

The Philippines - United States - Japan - Australia Defense Diplomacy through “the Squad” : Actor, Process, and Issue

Kristoforus Evan Andriyanto^{1*}, Rodon Pedrason², Anak Agung Banyu Perwita³, Oktaheroe Ramsi⁴

Universitas Pertahanan Republik Indonesia

Corresponding Author: Kristoforus Evan Andriyanto keandriyanto@gmail.com

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords: The Squad, Defense Diplomacy, Minilateralism, Alliance

Received : 16, February

Revised : 18, March

Accepted: 20, April

©2025 Andriyanto, Pedrason, Perwita, Ramsi: This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Atribusi 4.0 Internasional](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).



ABSTRACT

To counter China's aggressive behavior in the Indo-Pacific, the United States, the Philippines, Japan, and Australia have formed a security partnership called “The Squad.” This study utilizes an intrinsic case study approach in qualitative methods to investigate the key actors, processes, and issues within The Squad, as well as its potential benefits and risks. Defense diplomacy and minilateralism are essential tools The Squad uses to achieve its strategic objectives. By leveraging their historical ties and shared interests, these countries aim to uphold a rules-based order, deter aggression, and ensure freedom of navigation. However, The Squad must also consider broader regional dynamics and the principles of ASEAN. Its success will depend on effective cooperation, adaptability to geopolitical dynamics, and the ability to tackle emerging challenges.

INTRODUCTION

The Indo-Pacific region is important for global trade, security, and politics, thus powerful nations try to counter China's influence. This area includes key trade routes in the Indian and Pacific Oceans, involving major countries like Australia, Japan, and those in Southeast Asia. Pan (2014) describes the Indo-Pacific as a region formed by concerns over China's growth, leading to rivalries and security issues. China's increased assertiveness raises fears that it might dominate the region and disrupt existing economic and security arrangements. The South China Sea is one of the major point of conflict, with disputes involving China, Taiwan, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Brunei Darussalam. Yahuda (2013) asserts that China's actions are driven by its military strength, a belief in superiority, and strong nationalist feelings about its claims to this sea, making disputes harder to resolve and increasing the chance of conflict.

The Senkaku Islands, which the Chinese called as the Diaoyu Islands, are also a complicated territorial issue between China and Japan, which related to strategic interests and resources in the East China Sea. On this matter, Wiegand (2009) argues that China may use this dispute to influence Japan's policies on other matters. Moreover, China also aims to limit Taiwan's autonomy to prevent it from developing closer ties with enemies and to enhance its national security. Qiang & Wang (2023) argues that different views between China and the US on Taiwan create conflicting narratives and make it harder to reach agreements, raising tensions in the Taiwan Strait.

To deal with these challenges, the US needs strong partners. Henke (2017) notes that the US is likely to form military coalitions based on its relationships with other countries, focusing on economic and political ties. In regard to this, the US pursue its security strategy that includes military efforts and alliances, highlighting the maritime domain interests where Japan and Australia are being vital partners (Gopal, 2017). In addition, countries like India, South Korea, and the Philippines have also strengthened their connections with the US and each other to respond to China's assertiveness, aiming to uphold regional rules and norms.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Defense Diplomacy

Defense diplomacy is the practice of countries working together to address security threats. This concept has roots in ancient Greece when alliances were formed for protection. According to Cottey and Forster (2009), defense diplomacy traditionally involved using military forces and resources to support a nation's security and foreign policy. It highlights key aspects, including defense cooperation and military assistance between nations. After the Cold War, defense diplomacy changed focus. Countries began using their Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces to cooperate with others and support military development. Aris Sarjito and Anak Agung Banyu Perwita (2024) asserts that defense diplomacy has created complex ways to solve security problems, such as NATO and the Warsaw Pact.

Based on those historical process in “shaping” defense diplomacy, today, defense diplomacy aims to achieve foreign policy and security goals through cooperation. It also seeks to build ties with former or potential enemies, an approach called strategic engagement. This method involves working together within defense pacts and forming partnerships with other nations. The main purpose of defense diplomacy is to promote a country's security and defense policies worldwide. It encourages cooperation during peaceful times. Sarjito and Perwita (2024) mentioned that it involves building trust, communicating openly, sharing information, conducting joint military training, and joining security discussions internationally. Meanwhile, Cottey and Forster (2004) argue that defense diplomacy helps prevent conflicts and build long-term partnerships. This distinguishes it from policies that focus only on military power.

