

Japan's Response to AUKUS in Suppressing China's Rise

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Abstract

This article aims to examine the reasons behind Japan's ambiguous stance regarding its potential membership in the AUKUS defence pact. Japan's membership in AUKUS has become increasingly urgent as its role is deemed necessary in supporting Pillar II of AUKUS, which focuses on cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, quantum technology, and additional underwater capabilities. Another consideration for Japan's membership is the phenomenon of China's rise, which AUKUS partners perceive as a security threat. Japan's inclusion is expected to help counter China's influence in the Indo-Pacific region. Japan's membership is highly anticipated, as it is considered a like-minded country and a close ally of the United States. In theory, Japan should not face difficulties in making its membership decision, especially since AUKUS partners strongly support its inclusion. However, despite official statements from the Japanese government indicating openness and a positive reception toward the opportunity, Japan has yet to make a definitive decision regarding its AUKUS membership. This article seeks to understand why Japan remains uncertain (ambiguous) about its membership in AUKUS. This question is addressed through the concept of defensive realism. Based on this approach, Japan prioritizes its national interests by not joining AUKUS while still supporting the alliance's continuity. This stance allows Japan to maintain cooperation with AUKUS partners without becoming an official member of the alliance. It also reflects Japan's strategy in maintaining regional balance, ensuring that its position does not excessively escalate tensions with China, which is a global powerhouse in the region.

Keywords: AUKUS; Japan; China; Defensive Realism

Introduction

The development of technology in contemporary security issues is currently increasingly complex, along with the opening of opportunities for various forms of international crime, such as cybercrime, espionage, and the potential for an arms race. This phenomenon encourages various countries to strengthen their national security protection through bilateral to multilateral cooperation. One multilateral initiative that reflects this response is the establishment of the AUKUS trilateral security cooperation by Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. AUKUS, which was launched on September 15, 2021, is seen as one of the strategic efforts to respond to the phenomenon called the rise of China or China's Rise in the Indo-Pacific region (Cheema, 2022). This cooperation not only focuses on the transfer of nuclear-powered submarine technology

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gy, but more broadly also includes planning collaboration in other defense capabilities, such as cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, quantum technology, underwater warfare technology, hypersonic technology, electronic warfare, and innovation and information exchange (Childs, 2023).

With this form of security cooperation, the existence of AUKUS has triggered various responses in the Asia Pacific region. Meanwhile, the countries that are members of the AUKUS alliance, most of which have significant economic relations with China. The protest stance also voiced by Indonesia and Malaysia adds to the series of security dilemmas that may be caused by this cooperation (Strangio, 2021). Likewise, China has consistently voiced strong opposition to AUKUS, which is considered a form of deterrence by the US, UK, and Australia. The Chinese government considers AUKUS to be at risk of triggering nuclear proliferation, an arms race, and threatening regional stability (CGTN, 2021; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2024). In contrast, Japan responded positively and expressed its support for AUKUS. Official statements by Japan, both by Foreign Minister Motegi Toshimitsu and under the Kishida Fumio administration (Kushida, 2024; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2021), show Japan's openness to Japan's potential involvement in pillar II of AUKUS, especially in advanced defense capability development projects (U.S. Department of Defense, 2024).

Several regional studies have examined Japan's response to AUKUS, for example, as stated by Koshino who identified three strategic benefits of Japan's involvement, namely strengthening the alliance to limit China's influence, alignment with the *Free and Open Indo-Pacific* (FOIP) vision, and opportunities in developing Japanese defense technology (Koshino, 2023). Meanwhile, Koga sees it using the concept of tactical hedging to explain Japan's ambiguous strategy. This strategy intends to take steps to balance limited involvement while avoiding the assertion of full commitment to the nuclear submarine project (Koga, 2025). However, these studies are still limited in their descriptive approach and have not used the lens of international relations theory systematically to understand Japan's strategic calculations.

