

**The Threat of New Security Alliances in The Indo-Pacific Region to The Centralization of ASEAN:  
The Case of AUKUS**  
**تهديد التحالفات الأمنية الجديدة في منطقة الهندوباسيفيك  
لمركزية الآسيان: حالة الأوكوس**

FELLAH Amina \*, university of constantine3  
amina.fellah@univ-constantine3.dz

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**Abstract:**

Since its creation, ASEAN has tried persistently to occupy a central position in both the regional security architecture and the economic cooperation in the region. However, the US participation in the security alliance along with Australia and the UK, or what is known as AUKUS unquestionably weakened ASEAN's centrality in terms of regional decision-making in the East Asian and Indo-Pacific regions.

The central question of the paper is: How the new security' alliances in the Indo-Pacific region are weakening ASEAN's centrality in regional affairs. To examine the research question, this paper opts for AUKUS as a case study.

The paper draws on "networking analysis", it assumes that the US's way of consolidating and broadening its alliances by networking with and between allies, through an integrated deterrence concept and networked approach, is threatening the idea of ASEAN centrality.

The main paper's findings are: AUKUS will further weaken the already vulnerable ASEAN centrality's efforts to handle its own interior affairs. Southeast Asia states differing stances on AUKUS present deeper problems for ASEAN's centrality future. AUKUS also outlines how actually the US is restructuring its 'hubs and spokes' alliance system through an "integrated deterrence" strategy and network approach in the Indo-Pacific region.

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\* Author Correspondant

**Keywords:** ASEAN centrality; integrated deterrence; network approach; AUKUS, Indo-Pacific region.

### ملخص:

تسعى رابطة الآسيان، منذ إنشائها، جاهدة أن تحتل موقعاً مركزياً في هندسة الأمن الإقليمي والتعاون الاقتصادي في المنطقة على حد سواء. إلا أن مشاركة الولايات المتحدة في التحالف الأمني مع أستراليا والمملكة المتحدة فيما عُرف بالوكوس أدى بشكل قاطع إلى إضعاف فكرة مركزية الآسيان فيما يتعلق بالقرارات الإقليمية في منطقتي شرق آسيا والاندوباسيفيك.

انطلقت هذه المقالة من تساؤل رئيسي مفاده: كيف تعمل التحالفات الأمنية الجديدة في منطقة الاندوباسيفيك، تحديداً تحالف الوكوس، على إضعاف فكرة مركزية رابطة الآسيان في الشؤون الإقليمية؟ تفترض الورقة البحثية، أن الطريقة التي تتبعها الولايات المتحدة لتوطيد وتوسيع تحالفاتها بالتواصل مع الحلفاء وبينهم هي ما يهدد فكرة مركزية رابطة الآسيان.

من أهم النتائج التي توصلت إليها الورقة البحثية، أن الوكوس سيؤدي إلى زيادة إضعاف تدهور جهود مركزية رابطة الآسيان في معالجة شؤونها الداخلية. تباين مواقف دول جنوب شرق آسيا اتجاه تحالف الوكوس يوضح عمق مشكلة مستقبل مركزية رابطة الآسيان. كما يكشف تحالف الوكوس عن الخطوط العريضة لإعادة هيكلة الولايات المتحدة لنظام تحالفها "المحور والشعاع" من خلال استراتيجية "الردع المتكامل" والنهج الشبكي في منطقة الاندوباسيفيك.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** مركزية رابطة الآسيان، الردع المتكامل، المقترب الشبكي، الوكوس، منطقة الاندوباسيفيك.

### Introduction

At the end of the Cold War, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) succeeded in establishing a central role for itself in East Asia's regional architecture through a complex network of economic and security institutional arrangements and relationships. So, it hosted a large international summit like the East Asia Summit (EAS) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). These dialogues are complemented by various bilateral security cooperation between individual ASEAN states and China or the US, creating a complex security network. (Goh Evelyn, 2016) Due to its agenda-shaping skills, ASEAN has been able to exert some agency, albeit a limited

amount of authority that has been granted to it by stronger outside powers.