Hence, there are three main goals of defense diplomacy; pursuing national interests, improving security and foreign policy, and building good relationships to reduce uncertainty among countries (Syawfi, 2009). Overall, defense diplomacy aims to prevent conflict and communicate defense strategies to encourage cooperation and address common security challenges. Syawfi (2009) expressed that those goals ends are to balance regional stability, defense growth, and independence. This combines diplomacy, defense strategies, and industrial development. Subsequently, Sarjito and Perwita (2024) explain three main concepts of defense diplomacy: (a) confidence building measures referring to the actions that help countries build trust by optimizing the role of cooperation, communication, and reducing tensions, through some activities such as joint military exercises, exchange programs, and official visits; (b) capacity building that aims to improve a country's defense abilities in technology and military resources; as well as (c) defense industry that focuses on improving a country's defense technology and products by working internationally on research, sharing technology, and acquiring defense equipment. Effective defense diplomacy brings these concepts together. It clears up misunderstandings, gains support from similar countries, and boosts the defense industry. This ultimately strengthens a country's capabilities and promotes its growth.

Minilateralism

Minilateralism refers to the collaboration of small groups of states that come together to address specific challenges or issues. This approach offers a more flexible and focused alternative to traditional multilateral organizations. Moisés Naím (2009) explains that minilateralism helps countries make decisions faster and reach agreements because there are fewer participants involved. As a result, minilateralism provides an opportunity for states to collaborate more efficiently on international challenges, achieving tangible results that might be hindered in broader multilateral frameworks.

Scholars have explored how minilateralism operates within regions, particularly in relation to ASEAN and emerging security coalitions. Koga (2022) states that it allows like-minded countries to work together on strategies to respond to China’s growing influence. This way, countries can avoid the slow processes of larger organizations. Satake (2023) highlights how minilateralism helps address security challenges from China’s assertiveness.

Overall, minilateralism represents a strategic shift towards smaller, more focused coalitions that can act quickly and decisively on specific issues. By involving a limited number of states, these groups offer a nimble alternative to the often rigid structures of multilateralism, allowing for more focused and efficient action. This approach is particularly relevant in rapidly changing regions where responsive and coordinated action is essential.

Based on the causal relationship between dependent variables and independent variable, the researcher has provided a framework generated for this research below:

