



PICTURE INTERPRETATION IN CONTEXT OF A.P.I AND POWER: AUSTRALIA, CHINA, US INTERACTION IN INDO-PACIFIC REGION

Ari Harmoko & Muhammad Arkan

Defense Diplomacy Study Program, Faculty of Defense Strategy,

The Republic of Indonesia Defense University

aree.pakdhe@gmail.com

Abstract

In recent times, the Indo-Pacific region is one of the most dynamic with newly rising and developing powers. Rivalry within the region, which has stemmed from border issues to cultural issues within nations, sets the region to be one of the most volatile one. Its dynamicness along with its abundance of resources has caught the attention of major powers to gain influence in the region, including People's Republic of China, Australia, and The United States. In depicting tense political situations, satirical cartoons are one of the most popular media to be used in publications. This paper conducts a semiotic analysis towards one of these cartoons which can be interpreted to depict the recent developments regarding major power rivalry within the region. Relating to the concept of balance of power, the analysis will be used to further explain the actions and history of interactions between these powers in the region along with their future motivations.

Keywords: *United States, China, Australia, Foreign Policy , Rivalry*



1. Introduction

In this picture (drawn by cartoonist Liu Rui in 2020), we can see three separate objects interacting with each other. We can see a kangaroo being puppeteered to fight a panda by a hand with a two-layered outfit, a suit often worn by government officials and executives. On top of the suit, the flag of the United States of America is seen embedded. The hand is seen puppeteering a kangaroo with boxing gloves and shorts, holding and making the kangaroo ready to fight. Finally, in front of the kangaroo is a panda, standing still while looking at the hand that is puppeteering the kangaroo. The panda on the left side of the caricature is a typical representation of the People's Republic of China. As the panda is the national animal of the PRC and endemic to Chinese territory. In fact, historically the PRC has conducted a 'Panda Diplomacy' that uses the panda to promote their nation. (Lin, 2009)

In front of the panda is another animal, a kangaroo with boxing gloves and shorts. The kangaroo with the boxing gloves is a typical representation of Australia. The same as the panda that represents the PRC, the kangaroo was a national animal of Australia and endemic to Australian territory. The kangaroo is a unique wildlife that can only be found in Australia. Thereupon, the kangaroo is used as the national icon to distinguish themselves from other countries. The kangaroo icon is used as part of the coat of arms and in various logos and mascots at international



sporting events. The kangaroo is seen with boxing gloves and shorts, this might signify how the kangaroo is ready to fight the opponent in front of him. But frequently, kangaroo was associated with boxing. This idea and association originated from kangaroo defensive's behaviour, in which a kangaroo will use its smaller forelegs to hold its attacker in place, while also using its larger limbs to try attack, claw, and kick the opponent. This defensive stance that kangaroo take appears like a boxing stance to its opponents and spectators alike.

On top the kangaroo, a hand puppeteering the kangaroo is seen holding a vertical and horizontal bars that was used to control it. This hand is depicted wearing two-layered outfit, a suit often being worn by government officials and executive. The United States of America flag is seen embedded to the sleeves, signifying that the hand that is puppeteering the kangaroo is the United States of America government from behind the scene.

In the context of International relations system of **Actors, Processes, and Issues**, the Actors displayed in this picture are a **panda**, representing the **People's Republic of China**, a **kangaroo with boxing gloves**, that represents **Australia**, and a **hand that's puppeteering the kangaroo**, which represents the **United States of America**. The issue that is depicted in this caricature is the **conflict in Indo-Pacific Region**. The People's Republic of China is seeking to claim territory in South China Sea, which is currently a natural zone bordering multiple countries in South East Asia such as Malaysia, Taiwan, Philippines, Japan, and Vietnam. People's Republic of China action cause conflict between these South East Asia countries, as if PRC succeed in taking South China Sea as their territory, PRC would gain a strategic territory and strip other countries of said territory for trading and military route.

This sudden change on the balance of power would make situation in South East Asia unstable and if left unchecked, would rise conflicts in those parts. The conflict



would make trading and investors in South East Asia harder to do and would hindered multiple interest on those region, and in this case the interest of United States of America. But with the public perception of war, the United States of America can't afford to directly intervene in this conflict. As the nearest major western power near South East Asia, the United States of America would then make an arrangement and alliance with Australia to deal with this conflict. This paper will further describe actors, processes, and Issues involved in higher detail.

