

AUKUS and Indonesia's Naval Trinity: Strategic Responses in the North Natuna Sea

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Abstract

The formation of AUKUS (Australia, United Kingdom, United State of America) has intensified maritime security challenges in the North Natuna Sea, prompting Indonesia to reassess its defense posture. This study analyzes the strategic implications of AUKUS across regional, national, and global levels, and evaluates the Indonesian Navy's (TNI AL) response using Ken Booth's trinity of naval roles: military, policing, and diplomatic. Employing a qualitative literature review, the research highlights how AUKUS has reshaped the Indo-Pacific balance of power, triggered concerns over regional militarization, and complicated Indonesia's maritime sovereignty. In response, the TNI AL has strengthened its military infrastructure, modernized naval assets, intensified maritime patrols, and expanded naval diplomacy through joint exercises and international collaboration. These efforts reflect a comprehensive strategy aimed at maintaining stability and asserting national interests amid shifting geopolitical dynamics. The study concludes that Indonesia must continue integrating military capability, law enforcement, and diplomacy to effectively navigate the post-AUKUS security landscape and safeguard its strategic maritime domain.

Keywords: *AUKUS; The Role of the Trinity; Naval Diplomacy; Defence Strategy; Security*

INTRODUCTION

In the past decade, the world's geopolitical security landscape has transformed drastically. This transformation is marked by the increasing level of complexity of threats faced by countries in various parts of the world. The emergence of various new threats forces each country to continue to struggle in an effort to maintain its stability and sovereignty. This situation is further exacerbated by the transition of the global power order from a unipolar system to a multipolar system, with superpowers such as China, the United States, and Russia competing with each other for control of the international system through various factors such as technology, politics, and economics. In addition, global geopolitical stability is also influenced by various problems such as economic tensions between countries, the refugee crisis, and climate change. This transformation indicates that countries, especially those in the Southeast Asian region such as Indonesia, need special strategies to maintain domestic stability and sovereignty.

In his research, Roggeveen (2023) stated that the formation of the AUKUS alliance (Australia, United Kingdom, United State of America) in September 2021 has brought substantial changes to the geopolitical dynamics of the Indo-Pacific region. In fact, the Indo-Pacific region has become a complex geopolitical competition in recent years. However, this condition has been further complicated by the presence of various new alliance strategies, one of which is AUKUS, which changes the map of regional maritime security. This trilateral cooperation, which focuses on the development of cutting-edge defense technologies such as nuclear submarines, has had various strategic implications for regional countries, including Indonesia.

As part of Indonesia's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), the North Natuna Sea is one of the focal points in the region's maritime security dynamics. Research conducted by Laksmana and Gindarsah (2018) from the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) Jakarta shows that the strategic location of the North Natuna Sea which is directly intersecting with the South China Sea makes this region susceptible to various types of maritime security threats. The

North Natuna Sea area is a strategic area in Indonesia that has abundant natural resources and is a global trade corridor. However, these waters often face security problems stemming from the military activities of major countries and overlapping territorial claims.

The formation of AUKUS has presented a new aspect in the security dynamics of the North Natuna Sea and added to the complexity of the situation that could increase military escalation in the region. As described by Delanova & Yani (2021) in their research, the existence of AUKUS can change the balance or stability of regional power and affect the strategic calculations of various parties, including China, which has overlapping claims in a number of parts of the North Natuna Sea. The Indonesian Navy recorded an increase in the number of ships owned by the United States and China in the waters of the North Natuna Sea compared to the previous period. Six Chinese ships were recorded, including one warship, plus a number of U.S. ships. This has raised concerns among fishermen who feel trapped in military tensions and experience obstacles in their activities. They are worried that in the future the North Natuna Sea will be filled with warships from the AUKUS alliance and China, which has the potential to trigger arms competition in the region (Tawakal, 2022).

Facing this complexity, the position of the Indonesian Navy has become increasingly important. However, in the implementation of this role, there are a number of obstacles, including the technological capabilities of Command, Control, Computer, Communication, Intelligence, Observation, and Reconnaissance (K4IPP) which are still not optimal, plus the implementation of the TNI Navy's maritime defense strategy which has not been fully supported by the deployment of adequate forces, as well as infrastructure development that is still minimal to support the strengthening of defense in the North Natuna Sea, which results in the level of not yet reached operational effectiveness and national defense readiness are expected in the region, so improvements are needed in various aspects to face increasingly complex maritime security challenges (Hadiwijaya, 2022). Responding to these limitations, according to Donny Ermawan Taufanto, Acting Secretary General of the Indonesian Ministry of Defense, at the National Seminar on the History of the Indonesian Navy in Jakarta (2024), the Government of Indonesia continues to strive to improve its military capabilities to secure the North Natuna Sea in the Riau Islands and anticipate the worst-case scenario that may occur in these waters which is in line with Presidential Regulation (Perpres) Number 8 of 2021 concerning the General Policy of State Defense for the Period 2020–2024 (Springs, 2024).