ASEAN's sophisticated system for engaging external partners, consisting of a hierarchical mechanism endowing them with access to forums led by ASEAN as well as bilateral dialogues, has been seen as a major achievement of the organization (Lukas Maximilian Mueller, 2019,1) and lauding the organization's success in "living with giants" within its macro-region.( Beeson, "Living with Giants.") Because of its multilateral nature, consensual decision-making, and lack of strategic ambitions beyond its borders, ASEAN was seen as an honest, neutral broker. For the region's diplomats, the so-called ASEAN centrality—that ASEAN will speak for the region as a whole when outside powers are involved—became an article of faith. (William Choong, Sharon Seah ,2021)

Located in the midst of the Indo-Pacific, the world's most active geopolitically and economically vibrant region, Southeast Asia has become a battleground in a system led by either the United States or China. As a result, ASEAN has made a virtue out of its aim to avoid superpower confrontations. In fact, ASEAN nowadays struggling to preserve its unity in face of multiple challenges most notably : the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue known as the Quad in addition to opposing other ideas of regional order- ranging from the United States-led Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy to China's Belt and Road Initiative- to ASEAN's own Indo-Pacific outlook.

The notion of ASEAN centrality deterioration is not a new problem. It goes back to 2012 when Cambodia, the organization's rotating chair at the time, sabotaged a key ASEAN communiqué because drafts had highlighted the disagreement between many member nations and China in the South China Sea. Nonetheless, the accelerating pace of forming security and economic alliances most notably the emergence of AUKUS has increasingly called into question ASEAN centrality in the East Asian and Indo-Pacific regions.

A review of major studies in this area confirmed that challenges of ASEAN centrality originates in its ability to retain consensus and carry out collective actions. According to Amitav Acharya, ASEAN's centrality has now faced serious challenges on several fronts: the deterioration of intra-ASEAN cohesiveness, and ASEAN's neutrality, which entails refusing to take sides in the Great Power conflict, China's expanding vision, and its approaches to regionalism. (Amitav Acharya,2017, 276-279). For others, the challenge for ASEAN at the turn of this decade remains how to preserve its historically central position against a changing external environment. (L. M. Mueller, 02)

Depending on previous literature and coping with the changing strategic and geopolitical fact of the Indo-Pacific region, our research aims to shed light on the challenges to ASEAN's centrality posed by new Asian security arrangements and alliances where minilateralism runs parallel to multilateral institutions centered on ASEAN, besides ASEAN's centrality marginalization and loss of trust status from great power specifically the US.

In brief, the purpose of this study is to broaden the debate on how new geopolitical facts in the Indo-Pacific region of creating new alternative security alliances far from ASEAN are weakening the ASEAN hub, convener and convenience roles in governing regional affairs.

On that basis, the central research question of the paper is: how do the new security alliances in the Indo-Pacific region, precisely the AUKUS, undermine ASEAN's centrality in East Asian and Indo-Pacific region's affairs?

This question is crucial in unpacking the outcome of new network alliances on the centrality of ASEAN of its high number of ties to external partners besides its effects on ASEAN's hub, convener, and convenience regional roles. For that, the three elements outlined by See Sang Tan make for a good take-off point in unpacking the notion of centrality for this paper.

This article argues that the US's way of consolidating and broadening its alliances is by networking with and between allies, through an integrated deterrence concept and networked approach, which is threatening the notion of ASEAN centrality.

To prove this hypothesis, the paper follows a network analysis to explore the US's networking approach role in weaning the ASEAN centrality. Network analysis has been one of the fastest-growing approaches to the study of international politics

Through using the network approach, the paper showed that the changing nature and structure of alliances networks in the Indo-Pacific region, has an inverse effect on the ASEAN Centrality in terms of regional decision-making. The inclusion of a network approach has the potential to make the analysis of paper topics more comprehensible.