2. Conceptual Framework

This paper will analyze the issue of Actors in Indo-pacific region using the basic concept of Actors, Processes, and Issues (API) which is a basic element in international relation. Identifying actors will give a clearer picture and deeper understanding in analyzing the events of international relation. In this concept, Actors are those states, or in some cases non-state, which are involved in a certain event or issue. The processes are the means which these actors use to deal with certain issue, such as using military, diplomacy, or economy. Meanwhile issues are the problems themselves which requires to be processed by Actors, or acts from certain actors which caused issue towards other actors therefore generating conflict.

Furthermore, these actors, processes, and issues are to be related to the concept of power, to see how and why these nations committed such actions, and how does these actions increase or decrease the power of a certain nation. Power itself can come in several form, and is not limited to the traditional concept of military strenght of an individual nation. The concept of power can be measured from other indicators, such as the economic capabilities of a nation, along with how much influence a nation has towards others. In this case, the theory of balance of power (Burchill & Linklater, 2013) will be used to analyze the issues regarding US, Australia, and China in their interests within Indo-Pacific region.



3. Discussion

3.1 Region and Actors

3.1.1 Indo-Pacific Region

Indo-Pacific, or also known with the name of Indo-West Pacific or Indo-Pacific Asia, is a biogeographic region in Earth's Sea that is comprised of the tropical waters of the Indian Ocean, the western, and central Pacific Ocean. The Indo-Pacific connects the Pacific Ocean with the general area of Indonesia, hence the name of Indo-Pacific. This term is used academically in oceanography and geopolitics. Since 2010's the Indo-Pacific has become a 'symbiotic link' between Australia, India, Japan, and the United States with the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue. (Thu, 2018)

On the centre of Indo-Pacific region, the South China Sea was one of the most strategic area. The South China Sea is a natural ground that has a tremendous importance for economic and geostrategic. One third of maritime shipping passed through the South China Sea, with estimated value of US\$ 3 Trillion in trade each year. Other than its strategic route, the South China Sea contains huge oil and natural gas reserves and also lucrative fisheries for food security in Southeast Asia. The South China Sea are bordered by multiple states and countries. These states include; People's Republic of China, the Republic of China or also known as Taiwan, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia, and Vietnam.

3.1.2 People's Republic of China

The PRC was formed in 1949 after the Chinese Communist Party emerged victorious in the long civil war against the Chinese nationalist party. As a communist nation, it is naturally aligned towards the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc. This alignment means also natural rivalry with the western nations. In 1950, China was involved directly in war with the US-led United Nations forces defending South Korea, assisting The North in retaking back grounds lost to the Southern Forces.



Furthermore, during the Vietnam War, The Chinese actively assists The North Vietnamese by supplying weapons and sending military advisors to train the North Vietnamese Army to fight The Southern forces including The United States and Australians which were involved.

However starting from the late 50s, China's relationship with The Soviet Union deteriorated due to differences in how they implement and interpret marxism, further escalated relating to Khrushchev's inaction towards US recon aircrafts flying over Soviet territories. Despite both China and Soviets supporting North Vietnam during The Vietnam War, Vietnam was more aligned to The Soviets, while Cambodia and their Khmer rouge was supported more by The Chinese. Therefore after Vietnam war China themselves invaded Vietnam. On the other hand the split between Soviets and China allowed opportunity for The US to start a closer diplomatic relation with China, with trade agreements during The US's Nixon Administration involving technological exchange. (Liu, 2021)

Recently, China has been one of the most prominent rising power, both in economic and military. Since the 2010s, Chinese products has been exported all over the world and even western powers took advantage of considerably cheap chinese labour and production costs by producing their products in China. Chinese brands are considerably as popular as western ones these days especially in third world nations which generally has consumers with less buying capabilities. Their rising power coupled with their assertion of sovereignty towards Taiwan and South China Sea regions, led The US and their allies to constantly take precaution towards China.

3.1.3 Australia



First established as a British colony in the late 18th Century, Australia grows to be a major western-aligned nation, resided predominantly by European descendants, thus giving their identity as a western-nation in the eastern hemisphere. Being a commonwealth nation, it is only natural that their relation towards The Great Britain is kept close. Australia has supported Britain during the major wars such as both world wars, and during the Malaya Emergency up to 1965. However due to their geographical location, Australia eventually realise that they cannot always rely nor afford to support Britain at all costs. Eventually they thrive to become more independent and tried to find more regionally beneficial relations.