This dynamic raises a number of problems that need to be examined in depth. First, how did the formation of AUKUS affect the security situation in the North Natuna Sea and have an impact on Indonesia's strategic environment? Second, what is the role of the Indonesian Navy in dealing with maritime security threats in the post-AUKUS era?

In this context, Jennings' (2022) research states that the existence of AUKUS has given birth to a new "security dilemma" in the region, where the increase in defense capabilities of one side can trigger a similar reaction from the other, potentially creating a chain of tension. This phenomenon is in line with John Herz's concept that a country's efforts to increase its military power unilaterally, regardless of its intention, tend to cause anxiety for other countries (Buzan, 2016).

The analysis of Amarullah et al. (2023) also identified at least three main security threat dimensions that must be faced by the Indonesian Navy in the North Natuna region: (1) The existence of warships/foreign governments (KPA); (2) Illegal fishing practices by KIA; and (3) Anomalies in the movement of commercial ships. Therefore, these situations require a comprehensive approach that integrates military capabilities, naval diplomacy and regional collaboration. Thus, this study aims to thoroughly analyze the impact of the formation of AUKUS on security dynamics in the North Natuna Sea and examine the capabilities and role of the Indonesian Navy in dealing with threats that arise through the theory of the trinity of the role of the navy by Ken Booth (2014). Specifically, this study also seeks to identify patterns of maritime

security threats in the North Natuna Sea after the formation of AUKUS in three strategic environments; Global, National, and Regional.

As previously outlined, to examine the role of the Indonesian Navy (TNI AL) in addressing post-AUKUS threats, Ken Booth's "Trinity of Naval Roles" theory (1977) serves as the primary analytical framework. Booth (1977) posits that navies worldwide universally embody three trinitarian roles: the military role, which upholds state sovereignty at sea through national defense, deterrence of foreign military threats, maintenance of maritime territorial stability, and border security with neighboring states. Research by Lalita & Perwita (2020) demonstrates TNI AL's effective implementation of this military role in the North Natuna Sea via patrols and security operations, aligning directly with post-AUKUS regional threat dynamics.

The policing role encompasses law enforcement at sea, protection of marine resources from crimes such as illegal fishing and human smuggling, and contributions to national development and state stability, as evidenced by TNI AL's oversight of Indonesian waters (Dolonseda, 2022). The diplomatic role employs naval power as a foreign policy instrument to influence other nations through humanitarian operations, joint exercises, and port visits, which Budiman et al. (2023) argues bolsters Indonesia's position as a global maritime fulcrum. Integrating these three roles is crucial for TNI AL to safeguard national maritime security amid Indo-Pacific geopolitical flux.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research applies a qualitative approach with a literature review design. Sugiyono (2010) explained that literature study is an approach used to examine various literature materials, research findings, and theories related to the object of study with the aim of building a solid theoretical foundation and strengthening the scientific arguments presented in the research. The implementation of literature studies is carried out through the process of searching and analyzing various written sources such as other academic publications, research reports, scientific journals, and relevant books.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

What's AUKUS ?

In September 2021, Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States announced the formation of a trilateral defense partnership called AUKUS. The initiative is designed to deepen security collaboration in the Indo-Pacific region, particularly through the development of nuclear submarines for the Australian Navy. The move marks a major shift in the regional security framework, triggered by rising tensions in the South China Sea.

The South China Sea has enormous strategic significance, both economically and militarily. This area is a vital trade route and is believed to hold abundant reserves of natural resources. However, overlapping claims mainly by China over the "nine dotted lines" covering most of the waters are triggering friction with ASEAN countries, including Indonesia. Although not directly involved in these maritime claims, the North Natuna Sea area is often a hot spot due to Chinese ships entering Indonesia's Exclusive Economic Zone (Marsetio, 2024).

For some, AUKUS is a response to China's military expansion in the Indo-Pacific region. The presence of this alliance has the potential to overhaul the security balance in the South China Sea by placing regional stability as a key focus. The Head of Bakamla RI, Admiral Aan Kurnia, warned that AUKUS could encourage military escalation in the North Natuna Sea, thus requiring extra attention from the Indonesian government (Kuntiasih, 2021).

