

The AUKUS Affair: What Is Behind France's Anger?

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Australia signed in 2016 a contract with the French shipbuilder Naval Group to buy 12 conventionally-powered attack submarines. But on September 15, 2021, during a joint Australian-British-U.S. meeting, the Australian Prime Minister announced that his country would acquire nuclear submarines from Washington instead, thus nullifying the French contract. This new AUKUS (Australia–UK–US) tripartite cooperation goes beyond providing submarines to Australia and aims at bolstering Australian military capabilities and increasing its cooperation and interoperability with the United States. The whole ordeal is without doubt part of the wider U.S. goal of containing China's bid for regional hegemony. The French, furious at AUKUS betrayal, recalled their ambassadors to Australia and the United States on September 17.

What is the source of this wrath? First of all, it is unlikely to be solely about money. Out of the 17,000 employees of French defense contractor Naval Group, only 650 were working on the Australian submarines. The abrupt cancellation of the contract may force Australia to pay up to 400 million dollars in penalties to France (Capital 2021). Also, Naval Group's order book is full for the next few years. Therefore, the economic impact of the collapse of the contract is limited.

France under the government of Emmanuel Macron mostly resents AUKUS because it undermines its ambitious Indo-Pacific strategy, of which the Australian submarine deal was a keystone. In a nutshell, France expressed large ambitions in the region but lacked the military capabilities to make them credible. Paris invested few resources in the region and unsurprisingly got few results. The lackluster French Indo-Pacific strategy reposes on three main motives.

First, the French fear for the security of their Pacific territories. They worry that their military capabilities in the region are too meager to defend French Polynesia and New Caledonia against a potential Chinese attack (Auffret 2016).

Second, France's Indo-Pacific strategy also aims at signaling its value as an ally to the United States. Paris hopes that America will align its policies with French interests in Africa, in the Middle East, and in Europe. Indeed, the 'American pacifier' successfully constrained Germany and contained Russia since the end of World War II, thus allowing France to enjoy a relatively benign European regional environment (Mearsheimer 2001).

Finally, the Indo-Pacific strategy is for Macron an ideological pursuit. During the Donald Trump era, Macron came to perceive France and himself as the last protector of the traditional liberal international project promoting multilateralism, legalism, freedom of trade and movement, and the condemnation of power politics.

But obviously, the Americans do not consider French presence in the Indo-Pacific as an important factor. Where does U.S. disregard for France's Indo-Pacific strategy come from? While Macron imagines that "France is a great power of the Indo-Pacific" (quoted in Scott 2019, 77), Paris possesses in the Pacific Ocean no more than 7,000 troops and only a handful of ships. It would be unable to sustain large-scale military operations and would be of little help during a great power war with China. France is primarily a European land power and the Americans would prefer it to focus on defending Eastern Europe (see Mattelaer 2018) rather than to project power it does not have towards the Asia-Pacific region. In addition, it is possible that Macron's continued willingness to engage economically with China displeased the United States.

France's current anger is unlikely to lead to any serious reprisal. Contrary to what some suggested, Paris has little interest in leaving the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). As hinted earlier, U.S. presence in Europe allowed bottling up German power and deterring Russia since 1945. France will not jettison this for the sake of a few submarines.

Others see the submarine crisis as an impetus for France to push for European strategic autonomy. European autonomy in military matters has been an old chestnut since the Treaty of Brussels in 1948. But even if progress is made on this front, European efforts will not substitute for American leadership. In fact, it is because of U.S. presence that European cooperation is possible in the first place, since American power put the brakes on security competition among Europe's main powers and allows them to overcome the collective action dilemma so they can work together (Mearsheimer 2010). In addition, France is too weak to defend its Pacific territories alone and has to rely on U.S. benevolence instead. Thus, it cannot go too far in its quarrel with Washington and Canberra.

More broadly, the AUKUS humiliation is a symptom of the continuous decline of French military capabilities since the end of the Cold War. It comes at a time when France's traditional influence over African affairs is nearing its end under repeated Russian maneuvers. The Kremlin already managed to push France out of the Central African Republic in 2020. In September 2021, Mali requested Wagner mercenaries — Russian soldiers in all but name — to support its forces, despite the longstanding presence of French soldiers in the country to fight terrorist groups. France appears ready to exit the country.

French leaders long deluded themselves in thinking that France's venerable history, its language, and its culture — its *soft power* — were sufficient to maintain its rank in international politics. But such refinements hold little sway at a time when continental-sized behemoths like China, Russia, and the United States are vying for

hegemony in Asia, Europe, and elsewhere. Therefore, without *hard power*, the real currency of international relations, the AUKUS humiliation is unlikely to be the last.

Disclaimer: The views in this article are those of the author and do not reflect the views of IFES.

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