Eversince countering the threat of Japan's expansion during the second world war, Australia and The US has maintained a close cooperation. They fought side-by-side in driving Japan out of the territories they occupied starting from New Guinea campaigns all the way to The Liberation of The Netherlands East Indies. With Britain being mostly occupied in the European Theatre of the war, their relations with The United States only becomes closer, and Australia thus realised how The US might make a better partner which they can rely on in terms of protecting their territories and interests in The Indo-Pacific region compared to Britain. This cooperation escalated to establishing ANZUS treaty during The early cold-war era, a defence alliance between Australia, New Zealand, and The US. Following this treaty Australia and NZ eventually participated in The Vietnam War along with the US.

Towards China, Australia has a history of negative sentiments towards The Chinese. Since the gold-rush era starting from the mid-19th century, Australians have been having disputes with Chinese immigrants coming to Australia. A lot of Chinese people got attracted to come to Australia during the gold rush period in order to start a life and to have chance to be more economically established in a rather promising nation. In Australia Chinese people tend to be willing to work with



considerably below-standard payments and are willing to work more hours than regular Australian citizens. This led them to receive resentments from white Australian workers, eventually leading to riots and the formation of “White Australia Policy” in early 20th century which is aimed at filtering non-caucasian immigrants to Australia. Their participant within Second World War and Vietnam wars too increased anti-asian sentiments even further.

Even though white australia policy was eventually abolished under Whitlam government in the 70s, The PRC can still be determined as a potential threat towards regional stability in Indo-Pacific and South China Sea, which will likely affect Australia negatively. For this reason, Australia has always participated in settling conflicts within the South East Asia region, starting from participating in settling agreements between Indonesia and Netherlands during Indonesia’s revolutionary war (Soedarman et al., 2020). Malaya Insurgency and Vietnam war, all the way to the East Timor Crisis in the 1990s.

3.1.4 United States of America

The direct involvement of The US in the indo-pacific region leads back to the mid-19th century, when The US was involved in opium wars in China. However, the US showed their power in the region through the use of ‘Gunboat Diplomacy’ towards the then-self isolating-Japan starting in 1853. The success of The US navy in opening Japan’s ports leads to the eventual start of Meiji restoration period and modernisation of Japan. Later on The US was involved in silencing the boxer rebellion in China, and also capturing The Philippines from The Spanish thus establishing them as a US colony and a mainstay power in The South East Asia region. (Kolakowski, 2018)

During the start of second world war in 1937, The US supported The Chinese nationalist party in the war agianst Japan, sending personel, weapons, and



equipment even before The US officially entered the war in December 1941. However, civil war between Chinese Nationalist Party and the Communist party broke out right after The end of the second world war. During this period The US continued to support The Chinese Nationalist Party in their war against the communists. The failure of the Nationalists to fight off the communists results to their eventual evacuation out of mainland China to the Island of Taiwan, which The US still recognise as an independent nation separate from China despite China's insistence of it being a part of People's Republic of China.

As the cold war goes, the US involvement in Korean War which had direct military confrontataion with The Chinese along with their later involvement in Vietnam war increases the tension with The People's republic of China. However at the same time, the detoriating relation between PRC and Soviet Union gives the US an opportunity to establish more friendly diplomatic relations towards China, such as the start of Ping-pong diplomcy during the Nixon Administration which opens diplomatic relations towards The PRC (Liu, 2021). However the recent increase of Chinese economy and buildup of their military power, which includes military provocations¹ in regions such as Taiwan and South China sea led The US to stay on their guards towards China. These provocations worry The US and their allies that it might lead to further instability, which lead the US to increase military presence in the region such as near Japan and Australia.

Tensions within US and China further escalated as since 2018, The United States and China have been having the so-called 'trade war' with one another. This 'trade war' started as United States feels as the People's Republic of China doesn't respect the idea of intellectual property. The United States believes that a lot of China

¹ Provocations such as crossing air and naval borders without permission, or mining in other nation's exclusive economic zone.



product violate the intellectual property from their market and product. The United States then give sanction to the PRC for these violations that would result in the PRC getting fine for these violations. The PRC and the United States would then be giving each other sanction and fine each other for things they considered violations on their market. These sanctions and fine would then result in rivalry between the two in trade and market and constructing the 'trade war' the two have. (Hickey, 2020)