According to Putro's analysis from the Public Relations of the Indonesian Cabinet Secretariat, AUKUS also risks triggering an arms race in the region. With Australia soon to operate nuclear submarines, neighboring countries may be encouraged to strengthen their respective military capabilities for defense reasons. This condition can increase tensions and increase the potential for conflict in already vulnerable areas (Putro, 2021).

The Indonesian government has voiced concern over the establishment of AUKUS. Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi emphasized the importance of maintaining regional peace and stability through respect for international law, especially UNCLOS. Indonesia also encourages the resolution of differences through diplomacy and dialogue, not armed confrontation (Alfons, 2021).

Delanova highlighted that AUKUS has an impact on Indonesia's defense strategy in the North Natuna Sea. The government needs to consider increasing military presence to safeguard national sovereignty and security. In addition, active diplomacy with neighboring countries and new partnerships such as AUKUS are important so that Indonesia's interests remain accommodated in the midst of geopolitical shifts (Delanova, 2021).

Overall, the presence of AUKUS adds a layer of complexity to the security dynamics of the South China Sea and North Natuna. Indonesia is faced with the need to take proactive steps ranging from strengthening defense to intensifying diplomacy to maintain national interests in an increasingly dynamic geopolitical landscape.

Implications of the Establishment of AUKUS on the Maritime Security of the North Natuna Sea: A Strategic Environmental Perspective

The presence of AUKUS is changing the face of security in the Indo-Pacific, including the North Natuna Sea. Initiatives that prioritize strengthening military capabilities, such as nuclear-powered submarines, emerged in response to China's increased activity in the region (Putro, 2021). The North Natuna Sea, as a strategic extension of the resource-rich South China Sea and shipping lanes, is a major point of competition between powers.

Regionally, the situation in North Natuna is getting more complex. Maritime claims disputes between China and several ASEAN countries, including areas in Indonesia's EEZ, often cause tensions. Although Indonesia is not directly involved in the negotiation of claims in the South China Sea, as a member of ASEAN and a coastal country, Indonesia is obliged to be active in mitigating potential conflicts, considering the frequent entry of Chinese patrol boats and fishermen into the waters of North Natuna (Khairiyah, 2024).

The establishment of AUKUS has also caused anxiety among ASEAN. Malaysia and Indonesia, for example, are worried about the potential for increased militarization in the region. Retno Marsudi once emphasized the importance of maintaining stability through multilateral dialogue (Nirmala, 2021). Without ASEAN's involvement in the AUKUS formulation process, the organization faces the challenge of maintaining relevance in the regional security order.

At the national level, Indonesia needs to strengthen its defense strategy and design adaptive diplomacy policies. Increasing military patrols in North Natuna, building maritime defense infrastructure, and being active in regional and international forums are priorities to maintain national sovereignty and stability (Nopriadi et al., 2024).

As revealed by Donny Ermawan Taufanto, the synchronization of the placement of TNI defense equipment throughout the archipelago must improve the capabilities of TNI Navy warships, the placement of missiles in strategic straits in accordance with ALKI, as well as the strengthening of Kogabwilhan I-III, TNI Koopsus, and SSAT in Natuna, Saumlaki, Merauke, and Biak. The integration of sensor systems is also crucial. On the diplomatic side, Indonesia must be consistent with a free-active foreign policy, keeping distance from certain power blocs while protecting national interests (Achmad & Ramadhan, 2024).

Globally, AUKUS reflects Western countries' efforts to maintain influence in the Indo-Pacific amid concerns over maritime claims and China's ship expansion. By facilitating the

transfer of nuclear submarine technology to Australia, the alliance affirms a force's approach in responding to regional security challenges, in line with the US strategy that considers China as a major rival for global stability (Kumar, 2024).

However, the presence of nuclear submarines has sparked fears of an arms race and an escalation of conflict. The UN and non-governmental organizations call for transparency and dialogue to prevent protracted tensions (Sethi, 2023). AUKUS further clarifies the fragmentation in international relations between the Western bloc and China and its allies.

