[**Going nuclear**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1647732/going-nuclear)

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HOW do you infuriate France and further antagonise China at one stroke? Such questions rarely, if ever, arise in international relations. Even in theory, they would likely be candidates for the ‘too absurd’ basket.

Last week, a trilateral announcement by the Australian and UK prime ministers and the US president managed to achieve this possibly unique outcome. The centrepiece of the mini-drama was the declaration that Britain and America would share with Australia the top-secret technology that would enable it in due course to operate nuclear-powered submarines.

Beijing’s instant dismay (and disdain) was predictable, given that hostility towards China is clearly a raison d’être of the reinvigorated triple alliance. It’s reaction, though, has been rather more muted than the fury flowing from France, which recalled its ambassadors from Washington and Canberra, cancelled celebrations of its historic relationship with the US, postponed defence talks with London, and has threatened to scuttle the prospect of a free trade agreement between Australia and the EU.

Five years ago, after an extended period of mulling over its options for replacing the submarines, based on a Swedish design, that had gone into service in the 1990s, Australia finally opted for a French model and signed a deal with Naval Group. There’s at least a bit of irony in the fact that Australia insisted on the original nuclear design being modified to support diesel-powered engines, because it lacks a nuclear industry. That contributed to delays and cost overruns, and eventually added up to $60bn — France’s biggest ‘defence’ deal.

Australia may regret its ‘forever partnership’ with the US.

There was a plethora of minor disputes and resentments along the way, but never any clear indication that the contract was likely be scrapped altogether — not even after the alternative US deal was in train. Even at the highest-level discussions with France where the submarine deal came up in the conversation, there was never the slightest hint from the Australians or Americans that it was in jeopardy. Hence it is hardly surprising that the French are mightily miffed, complaining about being stabbed in the back, and venting about alliances and friendships that turn out to be not what they seem.

The Chinese are likely to have been rather less surprised. Like the rest of the world, they tried to take Donald Trump’s ravings in their stride, and perhaps they knew better than to expect that the dial would substantially shift under the Biden administration. Beijing has been much less forgiving where Canberra is concerned, though. Both sides are to blame for a situation whereby Chinese leaders and officials refuse to so much as take their Australian counterparts’ calls, whereas they continue to engage with potentially hostile Japan and South Korea.

The US has far more troops in those two countries than it does in Australia, yet it’s hard to fault China’s accuracy in identifying the latter as a longer-term adversary.

Much of Australia’s wealth in recent decades has flowed from what it has been able to sell to China — not least iron ore, which has helped to sustain Australia’s economy during the Covid crisis. At least some of those resources no doubt go towards China’s steady military expansion — which Australia and its allies then grizzle about.

That kind of hypocrisy is hardly remarkable in this globalised world. At the same time, though, it’s absurd to see Australia’s UK-US deal as a novelty. For the first half of its existence as a supposedly independent nation, Australia considered itself part of the British empire, contributing its human resources whenever and wherever the mother country demanded them. As the UK pivoted towards Europe in the postwar period, Australia latched on to the US as a saviour and never let go, not even when America helped to catalyse a regime change in 1975.

The US role back then — foreshadowed by the 1973 Chilean military coup and followed by the travesty in Islamabad in 1977 — appears to have been based on concerns that its regional spying facility at Pine Gap in Australia’s Northern Territory might be jeopardised. No such concerns have surfaced ever since, and about a decade ago Australia joined the satellite nations that host US troops and military resources. It has officially been flagged that the American presence will grow.

Joe Biden, Boris Johnson and “that fella down under” — as Biden referred to Scott Morrison when he couldn’t remember his name — were all keen on a distraction for a variety of reasons. Only one of them, though, has succeeded in sharpening the edges of the cross hairs should the new cold war against China ever warm up into a mutually disastrous military confrontation.

The Chinese leadership can be accused of many things, but sheer stupidity isn’t one of them. Australia, on the other hand, thrives on mediocrity, personified by its political leadership — which has now completed the island-nation’s transformation into a sitting duck.

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