

# AUKUS and Australia's Threat Perception Towards China

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**Abstract.** This study examines how Australia's participation in the AUKUS agreement reflects a shift in its threat perception toward China. The research aims to: (1) analyze the factors driving Australia's heightened threat perception, and (2) explain why this perception led to the abandonment of its hedging strategy between the U.S. (security ally) and China (economic partner). Methodologically, the article employs a deductive interpretive approach, adapting Rousseau's heuristic model to assess three key dimensions: identity divergence (status-quo vs. revisionist states), military capacity disparity, and China's aggressive regional intentions. The findings reveal that Australia's decision to join AUKUS was primarily motivated by China's revisionist identity, overwhelming military advantage, and assertive actions in strategically vital regions. The study concludes that these factors collectively elevated Australia's threat perception to a level where security concerns outweighed economic benefits, prompting a definitive alignment with the U.S.-led order.

**Keywords:** Australia, China, AUKUS, Threat Perception, Status-quo, Revisionist, Identit.

**Abstrak.** Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana partisipasi Australia dalam kesepakatan AUKUS mencerminkan perubahan persepsi ancaman terhadap China. Tujuan penelitian adalah: (1) menganalisis faktor-faktor pemicu peningkatan persepsi ancaman Australia, dan (2) menjelaskan alasan persepsi ini mengakhiri strategi hedging antara Amerika Serikat (sekutu keamanan) dan China (mitra ekonomi). Secara metodologis, artikel menggunakan pendekatan interpretatif deduktif dengan mengadaptasi model heuristik Rousseau untuk menilai tiga dimensi: perbedaan identitas (negara status-quo vs. revisionist), kesenjangan kapasitas militer, dan intensi agresif China di kawasan strategis. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa keputusan Australia bergabung dengan AUKUS terutama dipicu oleh identitas revisionis China, keunggulan militer China, dan tindakan asertifnya di wilayah-wilayah penting. Kesimpulan penelitian menyatakan bahwa faktor-faktor ini secara kolektif meningkatkan persepsi ancaman Australia hingga mengalahkan manfaat ekonomi, mendorong aliansi tegas dengan tatanan pimpinan Amerika Serikat.

**Kata Kunci:** Australia, China, AUKUS, Persepsi Ancaman, Status-quo, Revisionis, Identitas.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The study of security and international relations has long debated the causes behind the formation of alliances by states. The prevailing view suggests that when a state perceives a threat, it is compelled to pursue one or both of the following strategies: enhancing its own capabilities or collaborating with other states to counter the perceived threat. In this context, security pacts or alliances are often the more common course of action.

In 2021, Australia, the United Kingdom (UK), and the United States (US) established the AUKUS alliance. The formation of AUKUS was grounded in the longstanding bilateral ties among the three nations, which continue to endure, and was driven by the significantly heightened security challenges in the Indo-Pacific region (Australia Minister of Foreign Affairs, 2021). Consequently, AUKUS aims to strengthen the respective governments' capabilities in supporting their security and defense interests (Australia Minister of Foreign Affairs, 2021).

The AUKUS security pact is broadly divided into two key security initiatives: a commitment to support Australia in acquiring nuclear-powered submarines for the Royal Australian Navy, and an initiative to enhance joint capabilities and interoperability, with a focus on cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence (AI), quantum technologies, and additional undersea capabilities (Australia Minister of Foreign Affairs, 2021).

The establishment of AUKUS elicited a negative response from China, focusing primarily on the geopolitical implications of the alliance. China criticized AUKUS as a product of "Cold War mentality" among Australia, the UK, and the US (Cuong, Tien, & Tai, 2023). Furthermore, China argued that AUKUS would undermine regional security stability (Cuong, Tien, & Tai, 2023). China's Permanent Representative to the United Nations (UN) also voiced objections, condemning AUKUS as a violation of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (Commonly known as Non-Proliferation Treaty or NPT), to which all three member states are signatories (Wang, 2022). Additionally, China called on the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to publicly

condemn AUKUS, which it viewed as reflecting a "double standard" by the US and the UK regarding nuclear exports (Cuong, Tien, & Tai, 2023).

