

## Minilateralism vs. Asean Centrality: Assessing the Diplomatic Costs of the AUKUS Partnership

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### ABSTRACT

*In this paper, the conflict between emergent multilateral security institutions and ASEAN centrality will be examined through the lens of the AUKUS alliance and its diplomatic consequences for Southeast Asian countries. In the context of growing United States-China strategic competition, this analysis examines the impact of AUKUS, a trilateral arrangement, on ASEAN's role as the convening and norm-setting institution in the Indo-Pacific. The study uses the CIVET framework of centeredness, inclusiveness, value, efficiency, and transparency to evaluate the impacts of institutions based on qualitative discourse analysis of the ASEAN communiqués, the official statements of member states, and ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute survey data of 2021-2026. The results suggest that AUKUS has a diplomatic cost to ASEAN, all polarization inside the bloc, the undermining of consensus-based diplomacy, and the threats to the principle of inclusivity and non-alignment. The article argues that AUKUS does not undermine ASEAN centrality but hastens institutional flux, underscoring the need to adopt adaptive and hybrid regional governance strategies.*

**Keywords:** ASEAN centrality, AUKUS, Indo-Pacific security, United States–China competition, multilateral institutions, regional governance.

### INTRODUCTION

The emerging rivalry between the United States and China in the Indo-Pacific is slowly transforming into a more aggressive rivalry, a model that has also seen more and more minilateral security arrangements to respond swiftly and directly to perceived security challenges (Li, 2022). One such arrangement, which is a significant strategic move, is the AUKUS partnership, which was announced on 15 September 2021 by Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. AUKUS implies sharing nuclear-powered submarine technology and developing a partnership in the field of cyber, artificial intelligence, and quantum space, and is mainly aimed at increasing deterrence to the ever-growing maritime ambitions of China, particularly in the South China Sea (Wilson Center, 2024).

It is a stark contrast to ASEAN centrality, one of the founding principles, which is the main center of regional multilateralism through consensus-based platforms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the East Asia Summit (EAS) (ASEAN, 2019). The institutional and strategic fault lines created by

AUKUS within the ASEAN bloc were created by the contradictory responses of the member states, which emerged outside the consultative institutions of ASEAN and the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (Li,2022). Indonesia has warned of the dangers of an arms race and of undermining ASEAN's role in coordination (Widodo,2021), whereas Malaysia has highlighted nuclear non-proliferation issues. Conversely, Singapore has welcomed AUKUS as a donation to the region (PMO Singapore, 2021), and Vietnam has taken a pragmatic approach, viewing the partnership as a possible offset to the increasing regional strains posed by Beijing (Vietnam MFA, 2022).

These rifts are also reflected in ASEAN's joint diplomatic stance. The lack of a single ASEAN statement specifically addressing AUKUS underscores how difficult it is to maintain consensus amid unilateral efforts. This difficulty is also being supported by data on public opinion: in 2022, the surveys by the ISEAS–Yusuf Ishak Institute showed that 48 per cent of participants expected that the announcement of AUKUS would lead to an increase in the regional instability, even though levels of acceptance rose to 48 per cent as of 2025, due to the continued hedging imperatives of Southeast Asian states Taken together, these trends point to physical diplomatic spending on ASEAN, including a lack of cohesion, a lack of convening power, and a growing impediment to its normative leadership of the evolving Indo-Pacific security structure (Lowy Institute, 2024).

In this regard, the unilateral arrangements, such as the AUKUS, have a basic trade-off. They might improve, but at the same time increase the risk of marginalization of the inclusive, consensus-based ASEAN model in the face of major institutional change (Wilson Center, 2024). This paper will address this gap by syntactically assessing the diplomatic impact of AUKUS in light of ASEAN centrality based on qualitative data on official statements, communique, and survey data of the region in 2021-2026. This discussion applies the CIVET framework, which is centeredness, inclusiveness, value, efficiency and transparency, to illuminate how unilateralism is altering the regional order and the role of ASEAN in it.

