

# French Anger over the AUKUS Trilateral Security Partnership Explained

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The Franco-American relationship seemed to be on solid ground at the beginning of last week. The US and French militaries have worked closely with one another in Syria, in the Sahel, in the Gulf, and in the Indo-Pacific region over the past decade, and last March, at the request of the United States, the French commander of the *Charles de Gaulle* carrier strike group assumed operational control over an American (CTF 50) naval task force in the Gulf region for a period. Military-to-military cooperation has never been better. At the political level, the relationship likewise seemed on solid footing, with Pres. Joe Biden's promise to "reinvigorate and modernize our alliances and partnerships around the world"<sup>1</sup> striking the right tone with a French establishment that had found Pres. Donald Trump's "America First" rhetoric grating. When Antony Blinken was confirmed as Secretary of State in January, the US and French press pointed out that Blinken had completed high school in Paris, spoke French fluently, and was a Francophile. Former French Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin commented that Blinken was "not only Francophone. He's also a sympathetic person. He knows how to listen, and he's not arrogant. He's respectful. In Europe, we appreciate that. And he knows it."<sup>2</sup> The French embassy in Washington, for its part, was planning a gala dinner for Friday, celebrating the 240th anniversary of the Battle of the Virginia Capes, which set the stage for the Franco-American victory at Yorktown.

How things change over the course of a week. On Wednesday, President Biden, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison, and UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced the formation of a new, enhanced trilateral security partnership between their countries. They proudly noted that one of the first tasks of the new AUKUS partnership would be to help Australia acquire a fleet of nuclear-powered submarines to be built in Adelaide in cooperation with the United Kingdom and the United States. The US and UK would be sharing their most advanced naval technologies with Australia, with Biden elaborating those three nations had stood together in two world wars, in Korea, and in the Persian Gulf. The new partnership heralded a new level of cooperation that would bring together Australian,

American, and British sailors, scientists, and industries to deliver a safer and more secure Indo-Pacific region.<sup>3</sup>

The French government had not been involved in the negotiations leading to this new partnership, and the French reacted to the announcement with white hot fury. The French company DCNS had secured a lucrative AUS \$50 billion defense contract in 2016 to replace Australia's aging Collins-class submarines with 12 conventional submarines to be built by a Franco-Australian consortium. While the Australians claim they had expressed concerns about the project (the Future Submarine Programme), the French foreign and defense ministers insist that their Australian counterparts never broached the subject of terminating the contract in the inaugural Australia–France Ministerial Consultations held on 30 August. The joint statement issued by the Australian and French foreign ministers instead committed both sides to deepening defense industry cooperation and “underlined the importance of the Future Submarine programme.”<sup>4</sup> The French government insists that neither the Australians, the Americans, nor the British let on that they had been exploring an alternative to the Franco-Australian submarine program. The French foreign and defense ministers issued a blistering joint communiqué on Thursday, noting that Australia's termination of the Future Submarine Programme “is contrary to the letter and spirit of the cooperation which prevailed between France and Australia” while the American decision to exclude a European ally and partner like France “signals a lack of consistency which France can only notice and regret.”<sup>5</sup> Speaking less diplomatically to *France Info* radio, Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian claimed that France had been stabbed in the back and that he was “very angry today, and bitter . . . this is not something allies do to each other.”<sup>6</sup> On Friday, France recalled its ambassadors to Australia and the United States for consultation.

Much of the initial commentary in the United States to the French reaction has focused entirely on the loss of the submarine contract and the impact this will have on the French defense industry and French jobs. This certainly is important as France gears up for a presidential election in 2022, but French anger goes beyond money, jobs, and exports. France has devoted a great deal of attention to developing an Indo-Pacific strategy over the past decade and considered the Franco-Australian relationship a cornerstone of that strategy. Furthermore, the fact that the United Kingdom, Australia, and the United States negotiated a new partnership that appeared to exclude France reignited Gaullist fears that perfidious Albion and its offspring were once again cooperating without regard to French interests. France thought it had come a long way in nurturing Franco-American and Franco-Australian trust and partnership and found itself left out in the cold.