Besides the network approach, the paper is using a qualitative method to carry out this research since it is beneficial in understanding contemporary phenomena in -depth, meanwhile, the structure would be AUKUS as the case study.

Apart from an introduction and a conclusion, this paper explores this topic in three sections. Section one outlines the conceptual framework, including: the notion of ASEAN centrality and the new

security alliance AUKUS. Section two details how the US integrated deterrence and network approach, personified by the AUKUS alliance in 2021, is fundamentally weakening the ASEAN's significant role in governing regional affairs. Finally, section three deals with the broader responses of southeast Asia states to the new security alliance AUKUS. In doing so, this paper tries to broaden the discussion beyond how ASEAN centrality can be maintained in the face of future established alliances and challenges. This is only possible if it can retain consensus, carry out collective action, and meet its declared objectives.

## 1- An Overview of The ASEAN Centrality and The Security Alliance AUKUS

### 1.1 ASEAN Centrality: Context and Connotation

ASEAN centrality is a multifaceted concept; it is read and understood from various perspectives. Nonetheless, the concept of centrality remains ambiguous and underutilized even though ASEAN has not attempted to define it clearly. The term first appeared in the ASEAN Charter, the official document and the constitution of ASEAN, ASEAN Charter stated that the concept of Centrality is one of ASEAN's goals and principles: "To maintain the centrality and proactive role of ASEAN as the primary driving force in its relations and cooperation with its external partners in a regional architecture that is open, transparent and inclusive." (ASEAN. Charter, art. 1, para. 15) It also emphasizes "the centrality of ASEAN in external political, economic, social and cultural relations while remaining actively engaged, outward-looking, inclusive and non-discriminatory;" (ASEAN. Charter, art. 2, para. 2)

Also, the chair's statement of the ASEAN Summit held in Hanoi, Vietnam, on 28 October 2010 also explicitly mentioned ASEAN centrality; the statement stressed the importance of enhancing and maintaining ASEAN centrality in the evolving regional architecture. (Nishimura, H., M. Ambashi, and F. Iwasaki ,2019, 138)

So, the concept of ASEAN centrality indicates that ASEAN needs to play a central role in multinational frameworks of the Asia-Pacific region. This role has been described in various ways, with ASEAN acting as "the 'leader', the 'driver', the 'architect', the 'institutional hub', the 'vanguard', the 'nucleus', and the 'fulcrum' of East Asian institutions.( Amitav Acharya, 273) or 'ASEAN in a driving seat'.

In other words, the centrality concept has been recognized as a 'primary driving force' to consolidate a framework, together with the cooperation of external partners, in evolving regional architecture and ASEAN integration. (Nishimura, H., M. Ambashi, and F. Iwasaki, 138)

Mely Caballero-Anthony tries to understand the centrality concept as it applies to ASEAN by using SNA- Social Network Analysis-approach as a conceptual framework. She stated that the centrality of ASEAN can be seen or depicted by its being in between, being closely connected to and being in a number of networks in the wider East Asian institutional landscape. (Mely Caballero-Anthony, 2014, 568) Most precisely, the author emphasizes that ASEAN's centrality has to be understood in terms of its significance in amplifying the capability of ASEAN to influence and shape the regional environment and the regional order. (Mely Caballero-Anthony, 581)

Indeed, the author in her works argues that ASEAN derived its centrality from dense ties with other actors in the network of institutions in East Asian regionalism, and more importantly, from its position as a node bridging these different networks. (Mely Caballero-Anthony, 565)

She divides ASEAN's centrality in its regional environment into two categories: Centrality within ASEAN is defined as the proximity of the ties between ASEAN member states; intra-ASEAN coherence leads to centrality by way of enabling the organization to "gain access to resources, set the agenda, frame debates, and craft policies that benefit its member states." The centrality of ASEAN, meanwhile, is a consequence of its high number of ties with external partners as well as constant exchanges of resources and information, which should enable the organization and its member states to procure resources more easily. (Lukas Maximilian Mueller, 03-04)

Mely Caballero-Anthony's contribution, using the social-network understanding of ASEAN centrality, tries to provide a more comprehensive perspective, with the aim of describing centrality in both quantitative and qualitative aspects. Tan's contribution gives a valuable foundation for this. See Seng Tan identifies five potential overlap roles for ASEAN in regional forums: regional leader, regional convener, regional hub, regional driver of progress, and regional convenience.