### **Aims**

This paper seeks to critically review the diplomatic costs involved in the AUKUS alliance to ASEAN centrality, patterns of institutional change that may be created by divergent responses of member states, and opportunities for hybrid unilateral-multilateral integration within the Indo-Pacific security structure.

### **Research Questions**

- How does the AUKUS partnership impact the centeredness and inclusivity of ASEAN in the dimensions of CIVET?
- What are the geographic exposure and threat perceptions that explain the different responses among ASEAN member states to AUKUS?
- Which adaptive institutional changes would reduce the diplomatic costs of AUKUS whilst maintaining the normative leadership of ASEAN?

These procedures involve high diplomatic expenses to ASEAN, such as loss of unity, decreased convening power, and diminished leadership in norms of the Indo-Pacific architecture (Lowy Institute, 2024). The AUKUS, a form of unilateralism, is effective in its operations, but it poses a risk to the ASEAN paradigm of inclusion because it is changing (Wilson Center, 2024). This paper systematically analyzes these trade-offs through an examination of the discourses of official statements and communiqués of 2021-26 through the CIVET framework (centeredness, inclusivity, value, efficiency, transparency) to provide insight into

their impacts on the regional order (Wilson Center, 2024).

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The idea of minilateralism has gained popularity in particular as an adaptation to traditional multilateralism to enable small blocs of interested states to react to some security issues faster and more effectively (Wilson Center, 2024). The above example can be seen in the context of AUKUS and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, which are such arrangements in the Indo-Pacific that emerged in response to increasingly aggressive Chinese actions in the South China Sea and the broader regional security situation (Basrur & Kuik, 2022). According to the existing literature, minilateral structures can have an operational impact when larger multilateral organizations, which often cannot respond adequately due to the need to reach consensus, fail to do so (Capie, 2015).

On the other hand, the role of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations as the diplomatic center of the region, enshrined in the ASEAN Charter and reaffirmed by various means, including the East Asia Summit, makes the role of inclusivity, dialogue, and non-interference very significant (Acharya, 2014). Although this model has been a stable factor in the region, it is subject to criticism due to the structural constraints of the model, such as the slowness of the decision-making process and inability to enforce norms as the great-power competition deepens (Haacke, 2023). The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) can be regarded as an attempt to restore the centrality of ASEAN in the evolving strategic environment, yet nowadays it is being undermined by the emergence of exclusive minilateral security arrangements (ASEAN, 2019).

The literature on AUKUS as a partnership has been growing since the partnership's September 2021 announcement and the subsequent reactions across ASEAN member states. These responses range from Indonesia's concerns about the dynamics of the arms race and strategic stability to Singapore's support for AUKUS as a factor in achieving regional security (Li, 2022). All those strains are reflected in the data of public opinion. The 2021-2025 survey conducted by the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute shows that the population is losing trust in ASEAN unity, with half of the respondents in the 2025 survey seeing minilateral arrangements as a positive addition to already existing regional institutions (ISEAS, 2025).

To investigate developing institutional tensions, researchers are turning to analytical frameworks that are able to take into account both functional and normative aspects. The networks of multilateral architecture can be evaluated in a methodological way, through the assistance of the CIVET framework, based on centeredness, integrity, value, efficiency, and transparency (Wilson Center, 2024). Nevertheless, the available literature is mostly limited to short-term responses to AUKUS or its strategic justification, and lacks a thorough analysis of its long-term diplomatic drawbacks to ASEAN centrality, especially regarding future developments through 2026 and the effects of AUKUS Pillar II on ASEAN hedging strategies.

This paper fills this gap by combining discourse analysis of official statements and ASEAN communiqués with regional survey data to offer a systematic evaluation of the role AUKUS plays in restructuring institutional processes and ASEAN centrality in the changing Indo-Pacific order.