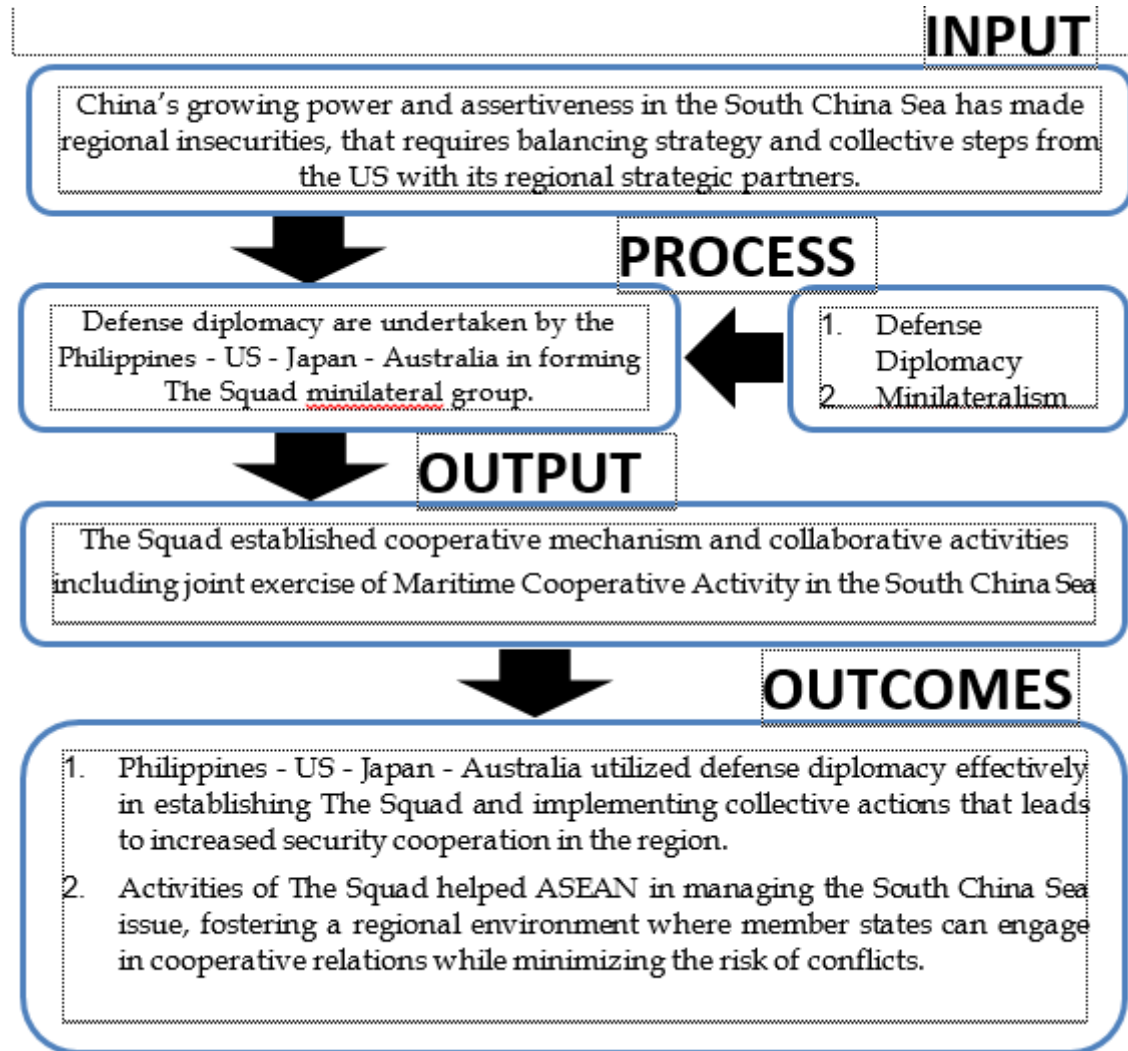


Figure.1 Framework

METHODOLOGY

This study used qualitative methods to better understand the problem and collect expert analyses of state actors' behaviors and their impacts on the region. The researcher has chose to use a case study approach to look at the interests of state actors and analyze defense diplomacy between the Philippines, the US, Japan, and Australia through The Squad. Creswell (2013) explains that qualitative methods help explore complex relationships and behaviors, hence case studies provide in-depth insights through detailed data collection.

This research will focus on an intrinsic case study, allowing for a thorough exploration of the specific defense diplomacy situation involving The Squad. The researcher will collect extensive data by reviewing relevant documents to outline defense agreements, joint activities, and collaborative frameworks. A comprehensive analysis will examine the key actors, processes, and issues involved. Lastly, the researcher will interpret the findings and present them in a narrative that highlights key insights and lessons learned from the case study.

RESEARCH RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

Actors

In April 2021, President Joe Biden spoke to Congress about the US's competition with China for world order in the 21st century. He stated that the US will keep a strong military presence in the Indo-Pacific to prevent conflict (White House, 2021). This shows that the US wants to rebuild alliances and counter China's influence in the region. The US aims to support a rules-based order and ensure freedom of navigation for stability and prosperity. To complement this, the US seeks cooperation with like-minded countries to protect its security interests (Chellaney, 2018). This strategy includes building military power and forming alliances against China.

The Philippines, as the US's oldest ally in Southeast Asia, is likely to support US efforts in the region. This can be seen throughout the years that the Philippines has worked to strengthen military ties with the US to counter China's rise (Castro, 2014). Castro further describes that the Philippines also seeks security partnerships with other nations like Japan and Australia to balance China's power. On this matter, Japan plays an important role in keeping regional stability by working with other like-minded countries (Chellaney, 2018). According to Yoshimatsu (2023), Japan aims to promote a rules-based order and strengthen security ties with key partners like the US and Australia to counter China's influence.

Australia's interest in the Indo-Pacific focuses on supporting the US-led international order through military strength and alliances (Suárez-Barraza, 2022). Growing concerns about China's assertiveness have led Australia to adopt a firmer approach in its strategic policy. To tackle joint security challenges, Australia has formed special partnerships with regional partners especially the Philippines, while also contributing to QUAD and AUKUS. As mentioned above that cooperation with allies particularly Japan and Australia are essential for the US to deter aggression and uphold regional standards, especially if China becomes more aggressive. Ha (2022) notes that the US prefers small coalitions for

effective responses to security challenges, as seen in the formation of "The Squad," which now includes the Philippines.