Based on this description, this paper attempts to answer two main questions, namely, first, why does Japan apply an ambiguity strategy in its foreign policy towards AUKUS? And to what extent is this policy then influenced by China's position and influence in the Indo-Pacific region? This paper argues that China's presence through the China Rise phenomenon influences the formation of Japan's ambiguous attitude towards AUKUS. Unlike previous studies that used the concept of tactical hedging (Koga, 2025), this paper tries to provide a different lens by adopting a defensive realism

approach that is considered capable of explaining similar phenomena more theoretically.

The theoretical basis of this study is based on the defensive realism framework as developed by Kenneth Waltz and Stephen Walt (Walt, 2013; Waltz, 1979), which emphasizes that countries tend to maximize their security through balancing efforts and avoiding excessive escalation. Principles such as the security dilemma, self-help, and balancing are used to analyze Japan's strategy in mitigating possible threats from China while maintaining strategic relations with the United States and other alliance countries. By integrating this theoretical approach, this paper is expected to provide conceptual and empirical contributions to enrich studies on Indo-Pacific security and understanding of Japan's strategy in facing the new alliance architecture in the region.

Method

This study uses a structured qualitative research method through data collection sourced from books, official documents, journals, and scientific publications relevant to the research being conducted. Qualitative data analysis uses the Miles and Huberman model through three stages, namely, data reduction, data presentation, and concluding. The next stage is to conduct data analysis with data analysis of the process of sorting, selecting, preparing, and making abstracts from interviews, transcripts, various documents, and notes relevant to the topic of discussion. This article hypothesizes that the presence of China through the China Rise phenomenon influences Japan's ambiguous foreign policy towards AUKUS. The ambiguity of Japan's policy towards AUKUS also reflects the defensive realism approach in its international relations, which can be seen from Japan's cautious attitude in participating in the alliance. With this approach, research is expected to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of Japan's foreign policy and its relevance to the theory of defensive realism.

Discussion

Japan's Foreign Policy towards AUKUS

This paper classifies Japan's foreign policy towards AUKUS as a form of policy that is strategically ambiguous. Where there are efforts on the one hand, Japan shows interest and positive signals to participate in AUKUS, but there are also indications of caution and limitations regarding the extent of its involvement. This ambiguous attitude or response is reflected in official statements by the Japanese government confirming its

interest in collaborating with AUKUS, although until now, there has been no concrete decision regarding the form and scheme of cooperation that will be adopted between Japan and AUKUS. So far, the discourse that has developed regarding Japan's involvement in AUKUS is limited to the possibility of participating in Pillar II of AUKUS, which focuses on the development and transfer of military technology (Koshino, 2023).

At the beginning of the formation of this cooperation, Japan showed no interest in Pillar I of AUKUS, which is related to increasing defense capabilities through the procurement of nuclear-powered submarines. Days after the announcement of the formation of AUKUS, there were concerns in Tokyo that AUKUS could spark a political controversy over whether Japan should acquire nuclear submarines, something that would drain its already limited defense budget by billions of dollars and expand the operations of the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force beyond the East China Sea. (Koshino, 2023). This attitude cannot be separated from domestic sensitivity regarding nuclear issues, as illustrated in the strict supervision of nuclear-powered warships owned by the United States and the failure of the Mutsu nuclear-powered civilian ship project due to public rejection (Nobuyasu, 2023).

In addition to domestic political factors, geographical considerations are also a strategic reason, considering the sea conditions around Japan, for example, the East China Sea which is relatively shallow and less than ideal for large nuclear submarine operations (Tsuruoka, 2021). These arguments indicate a small possibility of Japan's involvement in Pillar I of AUKUS. In contrast to Pillar I, Japan's involvement in Pillar II is considered more rational and in line with its national interests. Quoting from Rena Sasaki's writing, Japan actually has a strong basis for collaborating with AUKUS member countries through defense cooperation agreements that have previously been formed with the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia. However, this cooperation is still project-based and focuses on the development of basic technologies, such as amphibious technology and hybrid-electric vehicle systems (Sasaki, 2023). Japan's potential participation in Pillar II offers significant opportunities for technology transfer, including autonomous underwater systems, quantum technology, artificial intelligence, advanced cybersecurity, hypersonic weapons, electronic warfare, innovation, and information exchange.