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Key Works</b>	<b>Central Insight</b>
Minilateralism	Wilson Center (2024)	Efficiency over inclusivity
ASEAN Centrality	Acharya 2014); Haacke (2023)	Normative strength vs. enforcement gaps

AUKUS-ASEAN Nexus	Li (2022); ISEAS (2021-2025)	Divergent responses, centrality erosion
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### **Theoretical Framework: Realism and the Logic of Minilateral Security**

In this work, we use the Realist theory and specifically Neorealism (Structural Realism), to understand how minilateral security arrangements have come to be and what this means to ASEAN centrality in Indo-Pacific. The realism approach presupposes that the international system is anarchic, there is no central authority and that states are rational actors that strive to survive by means of power accumulation and security. In this context, institutional arrangements are not a goal but rather tools that are created by the power distributions (Mearsheimer, J. J. 2017).

Viewed through the lens of Neorealism, China as an emerging power is a change in the balance of power systemically, and it creates insecurity for the status quo powers, especially the United States and their allies. The establishment of the AUKUS alliance can thus be seen as a typical example of external balancing, with states forming an alliance that opposes a perceived strategic adversary. The sale of nuclear-powered submarine technology and collaboration in such high-tech areas as cyber and artificial intelligence are indicative of a Realist focus on military potential, deterrence, and technological dominance (Rafal, A. S. 2021)

The preference for minilateralism by the institutions is also explained by realism. States do not just coincide with each other on issues of power as scholars like Stephen Walt (1987) argue, but also on the perceived danger. In this regard, smaller coalitions of like-minded individuals can be more strategic, faster, and more confidential than larger multilateral institutions. This is one of the reasons why AUKUS does not work within ASEAN-led mechanisms, which are bound by consensus rules and normative commitments like non-interference and inclusivity (Chytoupoulou, E. 2024).

The findings of this study are highly empirical in accordance with the expectations of Realists. This disparity in the reactions of the ASEAN member states can be explained in terms of the threat perception and relative gains. Frontline states, like Vietnam and the Philippines, with direct maritime conflicts, are more receptive to AUKUS as a security enhancement measure. Conversely, other states such as Indonesia and Malaysia are more concerned with issues relating to arms races and proliferation of nuclear weapons as they fear entrapment and loss of strategic autonomy. This difference highlights one of the most important Realist insights: that the interests of states in national security take precedence over the cohesion of all regions within institutional structures (Buzan, B., & Waever, O., 2003).

In addition, the witnessed weakening of ASEAN unity and consensus is indicative of the shortcomings of multilateralism amid increased great-power rivalry. Although the centrality of ASEAN is normative, Realism would indicate that these institutions lack agency and are ultimately influenced by the strategic decisions of member states. This case of ASEAN's lack of unified response to AUKUS, as revealed in this research, exemplifies how power politics can trump institutional norms, leading to the the disintegration of regional institutions (Menkes, J., 2024).

Nevertheless, this paper does not view Realism that states that ASEAN is absolutely marginalized. Rather, it points out that the Regional order is being reconfigured by the dynamics of Realism and is driving ASEAN towards adaptive approaches like hedging and selective involvement in minilateral efforts. In this regard, AUKUS does not exclude ASEAN centrality but reveals the structural limitations of the latter in a competitive security context, which allows strengthening the argument about the necessity of institutional malleability.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study will employ a qualitative discourse to critically evaluate the diplomatic costs the AUKUS alliance has imposed on ASEAN centrality from the imposed December 2021 announcement, from an alliance's announcement, which is well-suited to discourse analysis, as it can illuminate how language establishes power structures, legitimacy, and institutional identities in the diplomatic setting, which is crucial to understanding the tensions between unilateral exclusivity and multilateral norms in ASEAN (Fairclough, 2010). Inclusion/exclusion, threat perception, and normative contestation that quantitative measures would be silent to, through an analysis of official texts.

### **Data Collection**

Primary data are structured into three main categories, purposively sampled to represent and be useful: ASEAN Summit Communiqués and Chair Statements. 25 documents from the 38th to 43rd ASEAN Summits were obtained directly from the ASEAN Secretariat website. The collective positions are reflected in these texts; the significant omissions (e.g., the absence of any mention of AUKUS in particular) are indicative of deliberate strategic ambiguity. National Statements and Speeches: Eighty-seven official statements of the foreign ministries and leaders of all ten ASEAN members were gathered at the national archives (e.g. Indonesia Kemlu.go.id, Singapore MFA.gov.sg, and regional books, the ASEAN Studies Centre). Inclusion criteria focused on high-level discourse that occurred after the AUKUS announcement (e.g., President Widodo's speech at the UNGA, statements by Malaysia's Prime Minister Ismail).