These four roles that contribute significantly to ASEAN centrality are illustrated in the following table.

Table N°01: Five roles contributing to ASEAN centrality.

Roles	Characteristics
Leader	Provision of intellectual leadership, implementation of stated aims leading to performance legitimacy
Convener	ASEAN primarily as a builder of forums and a generally neutral entity, able to broker compromises
Convenience	Provision of ASEAN Way and formal leadership, enabling other actors to lead from behind
Hub	ASEAN centrality as a way to avoid marginalization rather than providing leadership in East Asia.
Driver of progress	ASEAN's role as an agenda-setter as well as its performance legitimacy

Source : See Seng Tan,2017, 726-735

From his part, L. M. Mueller added another type of ASEAN centrality, labeled as a regional necessity. This refers to the fact that the large geographic size and population of the region coupled with its economic dynamism are a necessary consideration for actors, like the states of Northeast, interested in future-proof agreements (L. M. Mueller,05)

From institutional perspective, Alice D. Ba determined ASEAN centrality on post-Cold War regional arrangements that include: the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Plus Three (APT), and the East Asia Summit (EAS). For example, the ARF offered an early institutional expression of what is now commonly referred to as 'ASEAN centrality' (Alice D. Ba, 2017, 148)

In addition to the institutions mentioned above, the collective study of Nishimura, H., M. Ambashi, and F. Iwasaki, shows that ASEAN has options to complement ASEAN centrality: the AEC Blueprint 2025, the RCEP, and the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). As well, the study shows that economic cooperation provided by Japan has fostered the power of ASEAN as a political body and consolidated ASEAN's centrality in the architecture of the Asia-Pacific region. (Nishimura, H., M. Ambashi, and F. Iwasaki, , 140)

From a different point of view, for Amitav Acharya, the notion of ASEAN centrality is a myth and it is the product of both external actors in Southeast Asia and ASEAN members themselves. He added that its emergence had more to do with the dynamics of Great Power relationships than with any projection of ASEAN's internal unity or identity. (Amitav Acharya, 2017, 273) He stated that historically, the emergence of the notion of the centrality of ASEAN arose after an

unusually optimistic period in the life of ASEAN and reflected the strategic and normative context of the post-Cold War. (Amitav Acharya, 275)

From Amitav Acharya's analysis, we state that external powers constructed ASEAN centrality as a suitable means to interact in Southeast Asia without arousing the doubts and resentment of the region's peoples and governments. And this fact was confirmed by a statement of a Filipino scholar, Herman Kraft, who speaks of a "significant shift in the evolution" of ASEAN "from an association dedicated to keeping the Southeast Asian region free from being enmeshed in great power rivalries to one which accepted its 'centrality' in a wide East Asian and Asia-Pacific regionalism, a process that would entail accepting involvement of and engaging the major powers in the context of the region". (Herman Joseph Kraft, 2011, 63)

As Amitav Acharya stated, the notion that ASEAN "accepted" its centrality implies that it did not necessarily create it (Amitav Acharya, 273) Because great power granted centrality to ASEAN, it's time to restore it via creating new alliances, since changing the strategic and geopolitical environment, besides ASEAN members failed to carry out a collective consensus on regional matters.

We conclude that the optimistic period of ASEAN centrality after the Cold War is over and the strategic and normative context of that period has changed. This is why Southeast Asia countries should accept the changing fact and are no longer the main player in regional affairs. So, they should adopt a new way or approach to deal with the new Great Power architecture in the Asia-Pacific region, and to preserve its hub, convener, and convenience regional roles.

