



## AFTER THE SHOCK: FRANCE, AMERICA, AND THE INDO-PACIFIC

BY BRUNO TERTRAIS

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It felt like an earthquake. This isn't too strong a word to describe the French feeling last week, when the rumor began spreading that the United States and Australia were about to announce a new strategic partnership to replace the cooperation that Paris and Canberra had worked hard to build over the past 10 years.

The French submarine contract was in trouble, but no one seemed to know that the United States had been cooking up an alternative option with the Australian government, and that negotiations had begun months ago. There is no hint of that in the [Joint Communiqué](#) issued by Paris and Canberra on the occasion of the first foreign affairs-defense ministerial meeting, which took place Aug. 30 and celebrated the strength of France-Australia cooperation. US strategists like to talk about the “shock and awe” strategy. Typically, though, this is to bomb an adversary.

To be sure, the [announcement](#) of the new trilateral Indo-Pacific security partnership is the result of both well-calculated strategic considerations, and US and UK political expediency. Beneath the crude new acronym “AUKUS” (Australia, United Kingdom, United States) lies a desire to up the ante in military and technological cooperation between the three

countries to counter Chinese ambitions in the Indo-Pacific.

### A Strong Signal from the Anglosphere

AUKUS signals the rise of the Anglosphere, which in France is often, and wrongly, referred to as “Anglo-Saxon.” Its centrality is well-known, particularly in the discreet framework of intelligence exchanges within the Five Eyes Club (with Canada and New Zealand). AUKUS hurts the French, but there is a logic to it and it makes sense for a senior US official to [claim](#) that the United States has “no better allies than the United Kingdom and Australia.” Just a few days ago, Canberra, Wellington, and Washington commemorated the 70th anniversary of the ANZUS (Australia, New Zealand, United States) treaty with great enthusiasm. As for London, its participation in AUKUS is in line with its new post-Brexit [Global Britain](#) strategy.

Make no mistake, however: There will be a price to pay. How can France now take seriously the Biden administration's desire for greater European involvement in the Indo-Pacific, and for more consultation and coordination among allies over China? French Foreign Affairs Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian and Defense Minister Florence Parly are right to [talk](#) about a “lack of consistency.” Note that the US announcement was made on the same day that the European Union [published](#) its strategy for the Indo-Pacific. Talk about good timing!

For France, the shock is similar to the one it felt after the US abandonment of August 2013, when President Obama reversed its decision to conduct a strike on Syria. The United States may have felt the same 10 years earlier, when in 2003 Paris decided not to support Washington at the United Nations Security Council over its planned intervention in Iraq.

Context matters. The AUKUS announcement comes only weeks after another crisis of confidence, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, which proceeded with poor coordination with allies. French President Emmanuel Macron now feels vindicated, having argued for months that NATO is in a critical state. The traditional French narrative about America's unreliability, then, is validated. In any case, these are

Paris' lines. Per Le Drian and Parly, Thursday's [event](#) "only heightens the need to raise loud and clear the issue of European strategic autonomy." This is the French mindset as Paris is getting ready to assume the presidency of the European Union.

### **A Crushing Blow for France-Australia Cooperation**

The "contract of the century" for 12 Shortfin Barracuda submarines—an adaptation to Australian needs of the French Barracuda—was worth 35 billion euros (\$41 billion), of which 8 to 9 billion would have gone to the Naval Group (whose largest shareholder is the government, at 60%). The contract, signed in 2016, was already well underway and several hundred people were working on it, including many Australians in Cherbourg.

Implementation was difficult, but no one in France thought that Washington would offer Canberra an alternative, first because the major US defense contractor Lockheed Martin was involved and second because the United States does not traditionally sell nuclear-powered submarines.

Yet the American offer goes beyond this. Not only does the offer include submarines, but these submarines will also be armed with Tomahawk missiles, and the deal will proceed within the framework of a major trilateral cooperation on defense and security technologies. It is an attractive offer, especially given the regional security environment, which has worsened since the early 2010s. That's why, for example, the Labor Party can now accept nuclear propulsion technology, which provides a real military advantage both in terms of durability and patrol discretion.

For France, the submarine contract was part of a broader logic: It was about building a long-term strategic relationship, a marriage for 50 years, as the French used to call it. Many had worked hard to lay the groundwork for this, including through informal dialogue between government officials and experts.

This union, however, was cancelled before it was consummated, hence the harsh official reaction, describing Canberra's [decision](#) as being "contrary to

the letter and spirit of the cooperation that prevailed between France and Australia." This relationship was meant to be one of the pillars of France's strategy in the Indo-Pacific, which was walking on two legs, one Australian, and the other Indian (notably via the Rafale contract). The only advantage for Paris now is that its strategy for the region will be no longer be perceived as simply following the United States' lead (which was never the case).

### **Nonproliferation Undermined**

Nuclear propulsion has advantages, but it is a sensitive technology. That's why, until now, no nuclear-armed state has sold it to a non-nuclear-armed state. Only six countries possess such technology, the five nuclear-armed states "recognized" by the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), plus India. France has never sold such technology, despite requests (from Brazil, for instance) and significantly, back in the early 2010s, Australia did not ask for it. The United States has now broken this taboo. Imagine Washington's reaction had it been France!

Even with access to this technology, Australia will likely not be able to reproduce it. There will be a "black box," which will remain closed to Canberra.

There is also no risk of nuclear proliferation. Still, the reactors will probably use highly enriched uranium (HEU), a technology used by the Americans (and the British), unlike the French, who have chosen the more proliferation-resistant low-enriched uranium (LEU) option. Moreover, this technology could revive the debate in Australia about the need for a civilian or even dual (civilian and military) nuclear program.

The timing is also bad because of the next review conference of the NPT, scheduled for January 2022. HEU escapes international controls when it is used for propulsion alone; for practical reasons, because it is difficult to imagine foreign inspectors checking the rear part of national submarines. It is therefore possible, in theory, to remove HEU from controlled facilities to officially use it for nuclear propulsion. Iran could do this, for example. Moreover, other states could now sell similar propulsion reactors to non-nuclear-armed states, arguing that there is now a precedent.

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## The Way Forward

France should look forward. It should quickly settle the trade dispute and separate it from the unavoidable overhaul of its strategy for the Indo-Pacific. France is and will remain an important player in the region. Australia, for its part, will still need its “Pacific neighbor.” More importantly, no one wants China to exploit and sharpen the differences between Western countries. Hence the importance, for example, to continue not only official but also “track 2” (experts) and “track 1.5” (officials and experts) France-Australia conversations.

Over the next 18 months, the three AUKUS countries will have to answer important questions. Will France be allowed to join AUKUS periodically, for some projects or operations? Or will France be forced to seek greater alignment with Germany (in Europe) and Japan (in Asia), ironically its two competitors for the submarine contract with Australia?

France, too, will need to reflect on this experience, which will have major implications for its industrial and strategic interests. Was Paris just too trustful of its allies? Was it naïve? For now, however, Paris should steer clear of drawing hasty conclusions. The Biden administration is not the Trump administration. The latter did not care much for its allies. The former does, though not for all of them.

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