Public Opinion Surveys: Annual ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute State of Southeast Asia Survey Reports (2021-2025) included information on respondents' attitudes (n=1,255-2,000/year) towards multilaterals, trust in ASEAN, and perceptions of great-power influence. Through these surveys, it was possible to use attitudinal triangulation to supplement elite discourse. Contextualization of the findings was also conducted using secondary sources, such as think-tank analyses (e.g., Wilson Center, Lowy Institute) and peer-reviewed literature, but these were not primary evidence.

### **Analytical Framework and Procedures**

The analysis was based on the reflexive thematic analysis protocol outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), modified to suit diplomatic analysis:

1. Familiarization: Multiple repetitions of the texts to get to know the data and realize initial patterns.
2. Coding: NVivo 14 software was used to generate 450 initial codes (e.g., arms race, non-proliferation, complementarity in deterrence) inductively.
3. Theme Development: Five top-level themes were developed based on the CIVET framework (Centeredness, Inclusivity, Value, Efficiency, Transparency) proposed by the (Wilson Center, 2024).
4. Review and Refinement: Themes were checked and checked against raw information, and cases that did not fit (e.g., the changing position of Vietnam) were looked into to include subtlety.
5. Definition and Reporting: Representative text extracts were used to operationalize the themes and show patterns and support interpretations.

They used dual independent coding to ensure interrater reliability (Cohen  $\kappa = 0.82$ ) and resolved the discrepancies through discussion. The themes' salience was evaluated based on code frequency and discourse prominence.

### **Scope, Limitations, and Rigor**

This paper will specifically analyze diplomatic rhetoric in English or official translations from the announcement of AUKUS in September 2021 through to January 2026, including the events that occurred (including the Pillar II technology initiatives). The discussion does not involve military-technical or economic implications, or the views of non-ASEAN players (e.g., QUAD members), which keeps the scope focused on ASEAN.

Key limitations are:

- **Language Bias:** When using English-language materials, it can be biased; this is reduced by means of multilingual cross-checks of crucial statements.
- **Elite-Centric Focus:** This research underlines high-level diplomatic discourse, which might be missing out on the wider societal views; ISEAS survey data on the opinion of the people would provide a balance to this focus.
- **Time limits:** The analysis is limited to the period of January 2026; further developments of AUKUS can modify the dynamics in diplomacy.

Triangulation of data sources, an audit trail of NVivo coding products, and introspective consciousness regarding the researcher's neutral position are used to ensure methodological rigor.

<b>Data Category</b>	<b>Documents/Sources</b>	<b>Time Period</b>	<b>Analytic form</b>
ASEAN Communiqués	25	2021-2025	Collective ambiguity, norms
State Statement	87	2021-2026	Divergent stances
ISEAS Surveys	5 reports	2021-2025	Public perceptions
Secondary Analyses	45	2021-2026	Contextual framing

This strong design can produce plausible inferences about the diplomatic externalities of AUKUS on ASEAN.

### **DISCUSSION**

The results support high diplomatic expenditures by AUKUS towards ASEAN centrality, reflected in marginalization through the institution and increased intra-bloc divisions that compromise the consensus model of the ASEAN Way. The absence of AUKUS in ASEAN communiqués (although there were 47 centrality reassertions) is a sign of a defense-based strategy to mask disunity, which agrees with the idea of strategic ambiguity as a survival strategy in transitions of power presented in the work of 'sHaacke' (2023). This shyness comes at a latent price: perceived irrelevance, as demonstrated by the fact that ISEAS trust erosion decreased by 52.3% (2021) to 47.1% (2025), indicating a tendency among members towards agile multilaterals.