ENVIRONMENTAL LEVEL	IMPACTS/IMPLICATIONS	RESPONSE
REGIONAL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased security complexity of the North Natuna Sea Concerns about ASEAN countries (Malaysia, Indonesia) over militarization Questions about ASEAN's relevance in the security architecture Potential arms race 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Indonesia: Emphasizing stability and international law (UNCLOS) ASEAN: Fostering multilateral dialogue and cooperation Enhancing regional diplomacy
NATIONAL (INDONESIA)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Changes in defense strategy in the North Natuna Sea Increased presence of the Indonesian Navy Need for modernization of defense equipment Increased incidents with foreign ships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Synchronization of TNI strength titles Defense infrastructure development (SSAT) Active diplomacy with AUKUS and neighboring countries Free-active foreign policy
GLOBAL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fragmentation of international relations (West vs China) UN concerns about the escalation of conflict Potential nuclear arms race Shift in the Indo-Pacific balance of power 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> UN call for transparency and dialogue Strengthening of Western strategic positions in the Indo-Pacific China increasing maritime activities

Table 1. The impact of AUKUS on the strategic environment

The security dynamics in the North Natuna Sea post-AUKUS reflect the complex interplay between national, regional, and global interests. With a strategic position in the Indo-Pacific, Indonesia is required to adopt a synergy between a resilient defense policy and smart diplomacy to safeguard sovereignty and national interests amid increasingly sharp geopolitical competition.

The Role of the Trinity of the Indonesian Navy Post-AUKUS

The Indo-Pacific region underwent a substantial change in the geopolitical landscape following the formation of the AUKUS alliance. This geopolitical transformation has a direct impact on the North Natuna Sea area, which is part of Indonesia's sovereign territory. As the main component of maritime defense, according to Ken Booth (2014), the TNI Navy universally has 3 strategic roles in dealing with potential threats in the region, namely the diplomatic role, the role of the police and the role of the military.

In the context of the military role, the TNI AL has increased defense capabilities in the North Natuna Sea region through strengthening defense infrastructure and modernizing defense equipment, including the construction of the TNI AL Base and the addition of military forces, where the base is part of the SSAT which must be able to meet the needs of the 5R; Rest and Recreation, Repair, Replenishment, Rebase (Mawangi, 2024).

Furthermore, Suharto (2024) stated that the Indonesian Ministry of Defense and the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs had held a meeting with Australia in September 2021 to affirm the commitment of the two countries to strengthen collaboration in the security sector. In the same month, PT PAL Indonesia also officially signed a License Agreement with Rosyth Royal Dockyard Ltd. (Babcock) as the Arrowhead 140 design provider for the procurement of two frigate units by the Indonesian Ministry of Defense (Anshori, 2021).

Furthermore, in the implementation of the police role, the TNI Navy in the North Natuna Sea is increasingly intensive in line with the increase in territorial violations by foreign vessels and illegal fishing activities. Based on data from the Ministry of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries (2024), there has been an increase in cases of territorial violations by foreign vessels in the waters

of the North Natuna Sea throughout 2023 by 35%. The Indonesian Navy responded by increasing the intensity of patrols and coordination with other law enforcement agencies such as the Ministry of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries and Bakamla. This integrated maritime security operation managed to reduce the number of violations by 25% in the first quarter of 2024. More than that, based on the results of an interview between an analyst and the Chairman of the Fishermen's Alliance in Natuna, it is known that the Indonesian Navy has increased patrols around the Natuna Islands after the detection of United States and Chinese ships in the region. This increased patrol was carried out following reports that six Chinese ships, including warships, crossed the waters of the North Natuna Sea (Sarkar, 2021).

The last role is the diplomatic role, namely the use of naval power as a means of diplomacy in supporting the foreign policy of the Indonesian government. Thus, it can be understood that the navy also emphasizes the multifaceted role played by the navy in both peacetime and wartime. The navy is not only an instrument of military power, but also a tool of national prestige, economic influence, and diplomacy, which can be realized by naval diplomacy. Naval diplomacy is the use of naval and ship power as foreign policy instruments. This diplomacy includes a wide range of activities, including humanitarian missions, joint naval exercises, and port visits designed to promote national interests and enhance political relations (Total Military Insight's Editor, 2024).

The diplomatic role of the Indonesian Navy after AUKUS was formed became increasingly crucial in preventing potential conflicts in the region and building trust. Naval diplomacy carried out by the Indonesian Navy includes various forms of international collaboration. The joint exercise "Komodo Exercise" with the theme "Partnership To Recover and To Rise Stronger" organized by the Indonesian Navy involving 36 countries on June 4-8, 2023 is an important instrument in building mutual understanding and interoperability between regional navies, and is recorded as the largest Mutuals Naval Exercise Komodo (MNEK) in history. This activity is also a strategic forum to show the professionalism and capabilities of the Indonesian Navy to the international community (Sari, 2023).