This cooperation has the potential to strengthen the foundation of previously established bilateral cooperation and deepen the integration of Japanese military technology with its allies. However, Taniguchi also reminded of the importance of Japan in maintaining and improving the traditional bilateral alliance system, especially the US-Japan alliance. According to him, Japan needs to strengthen its national capabilities and

not rely entirely on multilateral alliances such as the Quad and AUKUS, whose expectations have not been fully tested (Boekenstein, 2024). In addition to the issue of the cooperation scheme, Japan's concerns in determining its position clearly in AUKUS are also influenced by the complexity of the dynamics of multilateralism in the field of defense and security, especially regarding the mechanism for sharing information and technology.

Japan's experience in its involvement with the Five Eyes intelligence network is an important precedent. Although not formally part of it, Japan has previously sought to strengthen security relations with Five Eyes members who share intelligence and collaborate in global security surveillance activities. This step cannot be separated from Japan's experience as a victim of cyber espionage, which has encouraged the Japanese government to be stricter and more careful in protecting the confidentiality of its domestic intelligence (Sinha, 2024).

Past lessons from Japan's engagement with the Five Eyes suggest that while the benefits of Japan's participation, including its geographic proximity to China, are clear, full membership is still not a serious consideration. Jagannath Panda and Ankit Panda argue that while Japan currently enjoys membership status as part of the Five Eyes-plus, it is unlikely to be accepted as a full member in the Six Eyes format anytime soon (Panda & Panda, 2020). Furthermore, if Japan formally joins, it could encourage other countries to apply for similar membership, potentially creating diplomatic dilemmas and undermining internal cohesion within the Five Eyes.

Although this cautious stance was further clarified in Japan's latest National Defense Strategy, which marked a significant shift in defense policy and opened up momentum for a greater role in the intelligence network, formal membership remains constrained by structural complexities and diplomatic considerations. In addition to intelligence, Five Eyes membership also involves defense, diplomacy, cybersecurity, and law enforcement. If Japan were to formally join, major reforms would be required to bring its domestic security systems, including screening standards, information classification, and data-sharing procedures, to bring them in line with Five Eyes standards (Hemmings, 2023).

Similar considerations also apply in the context of Japan's involvement in AUKUS. As in the Five Eyes, Japan will most likely only occupy a peripheral position amidst the dominance of the three core AUKUS member states. However, this does not mean that Japan has completely lost its role. Its participation is most likely limited to aspects of information exchange and technology collaboration, without being directly involved in high-level strategic decision-making. Therefore, a more realistic strategy

for Japan is to simultaneously strengthen bilateral relations with each AUKUS member state and the Five Eyes, without having to try to become a core member of the forum. So, this ambiguous attitude is then a safe choice in placing Japan's involvement in the alliance.

However, until now, Japan's foreign policy towards AUKUS is still in the realm of ambiguity. However, certainly, shortly official membership in AUKUS is not a realistic option in addition to the power transition in the United States. This cooperation will enter a new period along with the change of power in the US under the leadership of Donald Trump. The cooperation that may be established will be limited to Pillar II relating to technology transfer and military innovation collaboration. Despite various public statements from Japan and positive acceptance from AUKUS members, there has been no official declaration regarding Japan's participation in AUKUS as of the time of this writing. Japan's active involvement in various security multilateralism formats such as Five Eyes and AUKUS reflects a defensive realism approach in its foreign policy, where Japan shows a tendency to be more active in national security affairs than before, but still avoids aggressive steps that have the potential to trigger an escalation of open conflict in maintaining its national interests.