The Squad was created after a May 2024 meeting in Hawaii, where US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin met with his counterparts from Australia, Japan, and the Philippines. Austin explained that these countries share a vision for peace and stability, aiming to counter coercion and improve military cooperation among them (US Department of Defense, 2 May 2024). The defense chiefs met in Hawaii for the second time, having previously gathered at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore in June 2023. According to a statement from the Japan Ministry of Defense (2023) the leaders confirmed their commitment to a shared vision and cooperative efforts. They also discussed important regional issues and looked for ways to work together, especially in the South China Sea.

Process

In the last decade, the US has created several military partnerships to address global challenges, particularly in response to China's rising power. In 2017, the US revived the QUAD, a group with India, Japan, and Australia. While in 2021, the US established AUKUS with the United Kingdom and Australia, which aims to improve defense cooperation by providing Australia with nuclear-powered submarines. Moreover the US formed a new alliance called JAPHUS with Japan and the Philippines by 2023. The US has a strong defense relationship with the Philippines. This relationship is based on shared history (Winger, 2021). The 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty is key, as it offers security support and modernization (Avila & Goldman, 2015). The 1999 Visiting Forces Agreement and the 2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement strengthen the US military presence in the Philippines (Villegas, 2022).

Meanwhile, Japan was also seen strengthening its partnership with the Philippines through the Reciprocal Access Agreement that allows for joint military exercises and deployments to boost defense capabilities (Castro, 2017). Additionally, Australia has also previously approved the 2007 Status of Visiting Forces Agreement with the Philippines, that allows both countries to conduct joint military operations, showing the close security relationship between them (Halvorson & West, 2020). Those antecedents explain the process of trust-building and cooperation among the four countries to manage security stability in the South China Sea. Defense diplomacy acts as the operational tool and mechanism for trust-building, while multilateralism serves as the structural framework that enables agile and focused action. They leverage their long history of cooperation to enhance trust and increase maritime collaboration in specific mutual issues.

Issue

Robert Keohane's (1984) work explains how minilateralism can help or challenge larger multilateral organizations. As described above that minilateral groups are quicker and can avoid the lengthy agreement processes of large groups, however, they may ignore the non-interference principle that multilateral frameworks like ASEAN uphold, which could create tensions. The Squad initially aims to address regional security in the South China Sea. While it may improve regional security responses in Southeast Asia, it could also challenge ASEAN principles and the trust building among countries.

Benefits

The US-led international order influences the Free and Open Indo-Pacific by promoting rules that help counter rising tensions, especially from China's aggressive actions in the sea. The FOIP may be referred to a specific version of the broader Indo-Pacific idea, which aims to unite countries that value Western democracy and freedom. Likewise, Koga (2020) define that this concept aims to create a stable regional order based on existing international rules and to strengthen national defense. The US has made FOIP a key part of its strategy and encourages cooperation among allies to limit China's influence. The US vision for FOIP is built on three main areas: economy, governance, and security, with a strong focus on Southeast Asia, an important region for global trade and diplomacy (Calabrese, 2020).

As China gains more power in the region, the US and its allies need to work together to respond effectively. The new group called The Squad will play a significant role in the security of Southeast Asia, especially regarding the South China Sea. The Squad, along with QUAD, AUKUS, and JAPHUS, aims to create a unified response to security challenges and maintain balance in the region. Such groups are important for achieving strategic goals, improving deterrence, and stabilizing the area against China's growing influence (Wilkins, 2024).

Challenges

Minilateral groups can be beneficial, but they may undermine ASEAN role in achieving peaceful and prosperous region. Ha (2022) says that Indo-Pacific minilaterals reduce ASEAN's importance and central role. This is due to less reliance on its standards, smaller and more flexible memberships, and confusion in Great Power competition. Meanwhile, the Philippines' participation in these groups shows a shared interest in regional security and attracts attention from major powers. Castro (2020) notes that this foreign policy approach affects how ASEAN handles security issues.