Australia's involvement as a focal point of the AUKUS partnership has the potential to exacerbate its cooperative relationship with China. Professor Allan Gyngell, President of the Australian Institute of Foreign Affairs, noted that the announcement of AUKUS "removed any pretense that Australia is not firmly on the side of militarily confronting China" (Mao, 2021). However, prior to AUKUS, Australia had maintained a balanced position in its security relationship with the US, avoiding outright opposition to China while preserving its alliance with the US and its economic partnership with China. Australia had even acknowledged that "the importance of deepening ties with China cannot be ignored" (Australian Government, 2013). Australia's ability to maintain this equilibrium without displaying excessive hostility toward either side fostered bipartisan confidence that it did not need to explicitly choose sides (Bloomfield, 2016; Chan, 2019; Kwon, 2020; McDowall, 2009; Wilkins, 2023).

Nevertheless, Australia's balanced position began to waver in the 2010s, as elements of balancing increasingly permeated its policies (Kwon, 2020). In October 2020, Australia rejoined the Malabar naval exercises with the US, Japan, and India. Ultimately, Australia appeared to solidify its stance by joining AUKUS, a defense pact perceived as an alliance aimed at countering China's power, particularly through its agreement to facilitate the acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines—a move supported by the US that could potentially diminish China's influence (Cuong, Tien, & Tai, 2023).

Australia's decision to join AUKUS presents a compelling case for analysis, particularly in assessing its threat perception toward China, which remains its largest and most crucial trading partner. This article seeks to explain the level of threat perception that prompted Australia to form an alliance by examining the rationale behind its participation in AUKUS to counterbalance China in 2021.

Previous studies have identified China as a threat to Australia (Cox, Cooper, & O'Connor,

2023; Diabat, 2023; Leonova, 2022; Wallis, 2022; Xue, 2023; Gill, 2023). These perceived threats have been analyzed at multiple levels, including bilateral relations, regional dynamics, and the broader context of great power rivalry (Zhou, 2022; Wallis, 2022; Gill, 2023; Xue, 2023). However, the perception of China as a threat to Australia has existed for some time (Mackerras, 2010; Goodman, 2017; Liu, 2022), while AUKUS was only established in 2021. Although prior studies have highlighted Australia's sense of threat, they have not fully explained the shift in Australia's stance leading to the formation of AUKUS in that year. Therefore, this study posits that the level of threat perception can elucidate this shift, despite the risks of further deteriorating Australia-China relations.

This article is structured as follows. Following the introduction, it will discuss the analytical framework used to understand Australia's threat perception toward China. The analysis will then be divided into three sections. The first section will examine the identity differences between Australia and China within the context of great power rivalry. The second section will compare China's offensive capabilities relative to Australia's. The final section will analyze China's aggressive intentions and their implications for Australia. Additionally, this section will synthesize the three components within the analytical framework to address the research question. Finally, the article will present conclusions drawn from the preceding analysis.

## 2. METHOD

This article seeks to provide an understanding of Australia's behavioural shift, which is based on its threat perception toward China. The research conducted is qualitative in nature, employing a deductive interpretive approach to comprehend the reasons behind Australia's change in stance, driven by its perceived level of threat from China.

During the research process, primary data on national identity and military capabilities were utilized, including official documents and reports issued by the Australian government. Additionally, secondary data on national identity, offensive capabilities, and offensive intentions were also incorporated. These

secondary data were sourced from news outlets, third-party reports, and previous studies.