Defensive Realism: International Relations between Japan and China

The understanding of Japan's ambiguous foreign policy strategy towards AUKUS is shaped by the dynamics of its relations with China. Therefore, it is essential to first examine the development of bilateral relations between these two countries over recent decades. Regional scholars present a complex view of Japan-China relations, depicting it as a paradox that intertwines political antagonism with economic interdependence (Chiang, 2019; Lam, 2017; Lehmann, 2015). Despite the prospect that close economic ties could contribute to stability, Lehmann remains pessimistic about the ability of interdependence to entirely prevent conflict escalation, given the deeply rooted political antagonism in their historical interactions (Lehmann, 2015).

In analyzing this relationship, the defensive realism perspective is employed, highlighting that Japan-China relations cannot be fully understood apart from the dynamics of the triangular relationship involving Japan, China, and the United States. As noted in Christensen, the configuration of US-Japan relations influences China's perception of threat and strategic responses towards Japan, and this interaction is reciprocal (Christensen, 1999). The ongoing dispute between Japan and China over the Senkaku Islands, known as Diaoyu in China, highlights significant tensions in the East Asian region (Oliveira, 2022). While this situation may seem like a bilateral issue, the

United States plays a crucial role in shaping Japan-China relations. As a result, the relationship between the U.S. and Japan is a key factor in influencing how China perceives threats and responds strategically within this triangular dynamic (Christensen, 1999). This complexity renders Japan's participation in AUKUS a strategically challenging choice, considering the risk of escalation in the East Asia region, both in bilateral relations with China and amid the U.S.-China rivalry.

Tensions between Japan and China have significantly intensified since 2010. Koga noted that this escalation began when China increased its presence in the East China Sea using non-military vessels, such as fishing boats and Coast Guard ships (Koga, 2020). The incident in 2010, where a Chinese fishing boat collided with a Japanese Coast Guard vessel near the Senkaku Islands, exacerbated tensions further. In response, Japan nationalized three of the main islands in the Senkaku chain (Uotsuri, Kitakojima, and Minakojima), which triggered an increase in Chinese maritime activities in the area. This led to a series of retaliatory actions, culminating in China passing the controversial Coast Guard Law in 2021. This legislation permits the use of lethal force against foreign vessels in claimed territories, including disputed areas, resulting in more frequent incursions by Chinese Coast Guard vessels into Japanese-controlled waters and heightening the risk of military incidents (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2025).

In addition to territorial disputes, Japan's perception of the threat from China has escalated due to two significant factors: the expansion of Chinese influence through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and China's refusal to comply with the 2016 international arbitration ruling in favor of the Philippines regarding the South China Sea (Koga, 2020). As of February 2025, between 145 and 149 countries had signed Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) under the BRI framework (Nedopil, 2025). Projects such as the Jakarta-Bandung high-speed railway, which shifted from Japan to China, further fueled Japan's concerns about its waning influence in Asia. Additionally, China's disregard for the arbitration ruling has raised alarms regarding the efficacy of international legal mechanisms in restraining Chinese expansionism in the region.

During Fumio Kishida's administration, concerns about China were further amplified. Kishida remarked, "Ukraine today may be East Asia tomorrow," indicating the potential for a similar scenario in East Asia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Japan, 2022; Tatsumi, 2023). This prompted Japan to revise three key strategic documents—the National Security Strategy (NSS), the National Defense Strategy (NDS), and the Defense Build-up Plan (DBP)—collectively referred to as the Three National Security Documents. The 2022 NSS explicitly identifies China as:

“...an unprecedented and the greatest strategic challenge in ensuring the peace and security of Japan and the peace and stability of the international community, as well as in strengthening the international order based on the rule of law.” (Japan Ministry of Defense, 2022).

These documents propose significant measures, including the development of counter-attack capabilities and an expansion of security to encompass economics, cyber, space, and emerging technologies, aligning with the objectives of AUKUS. This marks a major shift in Japan’s security policy, as for the first time, it explicitly identifies China as a major threat.