Future Possible Scenario

The Squad's success depends on strong military strategies, effective diplomacy within ASEAN, and the ability to adjust to changes in domestic politics among its member countries (Patnayak, 2024). Thus, Heydarian (2024) highlights that the Squad should formalize its partnership by conducting regular joint patrols, improving intelligence sharing, enhancing maritime security cooperation, and supporting the Philippines' military modernization.

The foregoing has been initiated through conducting their first Maritime Cooperative Activity in the South China Sea on 6 April 2024. A joint statement from the four Defense Ministers, released by the Department of National Defense of the Philippines (April 2024) stated that these exercises show their commitment to strengthening cooperation with allies and improving collective self-defense, which helps maintain a peaceful and stable region. Comprehending this, it is entirely plausible that joint initiatives of this kind will be implemented regularly and with greater emphasis in the future.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Indo-Pacific region has emerged as a critical geopolitical and economic arena. China's increasing assertiveness has led to heightened tensions and security concerns, particularly in the South China Sea. To counterbalance China's influence, the US, the Philippines, Japan, and Australia have formed a closer security partnership, known as "The Squad." Defense diplomacy, which involves using military and diplomatic tools to achieve foreign policy goals, has become increasingly important in the region. Minilateralism, a form of defense diplomacy involving smaller, more flexible groups of countries, offers a way to address specific challenges more efficiently. The Squad is a prime example of minilateralism in action and defense diplomacy in the process.

The Squad aims to maintain a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific, deter aggression, and promote freedom of navigation. However, the minilateral group must balance its objectives with the broader interests of the region, particularly ASEAN's principles and norms. To be successful, the Squad will need to strengthen cooperation through regular joint military exercises, intelligence sharing, and capacity building. The future of The Squad will depend on various factors, including the stability of its member states' domestic politics, the evolving geopolitical landscape, and the group's ability to adapt to changing circumstances. By effectively addressing these challenges, The Squad can play a crucial role in shaping the future of the Indo-Pacific region.

ADVANCED RESEARCH

This study primarily looks at the United States, the Philippines, Japan, and Australia. By focusing on these countries, it misses important viewpoints from other regions. This limits our understanding of how security and diplomacy work in the Indo-Pacific area. The study mainly emphasizes defense diplomacy and minilateralism when addressing security issues. This focus may overlook the importance of non-military approaches, such as economic cooperation, cultural exchanges, and soft power, which are vital for long-term stability.

It is still unclear how sustainable The Squad will be. The study highlights its immediate goals, but it does not consider how political changes in member countries could affect their commitment to the group. Domestic issues, like changes in leadership, public opinion, or economic problems, could impact the group's unity and effectiveness. To improve this study, future research should include a wider range of regional players, such as India, ASEAN, and China, to get a fuller picture of the Indo-Pacific. It should also explore economic initiatives and soft power alongside defense strategies. Finally, long-term planning and studies about broader international community perception would help clarify how effective and sustainable the coalition will be in promoting regional stability.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

1. Lt. Gen. (Ret.) Prof. Dr. Jonni Mahroza, S. I. P., M. A., M. Sc., Ph. D., as the Rector of the Republic of Indonesia Defense University.
2. Maj. Gen. Dr. Oktaheroe Ramsi, S. I. P., M. Sc., as the Dean in the Faculty of Defense Strategy
3. Maj. Gen. (Ret.) Dr.rer.pol. Rodon Pedrason, M. A., as the Advisor for the researcher in this research
4. Prof. Anak Agung Banyu Perwita, M. A., Ph. D., as the Advisor for the researcher in this research
5. Col. (Czi.) Yermia Hendarwoto, S. H., M. H., M. Th., as the Head of Defense Diplomacy Study Program
6. Colleagues from Cohort X in Defense Diplomacy Study Program

