



WHAT AUKUS MEANS FOR EUROPEAN SECURITY

BY MARIE JOURDAIN

Marie Jourdain (MJourdain@AtlanticCouncil.org) is a visiting fellow at the Atlantic Council's Europe Center. She worked for the Ministry of Defense's Directorate General for International Relations and Strategy in Paris.

The Australia-UK-US (AUKUS) security pact is a European—not just French—issue. While the [canceled contract](#) with Australia was not about European submarines, and the strategic partnership with Australia was not with the European Union, EU leaders and heads of European states did more than sympathize with the French. EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy [Josep Borell](#) stated that EU member states consider AUKUS as “affecting the European Union as a whole.” [Michael Roth](#), the German Secretary of State for European affairs, called it a “wake-up call for everyone in the EU” and German Foreign Minister [Heiko Mass](#) states the manner in which it was established was “irritating and disappointing, not only for France.”

Why are Europeans worried?

First, the way AUKUS was negotiated and announced led to a crisis of confidence across the Atlantic because it suggests that Europe is no longer the US priority. For Europeans the problem is less the loss of a contract than the way France was treated. If this is how the United States acts with France, which has the strongest military in the European Union and its second-largest economy, what would keep Washington from doing the same with any other European country? Furthermore, if AUKUS confirms that the Indo-Pacific is now the priority for the United States, it implies Europe is no longer the strategic partner it once was. Not only did it sideline France—

which is at the [forefront](#) of Europe's growing Indo-Pacific engagement—but it also did so on the very day the European Union released its own Indo-Pacific strategy.

Second, AUKUS directly impacts the security architecture in the Indo-Pacific, where the European Union has strategic interests and its own approach, as developed in its [strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific](#). AUKUS might complicate Europe's deepening cooperation with Australia, and European countries could be tempted to limit engagement with the Indo-Pacific more generally. The timing is especially poor now: New Caledonia's [independence referendum](#) is set for December and China [favors independence](#) to extend its influence in the South Pacific (a New Caledonia under Chinese influence could break the encirclement of China by isolating Australia, as demonstrated by [Paul Charon and Jean-Baptiste Jeangène Vilmer](#)).

One reason for the crisis might be the absence of political appointees in the Biden administration—no ambassadors in Europe, and Karen Donfried was only confirmed as assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian affairs in late September—while the White House Indo-Pacific team is [much more robust](#). The [first tour](#) of the secretaries of state and defense was in that region, the [DoD's priority is China](#), and the [Quadilateral Security Dialogue](#) (“Quad”) in the Indo-Pacific has been revived. Even Biden's tour in Europe in June was remarkable in the way the communiqués of the [G7](#), [NATO](#), and [EU-US Summit](#) all mentioned China, paving the way for more awareness in Europe over this challenge.

Furthermore, [Ukraine](#) (a European, though not an EU, state) claimed to be “surprised” when the United States decided to permit the completion of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline. The withdrawal from Afghanistan was not a collective decision; the [G7](#), EU, UN, and NATO secretary general called on the Americans to extend the Aug. 31 deadline to end evacuations, but the US response did not meet their expectations. Finally, the lifting of the travel ban (expected in November) was not announced until Sept. 20, despite high vaccination rates in Europe (while other

countries with lower vaccination rates have not been subject to such a ban).

AUKUS is the last straw. It is a wake-up call for Europeans, a clear sign that they must do more to safeguard their strategic interests. The US commitment to Article 5 [remains iron-clad](#), but Europeans might wonder what the US stance would be if a crisis emerged in Europe's neighborhood, especially one that impacts Europe but not the United States. If the United States were to leave Iraq, what would the Europeans do, as the American armed forces ensure force protection? It is not surprising, then that there are [debates over strategic autonomy](#).

What is the way forward?

First, Europe does not have a shared strategic vision. To form one will require some collective imagination: as Carnegie Europe's [Judy Dempsey](#) put it, "strategic autonomy is meaningless" if Europe does not "collectively suppose strategically." The EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific was a significant step in enhancing a shared vision, and it will inform the future [strategic compass](#) (to be released in March 2022 under the French EU presidency). The European Union should agree on the key challenges ahead, and new EU special envoy to the Indo-Pacific Gabriele Visentin will be essential to foster consensus.

European states differ in their views of China, which the [European Union](#) has labelled a "systemic rival," "economic competitor," but also a "negotiating partner." It will not be easy to adopt a new EU strategy on China, but the recent [report](#) from the European parliament is a first contribution. It calls for engaging Beijing on matters of global concern—climate, health, and nuclear disarmament—but also defending core European values and interests, including engaging China in a human rights dialogue. It says no comprehensive agreement on investment can be reached while China [sanctions](#) European members of parliament and institutions—themselves a response to EU sanctions on individuals believed to be responsible for repression in Xinjiang—and even suggests an EU investment agreement with Taiwan.

Second, Europe must demonstrate that it is ready to be the global actor the European Union wants to be. This

comes with a price, financial (increasing investments in defense spending or developing critical capabilities) and political. The [endorsement of the EU strategy](#) on the Indo-Pacific by the heads of states in October is significant in this regard. Implementing the strategy, including its security item (increasing naval deployments and port calls, for instance) will demonstrate to regional actors and the United States that Europe is a key Indo-Pacific actor, offering a unique approach it can implement.

Third, the European Union must engage in an open-eyed discussion with the United States on European security (not limited to European territory). Organizing the focused dialogue on security and defense (with an agenda item on the Indo-Pacific) as promised during the EU-US summit last June would be a welcome initiative. High-level consultations on the Indo-Pacific later this year, which were [announced](#) by Secretary of State Antony Blinken and HRVP Borell, would also give the United States an opportunity to encourage Europeans to step up. NATO will remain the cornerstone of European collective defense, but the United States has much to gain from a more credible, stronger European defense, as acknowledged by Biden in the [joint communiqué](#) with French President Emmanuel Macron. Significantly, the communique states that the United States "recognizes the importance of a stronger and more capable European defense, that contributes positively to transatlantic and global security and is complementary to NATO."

Fourth, regaining trust with Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States is vital for further cooperation. How it happens will be critical. Opening avenues for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, between the European Union and the Quad (as considered in the EU strategy) would be a positive step. The [fruitful meeting](#) on Oct. 29 paves the way for France and the United States to restore this trust. This positive dynamic is yet to be found with Australia and the United Kingdom.

AUKUS will have lasting effects on European security. It revealed how much the strategic environment had changed and how the European Union's critical security partners intend to play in it.

Europeans must step up, not only to secure its own strategic interests, but also to participate in renewing a more balanced and more effective transatlantic relationship, including in the Indo-Pacific.

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