In the following two sections, the ASEAN centrality will be assessed in line with AUKUS effects on ASEAN's hub, convener, and, convenience roles in regional forums.

## **1.2 - AUKUS Alliance: Context and Implications**

The AUKUS is a trilateral security deal between Australia, the UK, and the US in which the three nations have committed to protecting the Indo-Pacific from China's dominance and built a class of nuclear-propelled submarines. (Aakansha Tandon, 2021)

The primary purpose of AUKUS is to provide Australia with nuclear-powered submarines, but it also includes a commitment to jointly develop other technologies such as quantum computing, artificial intelligence and other undersea capabilities. The agreement also accelerates the three countries' cooperation in undersea security,



cybersecurity, supply chain resilience, and artificial intelligence in the Asia-Pacific region, opening the door to a wide range of potential cooperation. Its other distinguishing aspect is the exchange of high-tech missiles and defense technology.

According to a joint statement, the deal underscores the three countries' commitment to deepen diplomatic, security and defense cooperation in the Indo-Pacific so as to meet the "challenges of the twenty-first century". (William Choong, Ian Storey ,2021) William Choong, and Ian Storey argue that AUKUS should be seen as an attempt to address the perceived imbalance in the regional balance of power stemming from China's military buildup and assertiveness. More pertinently, the advent of AUKUS and other US-led initiatives such as the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy and the Quadrilateral Security Grouping (the Quad, linking the US, Australia, India , and Japan), underscores the fact that extra-regional powers are seeking unilateral options outside the multilateral framework led by ASEAN. (William Choong, Ian Storey)

The three-party security arrangement was reached at a moment that appeared advantageous for both Washington and London. Whereas the first is attempting to blur and divert attention from its failure in Afghanistan, the second has been working for some time to end the consequences of its exit from the European Union, by re-momentum of its foreign policy with what was known as "Global Britain".( The Integrated Review of Security Defence, 2021 ) For this reason, some experts believe that Britain is the agreement's godfather, and it is the one who encouraged the Biden administration to speed up the process of implementing it in isolation from the European Union.

In this context, Rashed Uz Zaman, and Lailufar Yasmin used in their work the AUKUS as a case study to understand the changing nature, stability, and function of the international system, organized since World War II, and concluded that AUKUS has started with a lot of promises but its fundamental proposition is to counter the rise of China in the Indo-Pacific region although it does not mention it .Indeed, the AUKUS is an example of the patterns of the current international order that is another alliance without a clear path. (Rashed Uz Zaman, Lailufar Yasmin, 2022, 01)

The AUKUS has made Asia, and in particular the Indo-Pacific region, more vulnerable and conflict-prone. For that, Patrick Wintour, viewed the emergence of AUKUS as though "it subtracts rather than adds" to regional instability (Patrick Wintour, 2021)

The new released Black Swan Strategy Paper, specified that AUKUS has also outlined one new change to the nature of the alliance: a foundational commitment to advanced defense science,

technology , and innovation partnerships in key areas of regional competition such as hypersonic, missile technology, quantum computing, cyber...( Peter J. Dean,2022, 27) Significantly, all of these are critical areas of Indo-Pacific competitiveness in the 21st century. (Peter J. Dean, 26) For many observers, the AUKUS and Quad initiatives demonstrate Australia's commitment to cooperating multilaterally to counter China strategically in the Indo-Pacific. (Akshobh Giridharadas, 2021).