Turning first to the issue of lost contracts and jobs, the submarine contract was worth billions, was creating thousands of jobs in Australia and France, and would have connected the French and Australian defense sectors for decades to come. France has been devoting a great deal of effort to promoting French exports to the Indo-Pacific, and Australia has been one of the markets targeted. French military sales to the Indo-Pacific between 2010 and 2019 were worth more than 20 billion euros. While ranked well behind India, Singapore, Malaysia, South Korea, and Indonesia, Australia was a developing market. From a French perspective, if London and Washington had been negotiating behind Paris' back to undermine what France thought was an existing contract with Australia, they surely had their eyes on the far larger Indian market as well.<sup>7</sup> France believes that it can only sustain its full-spectrum military by supporting an independent French defense industry and technology base (“une base industrielle et technologique de défense” or BITD) dependent on exports. More than 4,000 small- and medium-sized enterprises comprise France's BITD, creating more than 200,000 jobs in France.<sup>8</sup> Without exports, many of these firms would close, and tens of thousands of jobs would disappear. The termination of the lucrative submarine contract hurt France's BITD and cost jobs, but the French were also stung by what they termed deception. Over the past decade, the French have devoted a great amount of effort to nurturing the Franco-Australian security relationship through forums such as the 2 + 2 Foreign and Defence Ministerial Consultation, crafting statements about an enhanced strategic partnership and doubling down on existing agreements such as the French–Australian–New Zealand agreement to coordinate disaster and emergency response operations in the South Pacific (FRANZ Arrangement).<sup>9</sup> Paris felt betrayed.

That France should be angry about terminating a lucrative contract is unsurprising. However, Washington appeared surprised by the level of anger directed against the United States. To understand the blowback against the US component of the AUKUS partnership, one needs to recognize three things. First and most important, France considers itself an Indo-Pacific power. Second, since 2016, France has devoted a great deal of effort into crafting an Indo-Pacific strategy and translating aspirations into actions. Third, the French believed that they had become a valuable partner to the United States and that the new administration had moved beyond an “America First” agenda and embraced multilateralism and partnerships.

France asserts that it is part of the Indo-Pacific community because French territories and dependencies from La Réunion in the Western Indian Ocean to French Polynesia in the South Pacific are home to some 1.6 million French citizens. Two of France's five overseas regions (*région d'outre-mer*) are islands located

in the southwest Indian Ocean, with La Réunion, France's largest overseas region in terms of population (2015 population estimate 843,529), and Mayotte its smallest (2015 population estimate 226,915).<sup>10</sup> Considered integral parts of the French Republic, La Réunion and Mayotte elect representatives to the French National Assembly, Senate, and the European Parliament; use the euro as currency; and are governed by French laws and regulations. Another 130,000 French citizens work and live in the Asia-Pacific region, chiefly in India, China, Thailand, and Australia.<sup>11</sup> In addition, France claims sovereignty over various uninhabited islands off the coast of Madagascar (the Crozet Islands, the Scattered Islands) and the Southern Indian Ocean (the Kerguelen Islands, St. Paul, and Amsterdam islands), along with a sliver of Antarctica (Adélie Land). These French Southern and Antarctic Territories have no permanent civilian populations, but French claims to them are maintained by military visits and scientific expeditions. France's overseas regions, collectivities, and territories, collectively termed *France d'outre-mer*, validate France's claim to be a global power with holdings in the Indian Ocean, the Caribbean, Melanesia, Polynesia, and off the Grand Banks. While France's overseas regions and territories individually rank low as security interests, they collectively are important. Based on its overseas holdings, France claims the world's second-largest maritime exclusive economic zone (EEZ). France's 11.0 million km<sup>2</sup> EEZ claim falls just short of that of the United States in total area and eclipses the EEZ claims of India and China.<sup>12</sup> Five French military commands ensure the security of its territories, their airspace, and French EEZs.<sup>13</sup>

In 2016, the French Ministry of Defense issued a policy paper on *France and Security in the Asia-Pacific*. Quoting from the earlier 2013 French White Paper on Defense and National Security, the paper asserted that "The security of the Indian Ocean . . . is a priority for France and for Europe" since "[French] companies and citizens are present in increasing numbers in the region and its prosperity is now inseparable from that of the Asia-Pacific region." In 2018, the French Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs updated the paper and provided additional elaboration on French defense and security policies in the renamed Indo-Pacific region. Visiting India and Australia in 2018, Pres. Emmanuel Macron presented France's Indo-Pacific strategy. Its goals were to "maintain a space that is open and inclusive, free of all forms of coercion, and in accordance with international law and multilateralism."<sup>14</sup> Macron advocated that the like-minded democracies of France, India, and Australia forge closer ties to counter growing Chinese assertiveness. Minister of Defense Florence Parly elaborated at the Shangri-La Dialogue that year that France recognized the changing balance of power in the region and was building a partnership based on friendship, values,

and democracy. France had “fantastic relationships with Australia and India” based on shared visions, security partnerships, and a commitment to multilateralism.<sup>15</sup>

President Macron, Foreign Minister Le Drian, and Minister of Defense Parly have devoted tremendous energy to fostering relationships in the Indo-Pacific region. They have all visited the region, interacted with their counterparts, and argued that France should be a partner of choice for Australia, India, and the United States. Parly has insisted that “free and open access to maritime lines of communication . . . and the preservation of trade lanes that are vital to the world.” At the 2019 Shangri-La summit, she declared that this was a matter of principle. She explained that “Where rules are no longer the boundary of ambition, what security can there be for smaller states in the region? What is the meaning of sovereign equality, that cardinal principle of the UN? As for us, we will go about this issue in our own, steady, non-confrontational, but obstinate way. We will continue to sail more than twice a year in the South China Sea. There will be objections, there will be dubious manoeuvres at sea. But we will not be intimidated into accepting any *fait accompli*, because what international law condemns, how could we condone?”<sup>16</sup>

