

French Diplomatic Anger at the U.S. and its Friends

by Michael Curtis



Liz Truss has only been British foreign minister for a week, but she is already a player on the international world stage, with appearances scheduled at the UN in New York, at the Global Investment Summit, at the UN climate change conference in Glasgow, at the G7 meeting in Liverpool. She is positioning the UK at the heart of a network of economic, diplomatic, and security partnerships, and conforming the status of Britain as a vital part of international affairs. Her main policy views personify the slogan of Global Britain, and projecting a positive outward looking global Britain.

Truss is a champion of freedom and free trade, but she asserts that freedoms need to be defended by security ties around the world. That assertion will be tested in what may be a bitter meeting with the French foreign minister Jean-Yves Le Drian and French representatives at the UN meeting on September 21, 2021, as a result of their antagonism with British participation in the creation of AUKUS. Truss has defended this creation, and the submarine deal connected with it, explaining British readiness to be hard-headed in defending British interests and challenging unfair practices and malign acts.

AUKUS is the security pact between the UK, U.S., and Australia to cooperate on military technologies, and share information on cyber, artificial intelligence, quantum computing, and undersea technology. It has commercial ramifications but is primarily based on strategic issues. It is a device to associate the U.S. with Britain and Australia in ensuring a

desirable stability and security in the Indo-Pacific area and relations with or countering China's aggressive moves in the area. It suggests a change in U.S. and Western strategy and policy in the Asia-Pacific region. It also confirms British Brexit and the fact that the UK can be influential outside of a European bloc.

For the U.S. Biden administration the pact is not only significant in itself, but also important because it comes a few weeks after the controversial U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan which had led to some countries to be concerned about American commitments in general and specifically Biden's command of issues concerning the power of Taliban and the challenge of Iran now led by the hard line Ebrahim Raisi.

The starting plan is a decision of the U.S. and the UK to provide Australia with the technology and capability to deploy nuclear powered submarines so it will have a fleet of them, which are more powerful than the diesel electric boats it presently has. All understand that a nuclear submarine has enormous defense capabilities, and only six countries have them. The U.S. has 68, the UK has 10, and China has 15 nuclear subs. Regarding non-nuclear subs, China has 58, the U.S. and UK none, and Australia six.

The deal which means partnership of the three countries in the Indo-Pacific region means combining UK manufacturing, U.S. technology, and Australian geographical location. The deal also means that nuclear technology is being exported to a non-nuclear powered nation. Australia has produced star power, Nicole Kidman, Cate Blanchett, Hugh Jackson, Geoffrey Rush, and Russell Crowe, and Don Bradman, but not nuclear power.

As presently stated, the deal is to build in Australia at least eight nuclear powered subs which will be powered with nuclear reactors at a cost of \$90 billion. This will cancel the cancelled deal, estimated at \$66 billion, according to which France, Naval Group, would build 12 conventional

submarines.

What is amazing is the petulant fury and strong aggressive reaction of France, whose senior officials said the country was “blindsided” by the decision. Obviously, France suffered economically by the cancellation of the lucrative contract and would express disappointment, but more surprising were four consequences: the withdrawal of French ambassadors from Canberra and Washington; accusations that Australia was guilty of duplicity, breach of trust, bad faith and misinformation, and had given no warning in the process of making a new deal; and statements by the French foreign minister that there was a link between the exit from Afghanistan and the Australian agreement; the argument that U.S. did not respect the sovereignty of France, and that why there is a crisis. French ire was mainly directed at the U.S.

Who is telling the truth? Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison argued that in June 2021 he informed Macron that he was concerned that the French submarines were not sufficiently effective and it would be easy for the increasing assertive Chinese to detect them, and that Australia might scrap the deal. It rejected accusations it had lied. Morrison, concerned about China’s increasing influence, had revised his thinking about the capabilities of conventional submarines to deal with the new strategic environment, and would not be useful for Australia’s national security interest. He informed Macron that Australia had deep and grave reservations about the arrangement with France.

In contrast, France argued otherwise. It therefore recalled its ambassadors from the U.S. and Australia, a serious rebuke, the first time a French envoy has been recalled from Washington, D.C. French foreign minister Jean-Yves Le Drian declared Australia’s decision was unacceptable behavior between allies and partners. It was a “stab in the back.” France, he held, had only learned of the agreement just before the official announcement, and it had not been involved in any previous

consultation on the issue with either the U.S. or Australia.

It is pertinent to note that France's unusual dramatic action and this diplomatic rupture with the U.S. was not the first time Macron has acted in similar histrionic fashion. He withdrew the French ambassador from Rome in February 2019 after the Italian deputy prime minister met with the protesting French gilets jaunes, and withdrew the ambassador from Ankara in October 2020 after Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan suggested Macron needed a mental health checkup.

It is also not the first time that Macron has acted sharply towards a supposed ally. France and the UK have been allies since the series of agreements, the Entente Cordiale, of April 1904 that resolved colonial disputes and established a diplomatic understanding between the two countries. Yet, competition has sometimes been more conspicuous than cooperation. Macron has taken a particularly line in negotiations over Brexit, and acted strongly, threatening to cut off electricity on the island of Jersey as part of a dispute over French fishing rights in the English Channel, unfairly criticizing the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine largely because it was invented in the UK. and even trying to keep British sausages out of Northern Ireland.

In a sense, Macron has acted in independent fashion, in realpolitik, as other French leaders have done. In 1966 President Charles de Gaulle pulled France out of the NATO military command. In July 1985 President Francois Mitterrand approved the bombing of the Green Peace Rainbow Warrior, which was protesting the planned French nuclear test in Mururoa, Polynesia. France opposed the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, leading Congressional cafeterias to rename French fries as "freedom fries."

The cause for the intensity of Macron's reaction to the cancellation of the submarine contract can be understood in

terms of economic loss or in ideological and strategic differences with the U.S. and UK, but it can also be seen in terms of political considerations. The French presidential election will occur in 2022 and electioneering has already begun. Macron is displaying his nationalist credentials as he is challenged by competing right wing and other candidates include Marine Le Pen, Xavier Bertrand, and Paris mayor Anne Hidalgo. At the moment Macron has 24% approval compared with 23% for Le Pen, and has a disapproval rating of 58%.

Yet, internationally Macron has some support. It is interesting that he did not withdraw the French ambassador from London, probably because he considers the UK as a “spare wheel” of the U.S., the main target. He may be consoled by the amicable statement of Boris Johnson on September 20, 2021 that he is very proud of the UK relationship with France, and “our love for France is ineradicable.” He may sing , “L’Amour toujours, je crois toujours a tes yeux.”