One of the key findings of the Black Swan Strategy Paper is that the alliance recognizes some key changes not just to the character but to its underlying nature. These results do not apply to the ANZUS alliance but we find that could also apply to new-formed alliances in the Indo-Pacific region, as table 01 sets out below:

Table N°02: Three key changes in to the Alliances character and nature

Nature of the Alliance 1951-2021	Nature of the Alliance post-2021
An Asia-Pacific strategic order based on US hegemonic power	Indo-Pacific strategic order based on strategic competition, multi-polarity and a balance of power
Reliance upon US conventional deterrence	US 'integrated deterrence' with their allies and partners
Ongoing support for a rules-based global order based on international norms buttressed by US leadership	A changing rules-based order based on multi-polarity

Source: Peter J. Dean, 28

The AUKUS has two important implications: one, it brings Britain closer to the Indo-Pacific; and second, this trilateral alliance is unabashedly militaristic in nature and has a key feature that allows the US and UK to share nuclear submarine technology with Australia, helping Canberra own a fleet of nuclear submarines. (Akshobh Giridharadas) The AUKUS grants Australia rights to being a member of an exclusive club of only six world powers—the US, UK, France, China, India, and Russia—that are able to counter Beijing's adventurism in the Indo-Pacific. (Akshobh Giridharadas)

## 2- AUKUS's Implications on ASEAN Centrality

In addition to its implication on the instability of the international order, the creation of mistrust relations between Australia and France, distanced the UK from continental Europe, revived the idea of Europe's own defense mechanism besides its contribution to creating further division in Europe as well as a possible militarization of the

continent, the AUKUS alliance has also made the ASEAN rethink its position in the Indo-Pacific region as well as in the calculations of great powers.

There is much apprehension that the pact might affect ASEAN's centrality in the region once again, like during the Cold War period which stalled the function of the organization. Similarly, concerns arose over the great power rivalry heading to the Indo-Pacific region, which would have multifaceted implications for the region and, more importantly, might dethrone ASEAN's centrality in terms of decision-making for the region.

What Australia and the US have been doing undoubtedly weakens the role of ASEAN, Washington, and Canberra have always claimed to support ASEAN centrality, but their behavior is actually a slap in the face of ASEAN. Facts have proved that the US and Australia's words are very hypocritical. To some extent, the political and strategic trust between ASEAN and Australia, and the US has been further jeopardized. (Xu Liping,2021)

According to Rizal Hidayat, an international security expert, the alliance was deliberately formed as a consolidation of the strength of the US alliance to compete with China, which is currently the hegemonic power in the Indo-Pacific region. Australia and the UK are members of the Five Power Defense Arrangements (FPDA), while the US is the main ally of the two countries. Also, Hadayat saw that AUKUS is an effort to strengthen the political security agenda of the three countries," (Devina Halim, Pizaro Gozali Idrus, and Erric Permana ,2021)

We try to look deeper into the security alliance AUKUS 's threatening and we find that the US's way of consolidating its alliances threatens ASEAN Centrality. Precisely, the Biden administration is developing the concept of "integrated deterrence" to advance a networked approach to achieving its defense and security aims across a wide spectrum of strategic competition with China. (Jane Hardy, 2021,03)

The concept of integrated deterrence is not new but has a Cold War connotation, what is new about the way this term is now being used is the focus on enhanced networking with and between allies (Jane Hardy, 04). According to the Black Swan Strategy Paper, integrated deterrence, is a form of collective defense, which is a reflection of the reality that the US can no longer do conventional deterrence in the Indo- Pacific unilaterally. (Peter J. Dean,08)

For that, the Biden administration's strategy for integrated deterrence is broad allies and partners can contribute to collective deterrent efforts to the extent that they are willing and capable, but they will now be expected to contribute more to shared security goals. US Secretary of Defense Austin outlined this new approach as being centered on 'emerging threats and cutting-edge technologies that are changing the face and the pace of warfare ... integrated deterrence means using every military and nonmilitary tool in our toolbox, in lockstep with our allies and partners to meet a range of regional challenges, including 'the specter of coercion from rising powers. (Lloyd J. Austin III, 2021)

Furthermore, Secretary Austin's identification of allied networking as the central component of integrated deterrence implies a withdrawal from the hub-and-spoke alliance configuration of the Cold War era. Also, in his tour to the Southeast Asian countries, Austin described 'integrated deterrence' as Washington's "new, 21st-century vision" for the region. (Gabriel Dominguez ,2021). He clarified that "Integrated deterrence is about using existing capabilities, and building new ones, and deploying them all in new and networked ways ... all tailored to a region's security landscape, and in a growing partnership with our friends. (Gabriel Dominguez)