REFERENCES

- Avila, A. P. C., & Goldman, J. (2015). Philippine-US Relations: The Relevance of an Evolving Alliance. *Bandung: Journal of the Global South*. 2(1), 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40728-015-0021-y>.
- Calabrese, J. (2020). Assuring a Free and Open Indo-Pacific - Rebalancing the US Approach. *Asian Affairs*, 51, 307 - 327. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03068374.2020.1749400>.
- Castro, R. (2022). Exploring the Factors Behind the Persistence of the Philippines - US Alliance: A Focus on the Changing Gist of the 1951 Philippines - US Mutual Defence Treaty (MDT). *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 76, 694 - 711. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2022.2107171>.
- Castro, R. C. (2017). 21st Century Japan Philippines Strategic Partnership: Constraining China's Expansion in the South China Sea. *Asian Affairs: An American Review*, 44(2), 31-51. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00927678.2017.1296743>.
- Chellaney, B. (2018). Japan's Pivotal Role in the Emerging Indo-Pacific Order. *Asia-Pacific Review*, 25, 38 - 51. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13439006.2018.1475714>.
- Cottey, A., & Forster, A. (2004). *Reshaping Defence Diplomacy: New Roles for Military Cooperation and Assistance*. Routledge Taylor & Francis Group. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315000817>.
- Creswell, J. (2013). *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*. SAGE Publications. 11.
- Department of National Defense of the Philippines (6 April 2024). *Joint Statement Australia - Japan - Philippines - United States Maritime Cooperative Activity*.

- Gopal, P. (2017). Maritime Security in the Indo-Pacific: The Role of the US and its Allies. *Maritime Affairs: Journal of the National Maritime Foundation of India*, 13, 27 - 40. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09733159.2017.1321208>.
- Ha, H. (2022). Understanding the Institutional Challenge of Indo-Pacific Minilaterals to ASEAN. *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs*, 44, 1 - 30. <https://doi.org/10.1355/cs44-1a>.
- Halvorson, D., & West, L. (2020). A Retrospective on the Australia-Philippines Political and Security Relationship: On Canberra's Terms? *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 74(5), 557-577. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2020.1725424>.
- Henke, M. (2017). The Politics of Diplomacy: How the United States Builds Multilateral Military Coalitions. *International Studies Quarterly*, 61, 410-424. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ISQ/SQX017>.
- Heydarian, R. J. (9 May 2024). "Squad" Goals: Consolidating the New Quadrilateral Partnership. The Lowy Institute. Retrieved from <https://www.loyyinstitute.org/the-interpretor/squad-goals-consolidating-new-quadrilateral-partnership>.
- Keohane, R. O. (1984). *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*. Princeton University Press.
- Koga, K. (2022). A New Strategic Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific. *Asia Policy*, 17(4), 27-34. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27254590>.
- Naim, M. (2009). Minilateralism. *Foreign Policy*, (173), 136.
- Pan, C. (2014). The 'Indo-Pacific' and geopolitical anxieties about China's rise in the Asian regional order. *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 68, 453 - 469. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2014.884054>.
- Patnayak, P. L. (2024). High Hurdles for Achieving Squad Goals in the South China Sea. *East Asia Forum*. <https://doi.org/10.59425/eabc.1723197600>
- Qiang, X., & Wang, J. (2023). Parallel Perceptions: Divergent Perspectives of the United States and China on the Taiwan Issue and Risky Implications. *China Review*, 23, 41 - 76.
- Sarjito, A. & Perwita, A. A. B. (2024). *Safeguarding the Nations: Sasaran dan Strategi Diplomasi Pertahanan*. Indonesia Emas Group.
- Satake, T. (2023). The Rise of "Minilateralism" in the Indo-Pacific: The Quad & AUKUS.
- Suárez-Barraza, M. F. (2022). Australia and the Free and Open Indo-Pacific: A Strategy for the Defence of a "Rules-Based Order". In *The Indo-Pacific Theatre* (pp. 23). Routledge India. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003342311-5>.
- Syawfi, I. (2009). *Aktivitas Diplomasi Pertahanan Indonesia Dalam Pemenuhan Tujuan-Tujuan Pertahanan (2003-2008)*. Depok: Universitas Indonesia.
- US Department of Defense (2 May 2024). Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III's Press Conference With Counterparts From Australia, Japan and the Philippines, in Honolulu, Hawaii.
- Villegas, R. C. (2022) The Advent, Evolution Termination of the 1947 Military Bases Agreement and Its Influences to Philippine Military Foreign Policy. *The Research Probe*, Volume 2 Issue 1, pp. 1 - 28. <https://doi.org/10.53378/352882>.
- White House (28 April 2021). Remarks by President Biden in Address to a Joint Session of Congress. Retrieved from <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/04/29/remarks-by-president-biden-in-address-to-a-joint-session-of-congress>.