This shift is accompanied by a notable increase in the defense budget. In 2024, Japan raised its defense budget by 9.4%, reaching 8.7 trillion yen (approximately USD 55.1 billion), the highest in the history of Japan’s defense budget (Arthur, 2024, 2025). In contrast, China’s defense budget was increased by 7.2% to 1.67 trillion yuan (approximately USD 236.1 billion). Although China’s budget is four times larger, Japan’s significant increase reflects deep concerns about the imbalance of capabilities and security threats posed by China. Thus, within the framework of defensive realism, Japan’s strategic decisions regarding its foreign policy and defense are closely interlinked with its relationship with China and the broader geopolitical landscape.

Japan-China relations from a defensive realism perspective show that Japan prioritizes stability and security over expansion or confrontation. Despite economic interdependence, political tensions and territorial disputes continue to overshadow relations between the two countries, especially in the East China Sea issue and China’s increasing influence in the region. Japan balances its foreign policy by combining an engagement policy and a containment strategy in response to the dynamics of relations with China (Walt, 2013). Despite political tensions, the economic ties between China and Japan remain strong. *The Japan External Trade Organization* (JETRO) emphasizes that Japanese companies are eager to cooperate with Chinese enterprises, especially in promising industries such as new energy vehicles, robotics, health products, and high-value food products. Furthermore, with the entry into force of the *Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership* (RCEP), economic cooperation between China and Japan has entered a new phase. RCEP is the world’s largest free trade agreement, involving the world’s second and third-largest economies (Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO), 2023).

Japan’s increased defense budget, security policy reforms, and efforts to revise the constitution reflect a shift in Japan’s attitude toward China, especially under the

leadership of Fumio Kishida. Although Japan has strengthened its alliance with the United States and expanded strategic cooperation with other countries, its involvement in AUKUS remains ambiguous. Japan is aware that active involvement in AUKUS, especially in Pillar I, could increase tensions with China and change perceptions of its foreign approach from defensive to more aggressive (Tsuruoka, 2021).

Furthermore, as highlighted by Paul, AUKUS represents the rise of a security alliance configuration that has the potential to increase regional polarization (Paul, 2024). Therefore, Japan is implementing a balance of power strategy that allows flexibility in foreign policy. Support for AUKUS has been openly expressed but without a full commitment to join directly. This approach shows that Japan continues to seek to maintain relations with China while maintaining its national interests and security in the evolving geopolitical dynamics of East Asia.

Conclusion

Japan-China relations, viewed through the lens of defensive realism, demonstrate that Japan prioritizes stability and security over expansion or confrontation. Despite significant economic interdependence, political tensions and territorial disputes, particularly concerning the East China Sea and the rise of China's influence in the region, continue to overshadow bilateral relations between the two countries. In response to these dynamics, Japan has adopted a combination of engagement policies and containment strategies as part of its broader balance of power approach.

Under Fumio Kishida's leadership, Japan has increased its defense budget, reformed its security policies, and pursued constitutional revisions, reflecting a shift in its attitude toward China. While Japan has strengthened its alliance with the United States and expanded strategic cooperation with other nations, its involvement in AUKUS has been cautious and ambiguous. Japan understands that active participation, especially in Pillar I of AUKUS, risks escalating tensions with China and could shift perceptions of its foreign policy from defensive to more aggressive.

Given the potential for conflict escalation in the region, Japan has opted for a hedging strategy: expressing support for AUKUS without fully committing to direct participation. This approach allows Japan to maintain diplomatic and economic ties with China while simultaneously strengthening its defense capabilities and regional security cooperation. Overall, this strategy reflects Japan's efforts to safeguard its national interests and security in the increasingly complex geopolitical landscape of East Asia, aligned with the principles of defensive realism.

Authenticity Statement

We hereby declare that the manuscript entitled “*Japan’s Response to AUKUS in Suppressing China’s Rise*”, submitted for publication in *Vox Populi*, is our original work, free from any form of plagiarism, has not been previously published in any form—print or online—and is not under review or consideration by any other journal or publisher. We accept full responsibility and are willing to bear any consequences in accordance with the regulations of *Vox Populi* should any violation of this statement be discovered in the future.

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