To give it practical effect, the Biden administration's comprehensive approach to integrated deterrence demands a variety of tactics. These approaches are illustrated by Jane Hardy in his research as follows: (Jane Hardy, 05)

- building interoperability with a wide range of partners is crucial. The compelling benefits of interoperability may serve to influence attitudes among regional militaries, building awareness of the imperative for collective deterrence among senior military officials.
- undertaking multilateral military conferences and exchanges is important to develop mutual understanding and can enable the delivery of collective messages that reinforce the consistency of purpose.
- opportunistic, loosely coordinated, high-end activities among capable nations are needed to signal credibility and resolve to adversaries and other nations.
- mounting complex, multi-flag exercises around real-world scenarios with the most advanced military assets of close allies remains a powerful display of deep interoperability and the capacity for integrated deterrence.

Accordingly, AUKUS outlines the US restructuring its 'hubs and spokes' alliance system through an "integrated deterrence" strategy and network approach; which is based on empowering allies in the region.

The AUKUS alliance, and other initiatives that precede it, underscore the fact that while ASEAN Dialogue Partners such as Australia, the UK, and the US consistently echo the mantra of ASEAN centrality, in a fast-changing geopolitical climate, they do not perceive the concept as sacred or untouchable. As former Indonesia foreign minister Marty Natalegawa notes, AUKUS is a reminder to ASEAN of the cost of "dithering and indecision" in a fluid strategic environment.

Indeed, AUKUS reflects ASEAN's lack of ability to cope with China's increasing assertiveness in the maritime domain, particularly in the South China Sea. ASEAN's concept of inclusive and cooperative security has proved to be inadequate; AUKUS as a balance-of-power entrenchment is a "natural response" to coping with China's maritime expansionism in the region." (William Choong, Sharon Seah) For that, the United States is increasingly relying on non-ASEAN forums to serve its interests in the area, particularly in response to China's aggression, as seen by AUKUS and the recent revitalization of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue.

As a result, the way the US enhances and broadens its networking with and between allies is threatening the notion of ASEAN centrality. Besides, the US and its closest allies will no longer be dependent on ASEAN forums.

### **3- Southeast Asia States Responses to New Security Alliance AUKUS**

After the AUKUS's announcement, no official statement has been issued by ASEAN. The non-intervention stance is based on the association's policy and is fueled by a division among ASEAN member nations, each of which has a distinct perspective on China's influence in the area besides their dependence on the American military commitments.

The states that support AUKUS are much more dependent upon the American military for help, especially with China's assertiveness in the South China Sea. Singapore implicitly supports the alliance and hopes to contribute to creating stability and peace in the region and be a complement to the regional architecture. Vietnam's approach to

AUKUS is broadly similar to Singapore's, reflecting the two countries' big-picture perspectives on regional reality.

Whereas, the Philippines considered the alliance an opportunity to stop China's assertive moves in the Spratly Islands area in the South China Sea and will correct the regional strategic imbalance. In this context, the Philippine Foreign Secretary stated that "there is an imbalance in the forces available to the ASEAN member states, with the main balancer more than half a world away. The enhancement of a near abroad ally's ability to project power should restore and keep the balance rather than destabilize it." (Joyce Ann L. Rocamora ,2021)

From the other side, Indonesia and Malaysia have expressed reservations about AUKUS, fearing that it will increase military competitiveness in the area and may possibly provoke an arms race. Indonesia's reservation is likely to be influenced by its close relationship with China. It looks to be pursuing a free and active foreign policy, in which the government is not allowed to take sides. Likewise, Indonesia is deeply concerned over the continuing arms race and power projection in the region and reminded the commitments made under the NPT, TAC, and UNCLOS.( Gurjit Singh ,2021)

Evan Laksmana of Jakarta's Center for Strategic and International Studies, said Indonesia's greatest fear is that the new arrangement will leave it as a strategic bystander at the mercy of forces beyond its control. The same applies to Southeast Asia as a whole. Regardless of being a part of the FPDA, Malaysia has rejected the formation of the AUKUS defense agreement and warned that this pact could trigger a nuclear arms race because it plans to arm Australia with nuclear submarines besides its potentiality to disrupt peace and stability in the region by provoking some countries to act aggressively, especially in the South China Sea.