3.2 Issues

Since 2013, China has tried to acquire part of the South China Sea. China tried to claim the territories within the 'Nine-Dashed Line'. (Qiang & Zongqiang, 2015) In 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration backed the Philippines in initiating arbitration proceedings against China. There was no evidence of the territories within the 'Nine-Dashed Lines' that PRC has historically exercised exclusive control over the water and natural resources. Therefore, China claim has no legal basis to claim the territory with historic rights. Even then, the PRC hasn't stop trying to claim and asserting dominance in South China Sea. In March 2020, approximately 220 Chinese military vessels were spotted inside the disputed area. This action rose concern for its neighbouring countries, as they know they can't let the PRC do as they may but a full confrontation with the PRC would result on their lost. This repeated action from the PRC has been continuing and making the Indo-Pacific region close to unstable. As if the PRC do as they may and get hold of the South Chinese Sea, countries such as Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Taiwan, and the Philippines would have lost the strategic route of South Chinese Sea for their trading route. This arising conflict between the Indo-Pacific countries would also makes the investors loose interest in investing themselves to these countries. As investors wouldn't be confident to invest their assets in a region that might get into conflict



and hindered their plan and interest. And when the Indo-Pacific countries gets into conflict, it can also be assured that Australia, as one of the countries that resides near Indo-Pacific, would be affected by it. (Fangyin, July 2016)

By having the People's Republic of China the South Chinese Sea, the PRC would then get an upper hand in economic trading as the South Chinese Sea is one of the most strategic trade route. As by having the South Chinese Sea a territory of the PRC, other countries would then need the approval from the PRC to have their maritime shipping be passed through there. And with the 'trade war' that the PRC and the United States have, there is a slim chance that the PRC would let United States maritime shipping pass through the South Chinese Sea route, at least not without giving anything in return. There would also be a slimmer to no chance that the PRC would let these maritime shipments be escorted by military navy for its security, something that would make the United States feel unsafe for their shipment as there's always a chance for attacks from pirates or any kind of threat.

3.3 Processes

As stated before, the People's Republic of China action in acquiring the South Chinese Sea would affect multiple countries negatively. Therefore, the United States then make an agreement with Australia to keep the PRC in check. As the closest and biggest country near the region, Australia was tasked to make a defensive stance and keep the PRC in check from making any more conflicting actions. In 2021, Australia makes an agreement with the United States and the United Kingdom to make a security partnership, commonly dubbed as AUKUS agreement. In the agreement, Australia bought a nuclear submarine from the United States and United Kingdom as a deterrent weapon for the PRC. Although some other nations have opinion that Australia having a nuclear submarine itself would make another problem. As before Australia bought the nuclear submarine, there was no



weaponized nuclear in the Indo-Pacific region. By having a active nuclear submarine, some have stated that it increases the tension towards the US-China situation. Like the caricature above, from one standpoint Australia looks like a puppet that was being used by the United States, who doesn't want to get their hands dirty in restraining the PRC from the South China Sea. As it is also the United States' interest to hinder the PRC from gaining more power. From a more blunt perspective, when one nation can utilise other nation to pursue their interests then it would be beneficial, as they do not have to spare lives of their citizens or soldiers. However in this context, it is also in the interest of Australia to prevent The PRC from gaining power and committing actions which can destabilise the region. Australia could otherwise choose to remain silent and opt out of the conflict instead of taking sides.

From another standpoint, some have criticized Australia sudden agreement with the United States and the United Kingdom. Before Australia bought the nuclear submarine from the United States, Australia have made a trade negotiation with France for a nuclear submarine and other military assets. Which this negotiation was abruptly cancelled by the Australia as they favour the negotiation with the United States more. This leaves bitterness in France mouth, as they feel with this sudden new security partnership between Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom, the alliance of NATO, which the United States, the United Kingdom, and France is part of, are being left out and neglected. Although the status of AUKUS as a 'security partnership' is not as high and demanding as NATO as a military alliance, France feel as if this security partnership would be a start for a new military alliance. But this action by the United States and the United Kingdom is merely because the rising tension in Indo-Pacific region is seen as a conflict that is more urgent to face,



as currently the region which NATO operates, the Europe, holds no conflicts which may affect their interests as of now.

Aside from France, New Zealand also voiced their disapproval. Earlier during the cold war era, New Zealand's role in ANZUS treaty was considerably reduced due to their disapproval of using nuclear weapons, which includes their disallowance of nuclear submarines within their territories. South East Asian countries including Indonesia also voiced their concern that the establishment of AUKUS can lead to further conflict, as display of power and aggression can lead to more counter aggression, which culminates in an open conflict, attributed to the analogy of "Fighting fire with fire". An open conflict between Australia and The PRC is likely to affect The South East Asian nations, which are located in-between the two powers geographically.