The deterioration in Australia-China relations began in 2016, culminating in the formation of AUKUS in 2021. Therefore, the author limits the data used in this study to the period between 2016 and 2021. The data were collected through desk and archive research, processed using triangulation to ensure accuracy and minimize errors. The collected data were then analysed by comparing the actual conditions reflected in the data with the theoretical framework employed in the study.

To understand Australia's decision to join AUKUS, this article employs the concept of threat perception. Threat perception serves as a critical lens to explain the behavioural shift in Australia that led to its participation in AUKUS as a means to counterbalance China.

In the literature of international relations, a threat is defined as a situation in which one agent or group possesses the capability or intention to impose negative consequences on another agent or group (Davis, 2000). Threats, in this context, are probabilistic, as they may or may not materialize. Based on a broad perspective of threats, the concept can be divided into two categories: threats to individuals and threats to collectives (MacKuen, Erikson, & Stimson, 1992). International relations primarily focus on, though are not limited to, the latter category. Collective threats can manifest as (1) military threats, (2) economic threats, or (3) cultural threats. Conversely, threats to individuals may involve negative consequences to (1) their physical security, (2) their wealth and income, or (3) their personal values and beliefs. In some cases, collective threats may also represent personal threats to individuals.

Power can be utilized to threaten. Dahl (1957) defines power as the ability of Actor A to compel Actor B to do what Actor A desires (which Actor B would not otherwise do). Dahl's definition focuses on observable conflict between two actors. Bachrach and Baratz (1962, 1963) complement this view of power by introducing the concept of "power behind the scenes," such as agenda-setting, which can reduce visible conflict among actors. Finally,



Lukes (1974) argues that power should be expanded to include preference-shaping activities. If an individual or group can alter the preferences of another actor to align with their own through socialization or persuasion, no visible conflict or agenda manipulation is necessary.

By definition, power is a relative concept; the power of Actor A can only be assessed relative to other actors in the environment (Grieco, 1990; Fiske, 1993; Jones, 1972). This relational aspect distinguishes power from other central variables in international relations studies. For example, the level of democracy is not a relational variable, as an increase in one country's democratic level does not automatically imply a loss for another country. The relative nature of power has led many realist scholars in international relations to view power, and international relations more broadly, in zero-sum terms (Waltz, 1979).

Both classical realism (Gulick, 1955) and structural realism (Waltz, 1979) argue that threats arise from asymmetric power relations (Doyle, 1997). If a neighboring state possesses greater power than one's own state, the less powerful state is likely to feel threatened, as there is no guarantee that the more powerful state will refrain from using its power to instigate conflict. States are thus compelled to rely on their domestic military capabilities or to form temporary international alliances to balance the power of others.

However, while power plays a significant role in generating a sense of threat, Rousseau and Retamero (2007) offers a distinct perspective, arguing that threat perception is not solely caused by the excess power of another state. Rousseau and Retamero (2007) posits that a combination of power and identity is the primary driver of threat perception.

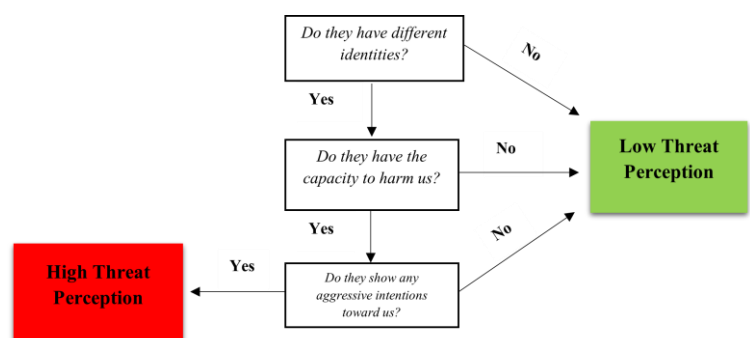
Regarding power and threat, Rousseau and Retamero (2007) interprets identity as the shared adoption of norms, beliefs, values, attitudes, and behaviours among actors. This shared identity, coupled with differences from other actors, leads to categorization based on the connotations of "us" and "them."

