot be swept away. A defense coalition of major nuclear and suspected nuclear states like this, across the Indo Pacific and Middle East is a real threat to US, making the idea of new security partnership a brilliant solution. On Indian Ocean front, the deteriorating US relation with Pakistan and the inclination of the later towards China adversely affecting the US influence in the region and by having India as new ally, to neutralize the situation. Thus, security partnership is the way forward for the US to preserve its hegemony in order to deter China assertive maritime strategy including the 'String of Pearls'.

Some experts put forward argument of NATO needs to accept that reality of new major contested geopolitics theatres in Asia besides Europe. A region rapidly developed, economically and militarily, where the key player, China is major power with huge influence across the world with its Silk Road and Maritime routes. With assertiveness posture demonstrated by China, its' domination of key trade route and SLOC including control over key chocking point along these routes, increase the risk of goods and people smooth movement and safety, poses a significant threat to NATO interest. Consequently, NATO and its nation members have to take immediate and holistic measure to deter this unprecedented new threat. One option is to become associate if not permanent members of security partnership, where NATO participation would hasten the said establishment and iron out issues fasters based on NATO long experience besides giving the new partnership a boost and improve effectiveness in ensuring South East Asia security while protecting NATO interest.

Some of NATO members has been sighted initiating significant action beyond securities policies to safeguard their interest in Indo Pacific by dispatching warship to the region. Could deployment of British's HMS Queen Elizabeth, latest aircraft carrier, to region in July and August 2021 marked the seriousness in UK's decision to be part of the new security partnership, as dictated by Admiral Radakin of Royal Navy, "where navies go, trade goes, and where trade goes, navies go." France is seen strategizing for closer geopolitical connection in the region and suggested a formation of security architecture with strong and holistic inklings for security partnership to promote "a stable, law-based and multipolar order" region effectively (Andrew, 2021). French President Emmanuel Macron in his 2018 Sydney speech urged the establishment of another regional structure, "the Paris-Delhi-Canberra axis" to reflect the geo-strategic reality. These three democracies, have similar security and defense interests besides sharing common values that uphold the international rules-based order, respecting states' sovereignty and their right to defend themselves against any interference and coercion, whether by states or terrorist (Raja, 2018). Could France's Indo Pacific strategic policy that in tandem with Australian Foreign Policy, 2017 White Paper spelling out the need for a networked security architecture involving diversified special partnerships be the driver for a new security partnership formation? Germany, another NATO powerhouse also sent a frigate to demonstrate concern in protecting its interest in the region besides ensuring FOIP and supporting FONOP. It's not the size of the ship sent but rather the commitment of influential state members of NATO towards South East Asia current challenges particularly related to security partnership.

RATIONALES AGAINST SECURITY PARTNERSHIP

Forming a new US led security partnership in South East Asia is a hot topic within security circles, and judging from historical failure of SEATO created in 1954 and ended in 1977, it is a big challenge requiring strong commitment from all participating members. Since SEATO cessation, there is no formal military security partnership ever instituted within the region except for several bilateral defense alliance and arrangement between the US and its allies. Now Washington, amid China increasing coercion, has institutionalized a security partnership with middle powers, Australia, Japan and India, currently member of security dialogue group, QUAD. Critic argues, QUAD is still



predominantly a Western concept with ideal democratic ideology that might not be suitable for its members and potential members in the region particularly those practicing unique political ideologies that neither full democratic nor total dictatorship. For instance, larger “democracies”, India practices very different democracy from Japan, not like the West, and they are not interested to influence others in following their governing settings. In short, first rationale against formation of security partnership is the non-existence of common shared values and no predominant government system among states, fundamental elements in forging a long-lasting defense alliance like NATO (Humphrey, 2018).

For a security partnership to materialize, the shared political model must reflect similar cultures and values. Member states have to avoid ideological conflict, settle sovereignty disputes diplomatically, accept regional realities and focus on priority issues including economic development and security stability. Could U.S. leaderships survive political onslaught at home for compromising ideal democracy values that it's been championing, just for the sake of institutionalizing a security partnership to counter China? Critics argued potential members, QUAD and other littoral states, not only lack shared interests, but also have conflicting interest including overlapping territorial assertion with each other besides issues with China, alliance critical success factors. India worried over Himalayan frontier border dispute (Sangkar & Huda 2023), the Philippines anxious over China intrusion into its Scarborough shoals, while the Japanese is troubled over Senkaku islands conflict. As security partnership would dictate members to “aid each other, if one or more is attacked”, let say, if a war broke out over the Himalayas, would Japan or ROK which is obligated to assist, send its forces over to the Himalayas? Or would India risk its sole carrier group to aid Japan over war at Senkaku Islands or assist the Philippines to battle the China forces at South China Sea? Failure to fulfil its obligation and violation of treaty terms would be futile to security partnership survival. In short, the hypothetical security partnership lacks the mutual benefit to be feasible and sustainable despite having similar enemy. In addition, crucial security partnership success, is India, strategically situated in the middle of several critical maritime chokepoint along Indian Ocean. Subsequent efforts re-started after the 2001, 9/11 attacks, where India join as QUAD dialogue partners in 2004.