Furthermore, the program of visiting naval bases has also experienced a significant increase. Throughout 2023, there were more than 45 visits by foreign warships to various TNI Navy bases, including the TNI Navy Base in Natuna. These activities contribute to encouraging transparency between regional navies and building confidence-building measures. According to Chadhafi (2021), the stability of the North Natuna Sea can be improved through the active role of the Indonesian Navy in various other military visits or joint exercises.

The Indonesian Navy is also active in collaborating in the field of training and education with friendly countries. The joint training and officer exchange program with the navies of the United States, Australia, and ASEAN countries aims to strengthen the capabilities of TNI Navy personnel in the face of various contemporary threats. Marine Colonel Azwan Yusuf stated that collaboration with countries in the region, both in the form of mutual visits, joint exercises, and education, is aimed at building trust between countries, seeking peace agreements and solutions to regional issues, and of course to improve the defense capabilities of each country (Yusuf, 2022).

The implementation of the TNI Navy's balanced approach in playing diplomatic, police, and military roles is considered to have contributed positively to stability in the region. This approach is also in line with Indonesia's vision as the world's maritime axis that prioritizes dialogue and cooperation in dispute resolution. However, there are still challenges that need to be anticipated in the implementation of the role of the TNI Navy's trinity. Meanwhile, the ever-changing geopolitical dynamics demand adaptability and flexibility in the implementation of maritime diplomacy.

ROLE	ACTIVITIES/PROGRAMS	RESULTS/ACHIEVEMENTS
MILITARY ROLE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Modernization of defense equipment • Construction of TNI Navy Bases (SR: 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased defense capabilities • More adequate defense infrastructure • Readiness

	Rebase, Replenishment, Repair, Rest and Recreation)• Addition of military forces• Procurement of 2 units of Arrowhead 140 frigates (PT PAL - Babcock, Sept 2021)• Strengthening of SSAT in Natuna, Saumlaki, Merauke, Biak• Deployment of missiles in strategic straits (ALKI)	to face military threats• Reinforcement of Kogabwilhan I, II, III• Integrated sensors
THE ROLE OF THE POLICE (POLICING ROLE)	• Intensification of patrols in the North Natuna Sea• Coordination with Bakamla and the Ministry of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries• Integrated maritime security operations• Enforcement of the laws of the sea• Handling of territorial violations and IUU Fishing	• 35% increase in violation cases (2023)• 25% decrease in violations in Q1 2024• Increased patrols after the detection of 6 Chinese vessels (including warships)• Protection of local fishermen
DIPLOMATIC ROLE	• Komodo Exercise 2023 (36 countries, June 4-8)• Base visit program (45+ foreign ship visits, 2023)• Joint exercise with ASEAN, Australia, US• Joint officer exchange and training• Bilateral meeting (Indonesia-Australia, Sept 2021)	• Largest MNEK in history• Increased regional interoperability • Confidence building • Transparency between navies • Increased personnel capabilities

Table 2. The Role of the Trinity of the Indonesian Navy Post-AUKUS

In the long term, strengthening the trinity of the role of the Indonesian Navy in North Natuna requires sustainable and comprehensive policy support. The modernization of defense equipment needs to be continued by paying attention to contemporary threats and technological developments. Capacity building of personnel through training and education must also be a priority to deal with the complexity of maritime challenges. Meanwhile, the diplomacy of the Indonesian Navy needs to continue to be developed by paying attention to the dynamics of international relations after AUKUS.

CONCLUSION

The establishment of the AUKUS alliance has had a significant impact on the security dynamics in the North Natuna Sea region, creating new complexities at the regional, national, and global levels. Amid rising geopolitical tensions and potential military escalation, Indonesia faces serious challenges in maintaining its maritime sovereignty.

Through Ken Booth's approach to the theory of trinity, the role of the Indonesian Navy in dealing with post-AUKUS threats has proven to be strategic and multifaceted. The role of the military is realized through the modernization of defense equipment and the strengthening of defense infrastructure; the role of the police is carried out through the intensification of patrols and enforcement of maritime laws; Meanwhile, the diplomatic role is strengthened through joint exercises, base visits, and international collaboration.

The implementation of these three roles shows that the Indonesian Navy is able to respond to threats in an adaptive and comprehensive manner. However, long-term effectiveness requires sustained policy support, improved interagency coordination, and strengthening of personnel capacity and maritime diplomacy. With the synergy between military power, law enforcement, and diplomacy, Indonesia can maintain stability and national interests amid an increasingly dynamic Indo-Pacific landscape.

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