To measure the level of perceived threat, this study employs Rousseau's (2006) simple heuristic model, which begins by examining the

identity of the state in question. The model then proceeds to assess the state's capacity and concludes by evaluating the state's intentions based on its actions in the surrounding region. Although this model is simplistic in explaining threat perception, Rousseau's (2006) framework is effective in identifying potential threats from a state of concern. Furthermore, Rousseau's emphasis on assessing the intentions of the opposing state aligns with Walt's (1985) focus on offensive intentions in his balance of threat model.

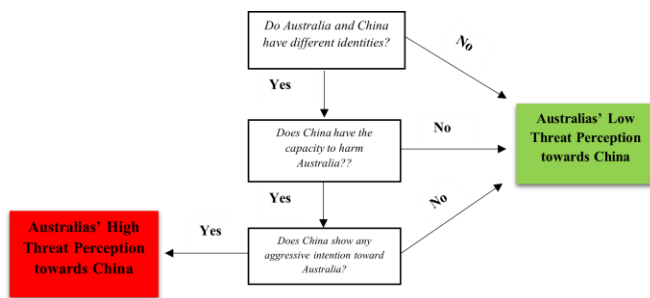
In this study, Australia's behavioral shift from hedging to balancing against China reflects a change in its perception of their bilateral relationship. This shift can be framed as a change in the level of threat perceived by Australia toward China, rendering hedging insufficient to maintain Australia's sense of security. This change indicates that the probability of a threat posed by China to Australia outweighs the potential benefits of maintaining a hedging strategy. Therefore, this article argues that Australia's shift in threat perception is linked to its heightened perception of China as a threat. To facilitate understanding of the analytical framework used in this study, Rousseau's (2006) simple heuristic model is illustrated as follows:

**Figure 2.1. Analytical Framework**



*Adopted by the Author from Rousseau, 2006*

Rousseau's simple heuristic model is then translated into three factors that serve as sub-sections of the analysis: (1) Identity Differences; (2) Offensive Capacity; and (3) Aggressive Intentions. The adoption of this model, as applied to this study, can be illustrated as follows:

**Figure 2.2. Analytical Model**

*Processed by the Author from Rousseau, 2006*

Thus, by integrating these factors, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of Australia's level of threat perception contributing to its decision to join AUKUS as a counterbalance to China. This approach not only explains state behaviour but also highlights the broader implications of great power rivalry in the Indo-Pacific.

### 3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1 Do They Have Different Identity? Status-Quo State vs Revisionist State

In the rivalry among great powers, status-quo states and revisionist states represent two groups vying for influence. There are two interpretations of these categories. The first is rooted in the definitions provided by realism and neoclassical realism, which focus on their respective needs for security or power. In this context, Morgenthau (1993), Schweller (1998), and Kydd (1997) define status-quo states as those that seek to maximize security, while revisionist states are defined as those that strive to maximize power. However, this classical definition does not directly relate to identity as understood by Rousseau. Security and power have a thin overlap, making their identification difficult (Davidson, 2006). Moreover, security and power are inherently interconnected, as states prioritizing security, from a realist perspective, will inevitably enhance their military power.

The author argues that the definition aligning with Rousseau's concept of identity in threat perception is that of Arnold Wolfers. Wolfers (1962) defines a status-quo state as one that seeks to preserve existing values, while a revisionist state is defined as one that pursues values that are yet to be realized (Wolfers, 1962). These values can encompass various aspects, such as territory, status, trade markets,

ideology, or even specific international laws and institutions relevant to the state's interests (Davidson, 2006). Thus, when a state strives to maintain one or more of these values as they are, it is a status-quo state. Conversely, if a state seeks to alter one or more of these values, it is a revisionist state.