In raising these concerns, the Malaysian Prime Minister stressed Malaysia's commitment to Southeast Asia as a Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) and the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapons Free Zone (SEANFWZ), as well as Malaysia's stance on not allowing nuclear-powered vessels to enter its territorial waters. (William Choong, Sharon Seah) For Some, AUKUS is an opportunity for Malaysia to reimagine its potential and step up its contribution in the regional architecture in addition to evaluating its long-term strategic objectives and how best to attain them. (Paul Sigar ,2022)

However, the countries which are much more economically dependent on China's support for national economic development

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than others, like Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam have remained silent. Generally, Southeast Asia states fear that the security alliance will result in an increase in the presence of large military forces in the South China Sea's waters. According to the South China Morning Post, some ASEAN members are concerned that AUKUS symbolizes the West will be more aggressive with China by including Australia in the nuclear club.

The divided ASEAN's members' responses to AUKUS show their internal split and incapacity to take common decisions. ASEAN member states' differing responses to AUKUS are yet another evidence of the region's deepening division in reacting to security and political challenges. Furthermore, it has demonstrated the decreasing importance of ASEAN in establishing a peaceful area once again; the association is engulfed in its own incapacity to talk coherently and frankly about the emergence of AUKUS, far from being able to take real action in response.

Former Foreign Minister of Indonesia Marty Natalegawa stated that in losing its centrality to regional diplomacy, ASEAN is paying the price for its inability to respond actively to the security dynamics in the region. (Lukas Singarimbun, 2021)

## CONCLUSION

Assessments claiming that ASEAN's centrality is under threat aren't new. This study, however, has provided more substantial explanations of how centrality has been affected, by the creation of the AUKUS alliance, and how previous and current assessments of centrality challenges fall short of reality.

The analysis of AUKUS's waning the ASEAN's centrality highlights a significant aspect:

- ✓ AUKUS serves as a wake-up call to ASEAN that it must be more proactive in terms of security and cannot take its centrality for granted.
- ✓ AUKUS illustrates that ASEAN's apparent inability to respond effectively in the face of changes in the geopolitical environment.
- ✓ AUKUS consolidates a changing state of affairs in Indo-Pacific security relations, one that is more multipolar in nature and one that relies less on ASEAN as a fulcrum and a norm provider.
- ✓ AUKUS outlines the US restructuring its 'hubs and spokes' alliance system through an "integrated deterrence" strategy and network approach in the Indo-Pacific region.

The inclusion of the network approach allowed us to conclude that ASEAN networks suffer from decline and loss of credibility and

centrality in light of the changing alliances architecture in the Indo-Pacific region.

The only way to do so, is to focus on bringing regional diplomacy back to operating through multilateral forums, where ASEAN takes the lead, such as to the ASEAN Regional Forum and East Asia Forum.

The study recommends that , in order to revitalize ASEAN centrality , the association leaders must rebuild their alliance network in response to new challenges and the new Great Power architecture in the Indo-Pacific region, by managing two challenges: harnessing the power of extra-regional initiatives to maintain a balance of power while ensuring ASEAN cohesion and relevance in a tense regional security environment. Indeed, to deal with the shifting security situation in the region, ASEAN must reinvent its multilateral structures.

Also, the AUKUS members should not neglect and forget the regional necessity and importance of ASEAN 's centrality role in the Indo-Pacific region's future affairs.

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