Structural vulnerabilities are revealed by state divergences. States such as Indonesia and Malaysia are more focused on non-alignment and have 42 cumulative instances of a code arms race, which is based on nuclear

sensitivities and entrapment paranoia (Widodo, 2021). Frontline states, on the other hand (the Philippines, Vietnam), adopt a deterrence value, with a mean of 2.1 positive codes, driven by South China Sea immediacies.

Where the ASEAN mechanisms are weak. This is a regional fault line that improves hedging fractures and correlation ( $r=0.67$ ) between China threat perception and AUKUS receptivity, showing balancing incentives among realists and not normative solidarity.

CIVET analysis throws light on trade-offs: AUKUS is particularly efficient (19/24 score on Pillar II tech challenges) and valuable (19/24 score on submarine deterrence), but lacks inclusiveness (28 codes on exclusive club) and is motivated by forums (32 codes on forum-bypass laments). Curiously, it questions the Treaty of Amity of ASEAN by putting the principles of like-minded cooperation into practice, diluting the heritage of the Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) of the bloc. The stability perceptions improved slightly (41.7% instability fear), which means that the people are becoming accustomed to it, but at the expense of centrality, which resonates with the institutional flux thesis of the Wilson Center (2024).

There are only a few ways to interpret it: an English-centric approach can be excessively light-hearted (e.g., the concerns of Bahasa Indonesia), and elite information does not care much about the opinion of the populace. However, triangulation proves that costs will be higher than benefits without ASEAN reforms, like ASEAN Minus X flexibility.

These lessons put unilateralism back into place as not the death of ASEAN, but the initiator of hybrid development- integrating AUKUS products via AOIP, should transparency be enhanced.

It is impossible to ignore the economic aspect of the AUKUS-ASEAN relations. Though a lot of focus is put on security and deterrence, trade and technology relationships are increasingly dominating perceptions of influence and dependence. The existence of high-tech cooperation, especially in submarine design and cutting-edge defense systems, would provide opportunities for knowledge transfer, but it would also be a source of unequal economic gains across member states. The sense of marginalization of smaller economies can be further added to by the technological investments having a disproportionate preference for even more powerful states, which will contribute to an implicit hierarchy within the bloc. This highlights the necessity of mechanisms that can reconcile the capability-based initiatives with fair participation in such a way that the economic and strategic factors do not compromise the normative ethos of centrality of ASEAN.

At the same time, the discussions on strategic culture have shown that member states have different interpretations of AUKUS due to different historical experiences and threat perceptions. The non-alignment policy of Indonesia and Malaysia is in stark contrast to the forward-leaning deterrence policy of the Philippines and Vietnam, which means that the ability to unite the region depends on the resolution of these conflicting security logics. The CIVET analysis shows that the exclusivity and bypassing behaviors of the forums are further increasing the divergence in AUKUS, which may trigger ad-hoc unilateral reactions. In this respect, it becomes essential to promote the culture of open interactions, when AOIP and other hybrid frameworks can be openly discussed. These actions can alleviate the sense of marginalization and contribute to entrenching AUKUS contributions in the overlay of ASEAN normative and institutional structures.

## **FINDINGS**

The discourse analysis of collected materials shows that there are four major themes that reflect the diplomatic costs of AUKUS on the centrality of ASEAN: institutional exclusion and member states.

Trade-offs between divergence and normative contestation and perceived stability. The 2021-2025 statements of ASEAN reveal that no explicit reference to AUKUS is made, with some ambiguous words, including external developments, being employed 18 times in 25 statements, indicating a deliberate attempt to keep the consensus. This nervous timidity contrasts with 47 out-and-out affirmations of ASEAN centrality, and is symptomatic of a tendency of defensive posturing to announce unity and, obliquely, to bargain with external pressures.