Australia is identified as a status-quo state as Canberra aims to preserve the liberal order under the U.S. leadership in the Indo-Pacific. This liberal order broadly consists of security and political alliances with a "hub and spoke" structure, positioning the U.S. as the central hub and its allies—Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Thailand, and Australia—as the spokes (Park, 2011). This alliance structure is a key feature shaping the political security of the Indo-Pacific region.

Australia's identity as a guardian of the existing order is articulated in its 2016 Defence White Paper (hereafter referred to as the 2016 White Paper) and its 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper (hereafter referred to as the 2017 White Paper). The 2017 White Paper, in particular, highlights "rapid change" as the primary motive for its publication (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017). This reflects the need for strategic direction in Australia's foreign policy to address emerging changes, as shifts in the existing order could significantly impact Australia's interests. Additionally, the 2017 White Paper identifies anti-globalization trends, pressures on global governance, and increasing contestation over the rules governing the international order as sources of threat (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017).

Both the 2016 and 2017 White Papers acknowledge the impact of China's rise on regional stability. These documents describe China's growing power and influence as having reached or even surpassed that of the U.S. in certain aspects, raising the likelihood of China seeking to shape the Indo-Pacific region to advance its interests (Commonwealth of Australia, 2016; 2017). This is a significant concern for Australia, as it has historically benefited from the U.S.-led international order (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017). Australia also recognizes the U.S.'s role in stabilizing the Indo-Pacific, while both White Papers assert that the U.S. will maintain its dominance in military and soft power aspects.

Chapter Two of the 2017 White Paper underscores the assumed link between Australia's security and prosperity and the U.S.-led international order. This assumption forms the foundation of Australia's foreign policy, driving its efforts to preserve the U.S.'s presence in the Indo-Pacific against potential revisionist challenges to the regional and global order. Using the term "rule-based order," the 2017 White Paper associates Australia's interests with liberal values, peaceful conflict resolution, and the U.S.'s role in maintaining the effectiveness of this order. Based on this, this article associates the status-quo with the U.S.-led liberal, rule-based order and identifies Australia's identity as a status-quo state based on its values and views on Indo-Pacific geopolitical dynamics.

Conversely, China is identified as a revisionist state due to its frequent opposition to the status-quo. While this article identifies Australia's identity as a status-quo state based on its White Papers, it also uses China's 2019 Defence White Paper as a starting point to identify China's position as a revisionist state.

If Australia's White Papers describe rapid changes in the international order as a threat, China's 2019 Defence White Paper portrays the current international reality as dominated by hegemony, power politics, and unilateralism, which it views as threats to its national interests (The State Council Information Office of PRC, 2019). The document highlights increasing challenges in global and regional security, such as setbacks in international arms control and disarmament, signs of a renewed arms race, and ongoing issues with the non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Specifically, China criticizes the non-proliferation regime as being fraught with pragmatism and double standards, citing the AUKUS agreement as a concrete example of such double standards (Wang, 2022).

For China, sovereignty is a non-negotiable national interest. Some observers argue that China's dissatisfaction with the liberal order stems from U.S. support for Taiwan's de facto independence (Mastanduno, 2003; Alagappa, 2003; Roy, 2003). For China, U.S. hegemony poses a threat to its sovereignty, particularly regarding Taiwan and the One China Policy. China's firm stance on sovereignty is also

evident in its maximalist approach to defending its territorial and maritime claims, such as in the South China Sea, the India-China border, and the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. While land border disputes have largely been resolved, maritime conflicts remain complex issues for China and its neighbors (Hayton, 2014). However, China does not seek to replace U.S. hegemony globally (The State Council Information Office of PRC, 2019). Instead, it aims to reduce U.S. dominance, enabling a multipolar world where China can emerge as a key pillar (Taylor, 2007).