The loss of a lucrative contract and French jobs certainly contributed to Le Drian’s anger last week, but I would argue it also reflects outrage that France was not in the “room where it happened” when the AUKUS agreement was negotiated. The French believed they contribute regional security and stability in the Indo-Pacific and share the same goals as the Americans, the Australians, and the British. French leaders were astounded and outraged when they discovered that they had been deliberately kept in the dark until hours before the new trilateral security partnership was announced. And France was not in it.

This played on French sensibilities dating back to World War II. Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill did not recognize Charles de Gaulle as a co-equal, an unsurprising attitude given that he brought little to the table in terms of military power after the Fall of France, and the Free French were entirely dependent on the British and Americans for arms, equipment, and money throughout the war. Yet de Gaulle chafed that he and France (one and the same in his mind) were kept out of planning for D-Day and not invited to the Yalta Conference, where key decisions were made concerning the postwar order. Following the war, France was not invited to join the UK–US intelligence sharing arrangement that was later extended to include Canada, Australia, and New Zealand (the so called “Five Eyes” group). Nor were the Americans and British willing to share nuclear know-how. De Gaulle reacted to these perceived slights by charting an independent foreign policy, eventually withdrawing France from NATO’s military command structure after his demands for reform were rejected.

In 2009, French President Nicolas Sarkozy announced that France would return to NATO's military command structure. The decision was an outgrowth of French participation in the NATO air campaign against Serbia in 1999 and its support of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission in Afghanistan. Since then, the relationship between the American and French militaries has intensified. In the Indo-Pacific, the French *Charles de Gaulle* carrier group conducted exercises with US, Australian, and Japanese naval ships in 2019, practicing formation sailing, live fires, search and rescue, and antisubmarine warfare drills. The Biden administration is now attempting to assuage French anger and assure France that the United States values its contributions in Europe, in the Middle East, and in the Indo-Pacific. But the French are smarting over the way things were handled when the United Kingdom, Australia, and the United States negotiated a security partnership that not only excluded France but was kept under wraps until the last moment. Whether and how French concerns can be addressed remains to be seen, but one can anticipate three consequences for Franco-American relations.

The first and most likely will be an abiding French cynicism concerning the Biden administration's profession that the United States is committed to transatlantic partnerships and values France as a "key partner in the Indo-Pacific zone." Still seething over the submarine deal, Le Drian remarked "This brutal, unilateral and unpredictable decision reminds me a lot of what Mr. Trump used to do. I am angry and bitter. This isn't done between allies."<sup>17</sup> French trust in the United States, already shaken by how the Afghanistan withdrawal unfolded, is at a low point.

This reinforces an agenda that President Macron has been pushing since 2017: the need for Europe to develop strategic autonomy. In a speech at the Sorbonne that year, Macron noted that Europe was witnessing the gradual and inevitable disengagement of the United States and needed to develop autonomous operating capabilities in complement to NATO. He advocated for a common intervention force, a common defense budget, and a common doctrine for action. How the French loss of a defense contract in Australia relates to European strategic autonomy is unclear, but the joint communiqué issued by the Le Drian and Parly ends as follows: "The regrettable decision just announced on the FSP [Future Submarine Programme] only heightens the need to raise loud and clear the issue of European strategic autonomy. There is no other credible path for defending our interests and values around the world, including in the Indo-Pacific region."<sup>18</sup>

The French are prone to speak of European interests rather than French interests, and the *European Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific*, issued last week, pays far more attention to sustainable and inclusive prosperity, green transition,

ocean governance, digital governance, connectivity, and human security that it does to security and defense.<sup>19</sup> EU President Ursula von der Leyen gave her State of the Union speech last week and echoed the French call for more strategic autonomy. She promised to convene a Summit on European Defence in the coming year, urging Europe to “step up to the next level” and create a European Defense Union with its own expeditionary force.<sup>20</sup> Brexit, however, has deprived Europe of the only power other than France that entertains notions of playing a role that transcends economics in the Indo-Pacific: the United Kingdom. And much to the annoyance of the French, Prime Minister Johnson can claim that AUKUS agreement provides proof to the pudding that was “Global Britain.” ❀

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### **Notes**

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3. For transcript of announcement, see “Remarks by President Biden, Prime Minister Morrison of Australia, and Prime Minister Johnson of the United Kingdom Announcing the Creation of AUKUS,” 15 September 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/>.
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