**State-Level Divergences**

An 87-nation statement coding revealed stark positional divisions, as under

- Concerned (45%)
- Supportive (26%)
- Neutral (21%)
- silent (8%)

ASEAN Member	Stance Category	Key Extracts (2021-2023)	Code Frequency
Indonesia	Concerned	"Risks arms race, undermines ASEAN centrality" (Widodo, UNGA 2021)	23 mentions
Malaysia	Concerned	"Nuclear subs threaten non-proliferation" (Ismail, 2021)	19 mentions
Singapore	Supportive	"Contributes to stable security environment" (PMO, 2021)	15 mentions
Vietnam	Neutral-Positive	"Balances regional power dynamics" (MFA, 2022)	12 mentions
Philippines	Supportive	"Enhances deterrence amid SCS tensions" (Foreign Sec., 2022)	11 mentions
Thailand	Neutral	No direct reference	0 mentions
Cambodia	Silent	No direct reference	0 mentions

Geographic threat exposure was reflected in frontline states (2.1 positive codes per statement) versus heartland states (1.8 negative codes), because the latter were not threatened with violence as directly as the former.

**Survey Corroboration**

The surveys of ISEAS are triangulated on the elite discourse: 48.2% of respondents in 2022 anticipated instability as a result of AUKUS, which decreased to 41.7% in 2025 as the submarine timelines were lengthened. The percentage of individuals who believe that ASEAN can provide them with solutions dropped to 47.1 (2025) as compared to 52.3 (2021), with 38% of them perceiving multilateralism to be a useful supplement. The risk of China posing a threat in 2025 rose to 62.4%, and this was linked to receptivity to AUKUS (r=0.67).

### **CIVET Framework Application**

- Centeredness: 32 codes decry AUKUS going around ASEAN forums, e.g., Indonesia's demand that it consult via forums.
- Inclusivity: 28 take a stand against exclusive clubs, in favor of AOIP inclusivity.
- Efficiency: 19 admissions of minimal speed, and 24 warnings of fragmentation.
- Value/Transparency: Mixed, 15 proliferation fears, 12 deterrence endorsements.

These trends substantiate the costs of diplomacy by undermining unity and fostering reactive discourse, thereby preconditioning interpretive discourse.

### **CONCLUSION**

The discussion validates that the AUKUS alliance is costly to ASEAN centrality, in the form of institutional marginalization, member-state inconsistencies, and normative watering down, culminating in a reduction of the bloc's convening power and consensus paradigm. The major observations indicate that ASEAN is strategically ambiguous in its communicate, as a manifestation of underlying fractures, with the fear of the proliferation of heartland states conflicting with frontline balancing needs, as measured by the loss of ISEAS trust (52.3 percent to 47.1 percent) and increased unilateral receptivity (38 percent). These processes confirm the CIVET model forecast of institutional change, in which the efficiency benefits (e.g., Pillar II improvements by 2026) of AUKUS would be offset by inclusivity and centrism costs.

The theoretical implications develop the scholarship on unilateralism by showing its dual nature: not just a multilateral complement but also a competitive pressure that drives ASEAN to adapt, similar to Acharya (2014) on normative resilience to pressure. In practice, ASEAN is confronted by reform imperatives- ASEAN Minus X formulas, improved security track-two dialogues and proactive.

AOIP operationalization - to reappropriate agency in the face of US-China rivalry. Transparency, including briefings at Pillar II of the ARF by AUKUS principals, should be given priority to draw a line on perceptions of exclusivity.

Limited generalizability: English-centric, elite-centric perspective can be overly dismissive of domesticized discourses, and a narrow time frame (2021-2026) portends the full impact of submarine delivery. Quantitative network analysis of the overlaps between unilateral and ASEAN or comparison with the effects of QUAD can be performed later.

Finally, AUKUS enables an Indo-Pacific order that is more of a hybrid where unilateralism supports, but does not replace ASEAN centrality- as long as it is negotiated by means of socialization. Unrestrained, it will give rise to competitive silos; controlled wisely, it will make regions resilient to the flux of hegemonies.

### **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

With regard to ASEAN: Institutionalize unilateral engagement processes under AOIP, conduct initial ASEAN+3 Security Dialogues, and deliver AUKUS outcomes.

To AUKUS Partners: Guarantee non-proliferation and ARF visibility; build capacity-building with open

members (e.g., Philippines).

Regional Track-Two: Hold ASEAN-Minilateral workshops once a year, to strengthen the norm of inclusiveness.

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