Beyond its Defence White Paper, China's revisionist identity is also reflected in its actions. Unlike Russia, which employs military means to assert its revisionism, China primarily seeks to reshape the global order through economic and diplomatic channels (Pisciotta, 2023). This approach is supported by its position as the world's second-largest economy (IMF, 2024). Regionally, China's economic strength allows it to foster positive relations with neighboring countries through trade and investment commitments. Globally, it enables China to challenge U.S. economic hegemony (Pisciotta, 2023). This challenge is pursued by integrating into the Western-created global economic system, such as through its participation in the World Trade Organization, and then expanding its products worldwide to dominate market share (Buzan, 2010).

China's rapid economic growth and active participation in global economic activities have advanced its goal of reducing U.S. presence in Asia and securing recognition as a great power (Okuda, 2016). A key step in this direction is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which aims to spread China's capital internationally and create a new structure to further its development (Pisciotta, 2023). The success of this initiative would signify China's growing influence and the erosion of U.S. influence in participating countries.

Ultimately, China's identity as a revisionist state is manifested through its efforts to create an environment supporting its economic expansion and transforming neighboring countries into friends, partners, or even allies. Through financial assistance, China can influence these countries to support its rise. Their increasing participation in China-led

initiatives also diminishes the U.S.'s role in global economic activities, reducing U.S. hegemony and aligning the global order with China's interests and ambitions.

### 3.2 Do They Have the Capacity to Harm Us? Comparison of Military Capacity of Australia and China

**Table 3.2. Comparison of military capacity between Australia and China**

| Country              | Australia     | China          |
|----------------------|---------------|----------------|
| Population           | 25,422,788    | 1.41 billion   |
| Active Personnel     | 59,000        | 2,035,000      |
| GDP (USD)            | 1.56 trillion | 17.82 trillion |
| Defence Budget (USD) | 34.3 billion  | 207.3 billion  |
| Tank                 | 59            | 4,590          |
| Fighter              | 83            | 3,260          |
| Warship              | 46            | 335            |
| Submarine            | 6             | 152            |
| Nuclear weapons      | -             | 350            |

*Sources: IIS (2022) and World Bank Data*

As shown from the table, Australia's offensive capabilities are significantly inferior to those of China. Backed by its massive economic strength, China dedicates 1.6% of its GDP to defense, amounting to USD 207.34 billion, while Australia, despite allocating 2% of its GDP, spends only USD 34.31 billion. China's defense budget constitutes 43% of the total regional defense spending, making its military movements a dominant trend in the region. Additionally, China's total active military personnel across all branches reaches 2 million, effectively making it the largest military force in the world by personnel size, followed by India (IISS, 2022).

China also surpasses Australia in terms of military equipment, with a stark contrast in nuclear capabilities. China possesses 350 nuclear warheads, while Australia has none, effectively eliminating geographical distance as a barrier if China were to launch a nuclear attack, as Australia would lack the means to retaliate.

In 2021, China amended its national defense law, centralizing military decision-making entirely within the Central Military Commission and removing legislative oversight from military matters (IISS, 2021). The absence of checks and balances, already weak in China's

constitutional framework, further complicates the predictability of China's actions, particularly regarding the use of military force.

Despite being far behind China in offensive capabilities, Australia maintains a significant, well-trained, and well-equipped military force. In response to the perceived threat posed by China's growing regional role, regional military modernization, and Indo-Pacific rivalries influencing regional security dynamics, Australia issued the 2020 Defence Strategic Update, which diverged from previous Defense White Papers. The revisionist threats outlined in the 2016 Defence White Paper have progressed faster than anticipated, prompting Australia to recognize the need for structural changes in its military. This reflects the increasing urgency of the security threat posed by China. The update outlines three key objectives: (1) shaping Australia's strategic environment; (2) implementing deterrence based on Australia's interests; and (3) responding with military force if necessary.

However, Australia would face significant losses in a direct confrontation with China. While Australia is currently enhancing its military capabilities, it still heavily relies on its security alliances, with the United States as its primary ally, followed by India, Japan, South Korea, and the United Kingdom (IISS, 2022). These alliances are crucial for Australia's security strategy, as they provide the necessary support to counterbalance China's overwhelming military advantage.