However, India has a long-standing skepticism of U.S. intention and reliability as defense ally especially under Trump administration. India is also seen as improving ties with China, powerful economic partners and Russia, critical military technology supplier, both having relationship issues with U.S. Next, “free and open Indo-Pacific” concept, for many Asian countries, is a discordant policy, that has caused numerous regional wars in the 20th century, particularly Vietnam and Cambodia War in the 1960s. Prime Minister Lee of Singapore cautioned that ASEAN does not want to be forced to take side between the two superpowers at ASEAN-Australia 2018 summit (David, 2018). His view is shared by other regional states particularly, those economy is very much dependent on both, China and US. Moreover, U.S. key allies, Japan and Australia economies are strongly entwined with China, their largest trading partners with 20 and 30 percent total trade respectively. The same goes to India, despite their unresolved boundary dispute over the Himalayas (Debasish, 2021). This interdependence economic interest, along with risk of China retaliation to a perceived encirclement as warned by Wang Yi, China Foreign Minister on numerous occasions, formed key challenges to the U.S. security partnership formation. James Morrow from University of Michigan asserted that a defensive security partnership formation, would provoke conflict if its members have previous conflict history with the third party that the partnership is deterring. The South East Asia current geopolitics is a clear illustration of Morrow findings, that existing tension could escalated into worst with a new security partnership, beating the purpose of collective deterrence. South China Sea littoral states prefer to avoid it from becoming a trapped pawn in the collusion of two global powers especially when their economic, geostrategic and energy interests are at stake.

Finally, strengthening existing bilateral defense security partnership with Japan, South Korea and Australia besides defense arrangement commitment with Philippines is the option taken by US in tandem to forming a security partnership to preserve security, prosperity and democracy in the Asian basin (Joshua, 2020). Even Trump abandons already built multilateral structure, the Trans-



Pacific Partnerships (TPP), casting doubt on U.S. commitment to ensure security partnership sustainability amid its challenging domestic economic. An act, regarded by Former United States Deputy Secretary of State Stephen Biegun as, “falling under the weight of excessive ambition.” Thus, forming a NATO liked, security partnership is perhaps bolder and audacious but has a consequential risk of failing.

CONCLUSION

Since Japan’s defeat in 1945, the region has witnessed formation of several formal regional security partnerships to address common threats, where some of them were U.S.-led. The critical question is whether this past experience would be a strong indicator for new present security partnership formation requirement after QUAD? Analyzing reasons for the failure of past security partnership, we could deduce that the same results will prevail if present security partnership is incorporated without addressing the old issues that still exist today. In the AUKUS domain, the issues of diverse political systems and organizations of regional states despite similar democratic ideology is not present. Similarly, race and religious diversity is also not being debated. Furthermore, trust and sincerity level among them is not questionable looking at their past history and the ‘coming together’ during difficult times. Moreover, their intention for collaborating in location, issues and degree of seriousness as having the same source of threat, China. The assertiveness and the compulsion for AUKUS was almost immediate. Proponents argued, security partnership is a mere extension of existing defense bilateral, multilateral and partnership between the US and other states. It offers promising starting point to move forward despite current bilateral relations have their own delicate issues, unique to each state, significantly influenced by regime change. For example, the law prohibits permanent foreign military base on Philippines’ soil in 1987, leading the departure of U.S. forces, that later return with “rotating temporary base” as stipulated in the 1999 Visiting Forces Agreement and as China threat become eminent, the 2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) granted longer stays and use of more facilities.

Nonetheless, the aim of projecting a security partnership is the most credible rationale as the combined strengths with the inclusion of U.S. advance hardware and forces would out-weight those of China, put aside nuclear deterrence element in the equation. However, US led security partnership formation might trigger a security partnership of China security partnership consisting Russia, Pakistan and perhaps Iran, leading to a new cold war, an unfavorable outcome of instability with adverse impacts to economy and trade while heighten security threats.

Moreover, western democracy, freedom of navigation and passage to promote “open and free” region, is a good gesture considering the infringement of FOIP by China militia over disputed territorial water which constantly denied by Chinese government. In addition, the dynamic of NATO members constantly sending warships to support the US under pretext of protecting their national interest in the region is something serious to consider especially from the standpoint of preserving US hegemony. It signifies western ego after dismay retreat of the US from the Middle East, demonstrating the U.S failure to live up as world hegemony after being beaten by a mere small guerrilla force. This might be a stronger justification for the US to pursue security partnership institutionalization like AUKUS. Opponents argued, the US, currently lack reliability as they are facing internal struggle to revive their stagnant economic and deal with their losses in several oversea conflict intervention. President Trump victory, sent stronger pressure for domestic needs focused rather than interfering with others’ problems, who later effected the withdrawal of U.S. from Trans Pacific Partnership agreement, a reversal of a security partnership spirit and setback to US hegemony position thus allowing China the opportunity to shine.

Furthermore, most regional states are economically dependent on China prompted them to avoid making any offending decision, especially to forge a security partnership with US and risk adverse economic repercussion, in worst case, political instability. In addition, the presumption of China aggression is to threaten South China Sea littoral states without valid reason is difficult to prove, despite ancient history illustrated their conquering inclination. In summary, there are strong arguments for and against the institutionalization of security partnership in South China Sea.



Proponents believed the need for US to preserve its hegemony and boost up morale as superpower, projecting strong deterrence capabilities in balancing its rival, China, power and fulfils its commitment in providing security and stability to allies and the region. Opponents concerned with such security partnership sustainability considering the diversity of key security partnership factors from real intention, members' obligation fulfilment tendency and individual states political "uniqueness" that in some cases volatile. They argued the threat perceptions itself, whether it is real or merely a propaganda with over exaggerated psychology war to form security partnership and taking advantage of the fear to "rob" the regional states of its resources, including procuring unnecessary weaponry and paying for external forces stay, in the pretext of providing security. However, both sides believed that intervening factor for security partnership realization rests in the hand of US and China to balance their strategic competition in their thirst for hegemonic legacy - thus the urgency and the inevitability formation of AUKUS seals the "horizon of war".


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