3.4 Balance of Power

Despite the criticisms and concerns from other nations, The US, Australia, and UK has a legitimate reason regarding why establishing AUKUS might be beneficial in contributing to the stability of Indo-Pacific region. In-line with the concept of balance of power, when a nation is seen to rise in power, other nations would try to compete with their power by measures such as building military power, and also establishing alliances to other nations which hopefully can keep them as powerful if not more than said rising nation. During the event of the second world war, Germany and Japan committed a massive buildup of their military forces and industry. These buildups were largely unopposed, and at that time there were no powers that are actively opposing Japan and Germany by also building up their military. Even though Germany has received warnings from Britain and France when they annexed Czechoslovakia and Austria, Britain and France both were weary of war due to the suffering they went through for the first world war.



Germany and Japan heeded the warnings of the other nations, and with no one directly opposing them, they felt confident that they can conquer and invade other nations successfully, which they did as Japan invaded China in 1937 while Germany invaded Poland in 1939. An unopposed rising power will result in their confidence to seemingly do what they want, as it gives the notion that the international world does not oppose what they do and have no power to oppose them. During cold war era, the balance of power is practiced more evidently. The Soviet Union and United States both emerged as superpowers after the second world war, and they are constantly at odds with each other. Every move, every encounters, and every achievement The Soviets made is attempted to be countered by The United States and vice versa. The western bloc established NATO while The eastern bloc did Warsaw pact. Further example, Soviets sent the first human cosmonaut to outer space, while The US NASA sent the first astronaut to step on the moon during the "Space wars" of the 1960s.

This balance of power led a powerful nation to constantly be on guard and remain caution regarding their actions, knowing what might happen if they provoke other nation which is just as powerful to open conflict. After the second world war and Korean wars, the world (especially western powers) becomes weary of large scale conventional war which takes not only the lives of soldiers, but also civilians and destroying long-established settlements. A balance of power eliminates the confidence of one nation to do as they please towards other nations when they know it might lead to conflict with an equally powerful nation. After the fall of The Soviet Union in 1991, The United States emerged as the winner of the Cold war, gaining its status as the sole remaining superpower and shifting the world to a unipolar system. (A.S., 2018) As a result, no one in particular posed a threat to The United States. As a prove, despite a lot of nations including The United Nations voicing objections,



The United States invaded Iraq in 2003 and no other nation is able to directly intervene to prevent nor stop this action.

From these statements we can infer that AUKUS is established to ensure that China do not gain the confidence to pursue their national interests which may harm other nations. For example, this will prevent China to conduct a full scale invasion towards Taiwan, knowing The US and Australia will likely participate to counter this move and become involved in the war. The same goes for South China Sea, in order for China not to freely claim and annex regions of The South China Sea as they wished. In addition, the possession of nuclear submarines in Australian Navy further gives a reason for China or any other nation to provoke war against Australia and its partners. Despite AUKUS' status as a security partnership and not a military or defence alliance², in a war or crisis time these status are harder to differentiate. The activity of security during a wartime relates to defence against other nations, therefore in the course of war AUKUS may easily be 'updated' into a full blown military alliance.

4. Conclusion

Three main actors, which can be considered as major powers, play a part in disputes and tensions within the Indo-Pacific region. The rising power of The People's Republic of China (PRC) is seen as a potential threat to other powers, in this case Australia and The United States. Both of these nations have their own interests in The Indo-Pacific region. For Australia, they are part of the region and if the region is destabilised then they too will be affected negatively in some ways. Meanwhile, the United States has their own interests, such as their intention to beat China In their trade war, to protect their allies such as The Phillipines and Taiwan, along with

² The activity of security is related to maintaining stability and keeping peace. "Defence" on the other hand can be interpreted as one nation's act to counter that of other nation's, such as preparing their military in order to counter an assault from another nation. Therefore, 'defence' tends to be more militarised than the general term of security, which may involve non-combat operations.



protecting shipping routes which they (and other nations in the international realm) uses for maritime trade. China themselves has interests in claiming Taiwan as their sovereignty and also several subregions of South China Sea, which may deny shipping routes to other nations and change the status of South China Sea from an International sea to part of PRC's.

Therefore, Australia, US, and The United Kingdom established AUKUS security partnership in an effort to become a balancing power in the region. Despite the criticism from several nations such as France, New Zealand, and South East Asian nations, AUKUS has a legitimate reason to be established and its establishment is in-line with the balance of power theory. A nation with a rising power will be taken note of by other nations, and other nations are to commit measures to make sure their power remains equal with said rising nation, in order to keep things at a balance. An unbalanced power, when a powerful nation has no other powers opposing them, will increase their confidence to do as they please which may include harming other nations in order to pursue their national interests. This is what AUKUS may try to prevent by their establishment, which is in order for China to be aware that there are surrounding powers opposing them and their action may lead to fatal consequences.

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