In conclusion, the disparity in military capabilities between Australia and China is stark, with China's superior economic and military resources posing a significant challenge to Australia's security. While Australia is taking steps to modernize its military and strengthen its alliances, the gap in offensive capabilities underscores the importance of strategic partnerships in mitigating the threat posed by China's revisionist ambitions.

### 3.3 Do They Show Any Aggressive Intention Toward Us? The South China Sea, Debt-Trap Diplomacy, and China's Regional Influence

The first factor, concerning identity difference, and the second, concerning the disparity in offensive capabilities between



Australia and China, have already been established. Based on Rousseau's simple heuristic model, China poses a threat to Australia. However, the model leaves one remaining question (or factor) that determines the level of threat perception Australia holds toward China: aggressive intentions. Essentially, China's aggressive intentions are evident, particularly given its identity as a revisionist state. However, it should be noted that China frames its actions as defensive measures to protect its core interests and sovereignty (State Council of PRC, 2019). China often influences the geopolitical space of other countries under the guise of its national interests. This reflects its opposition to the liberal world order and U.S. hegemony while maximizing its own power to safeguard against the uncertainties of the international system.

While Australia perceives China's actions as aggressive, Chinese officials argue that their activities in the South China Sea and Pacific region are lawful and consistent with historical claims (Wang, 2022). The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), often criticized as 'debt-trap diplomacy', is portrayed by China as mutually beneficial infrastructure development (Pisciotta, 2023). These differing interpretations highlight the subjective nature of threat perception.

Although China has never directly attacked or threatened Australia's national security, Australia's concerns as a middle power and a status-quo state are dominated by China's influence in regions directly adjacent to Australia, particularly the South Pacific and the broader Indo-Pacific (Hegarty, 2015).

This analysis primarily relies on Australian government sources and Western perspectives, which may reflect inherent biases. The study could be strengthened by incorporating more Chinese primary sources and third-party analyses to provide a more balanced view.

One of China's most notorious aggressive actions is its unilateral claims in the South China Sea. China has acted aggressively by asserting its nine-dash line maritime claims, violating the sovereign and maritime rights of five Southeast Asian nations: Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Brunei (Cook, 2021). However, some scholars argue that other regional powers, including the United

States, have also conducted freedom of navigation operations that challenge coastal states' claims (Medcalf, 2016). While China's claims in the South China Sea do not directly involve Australia, and the geographical distance between Australia and the South China Sea is significant, China's actions challenge Australia's position and its support for the status-quo, particularly the rule-based order, and could destabilize the broader Indo-Pacific region (Cook, 2021).

It's worth noting that China's activities in the South China Sea could be interpreted as attempts to secure energy routes rather than outright expansionism (Hayton, 2014), though this doesn't negate Australia's security concerns.

A significant response from Australia in support of the status-quo in the South China Sea was its call for China and the Philippines to adhere to the 2016 UNCLOS ruling, which resulted from the Philippines' case against China's violation of its exclusive economic zone (EEZ) rights in the South China Sea (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2016). This case marked a turning point in the deterioration of political relations between China and Australia. Notably, Australia was the first non-littoral state to issue a statement on the South China Sea to the United Nations, as highlighted in the "14 issues poisoning China-Australia relations" outlined by Chinese officials during a media briefing in Canberra (Kearsley, Bagshaw, & Galloway, 2020).

Beyond the South China Sea, China has demonstrated aggressive intentions through its efforts to establish a military base in Vanuatu in 2018. This was perceived as an offensive move because, according to Dr. Malcolm Davis of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (Bilton, 2018), China's spending in Vanuatu was not solely for promoting tourism but rather for expanding commercial influence, which could translate into political influence and eventually military presence. However, Chinese officials have consistently denied plans for overseas military bases beyond Djibouti (Wang, 2022). This narrative is supported by China's development of a military base in Djibouti (Wroe, 2018a) and reports of potential military facilities in Sri Lanka and Pakistan (Wroe, 2018a), where China's economic influence is leveraged for strategic purposes. If a military



base were established in Vanuatu (Wroe, 2018b) or elsewhere in the Pacific, it could pave the way for further bases, undermining Australia's security.

From another perspective, China's growing regional influence has raised concerns about Australia's security. Some analyses suggest that China's tendency to provide loans without considering the recipient country's debt burden or repayment capacity creates vulnerabilities that could be exploited for political influence. This "debt-trap diplomacy" could force countries to comply with China's demands, such as granting access to strategic resources, locations, or even permitting the construction of military facilities (Himmer & Rod, 2022). However, recent studies show that many recipient countries successfully renegotiate BRI terms, challenging the 'debt-trap' narrative (Himmer & Rod, 2023). This approach has caused significant concern for Australia, as it allows China to expand its influence and interests in Pacific Island nations, potentially sidelining Australia's own influence and interests.

Several limitations should be acknowledged: (1) The heuristic model simplifies complex geopolitical dynamics; (2) Economic interdependence between Australia and China is not fully accounted for in threat assessment; and (3) The analysis focuses on government-level perceptions rather than public opinion or business sector views that might differ.

By operationalizing these three factors, it becomes clear why Australia has chosen to balance against China by joining AUKUS, significantly enhancing its military capabilities, particularly through cooperation on nuclear-powered submarines. Returning to Rousseau's heuristic model, the first question asks, "Do Australia and China have different identities?" The identity difference between Australia as a status-quo state supporting the U.S.-led world order and China as a revisionist state creates an initial perception of threat. This perception is further reinforced by the second question: "Does China have the capacity to harm us (Australia)?" The vast disparity in offensive capabilities between China and Australia means that China is more than capable of harming or even destroying Australia in the event of armed conflict. This significantly heightens Australia's

threat perception of China. Finally, the third question asks, "Does China have aggressive intentions toward us (Australia)?" China's aggressive actions, including its unilateral claims in the South China Sea, which disrupt regional stability and the status-quo, as well as its economic influence in Vanuatu and other Pacific nations, further amplify Australia's threat perception.

Thus, the affirmative answers to these three questions lead to a high level of threat perception by Australia toward China, compelling Australia to take significant measures to safeguard its security and interests, such as joining AUKUS in 2021. However, as noted in the limitations, this assessment doesn't account for potential mitigating factors like economic interdependence or diplomatic channels that could modulate threat perception over time.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Australia's participation in AUKUS marks a definitive shift from its historical hedging strategy, prioritizing security alignment with the U.S. over economic ties with China. This decision, rooted in Australia's heightened threat perception of China, reflects a strategic calculus that transcends immediate economic benefits. The convergence of three factors—China's revisionist identity, overwhelming military modernization, and assertive regional behavior—has rendered hedging untenable, compelling Australia to embrace a more confrontational posture.

The implications of this shift are profound. By joining AUKUS, Australia not only reinforces the U.S.-led order but also actively contributes to the militarization of the Indo-Pacific, potentially exacerbating security dilemmas. China's likely response—whether through further military buildup, economic coercion, or diplomatic isolation of Australia—could deepen regional bifurcation, pressuring smaller states to align with either bloc. For Australia, the long-term challenge lies in balancing its security commitments with the economic costs of estrangement from its largest trading partner.

Yet this study underscores a broader paradox: while AUKUS addresses Australia's immediate security concerns, it may undermine the very stability Canberra seeks to preserve.

The agreement's focus on nuclear submarines and advanced technologies risks provoking China without guaranteeing deterrence, particularly in gray-zone conflicts. Future research should examine whether Australia's gamble will stabilize the regional order or accelerate its fragmentation.

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