**French fury**

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The recent scrapping of a lucrative deal by the Australian government has infuriated France besides driving a wedge between Nato allies, prompting the French government to recall its ambassadors from the US and Australia. The $90 billion submarine programme deal was struck between Paris and Canberra some years ago. The government of Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison says that Canberra will build nuclear-powered submarines with the help of the US and the UK.

The new deal will see Australia enter into a strategic ‘forever partnership’ with the US and the UK. The details of the deal are yet to be finalised, but many believe that it will include the sharing of nuclear-powered submarine technology with Australia. Many Western analysts assert that the technology sharing clause was one of the factors that prompted the Morrison government to scrap the deal with France. Prospects of job creation in parts of Australia is said to be another factor.

The new deal seems to be part of a strategic alliance announced jointly by US President Joe Biden, UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson and his Australian counterpart Morrison last week in a videoconference. The three countries are believed to have set up a trilateral security pact aimed at countering China whose rise to power has been a major concern for Western ruling elites. The initiative named AUKUS is meant to forge a military alliance between the old allies.

Morrison seems optimistic over the outcome of the deal, believing that the three countries will draw up a joint plan over the coming 18 months for assembling the new Australian nuclear-powered submarine fleet, which will be built in Adelaide. Only six countries of the world are equipped with submarines propelled by nuclear reactors. Australia will be the seventh such state. Referring to the international treaty obligations on handling nuclear fuel, Morrison said, “This will include an intense examination of what we need to do to exercise our nuclear stewardship responsibilities here in Australia.” He added that his country was not seeking to acquire nuclear weapons or establish a civil nuclear capability.

The new deal has created acrimony not only between Australia and France but other Western powers as well. Although the Australian prime minister claims that he had informed French President Macron about the scrapping the night before it was announced, French officials felt betrayed. Some of them went to the extent of describing it as a stab in the back. The sense of rage and anger is visible from the media statements and interviews of French officials. In an interview with ABC Radio, French envoy to Australia Jean-Pierre Thebault said, “We discovered through [the] press that the most important person of this Australian government kept us in the dark intentionally until the last minute.”

The attitude of Australia may lead to sour relations between Canberra and the European Union where Paris wields a lot of influence. Australia’s trade minister, Dan Tehan, will visit Paris for meetings with his French counterpart in early October to discuss Australia’s hopes for a free trade agreement with the EU. France is already believed to have been using this influence to bar EU states from including Canberra into any free trade agreement. If that happens, it will further strain the ties between the two old allies of the Western world. The anger of France is not directed towards only Canberra; it is also furious over the attitude of London. Paris has cancelled a UK-France defence summit as a mark of protest against the UK role in the AUKUS deal.

Some French officials consider all three countries to be complicit in this scheme. French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian is more vocal than others. He recently denounced the deal, describing it as a “stab in the back” and accusing those involved of engaging in “duplicity, contempt and lies” over the past few months. Le Darian asserted that the deal constituted unacceptable behaviour between allies and partners whose consequences would affect the alliances and partnerships.

The UK and the US are trying to assuage Paris. Washington has expressed a willingness to engage Paris while the UK has also declared friendship with France ineradicable, but the French do not seem impressed. French diplomats in Washington cancelled a gala to celebrate ties between the US and France while it seems they are not ready to accept the excuses of London over the deal. It is interesting to note no other major country from the Western world has tried to reconcile between the allies.

The tensions between the four Western allies have put others in a precarious situation. EU members are close to both Paris and Washington. The US had sided with the European countries during the cold war, throwing its support behind the Western Europe in its move against the Soviet Union. It sent thousands of troops to ward off the menace of the Red Revolution besides pumping billions of dollars into the European economy in the aftermath of Second World War. It is the first time that France has called its envoys from the US and Australia, which is unusual.

But for European countries, picking sides could be catastrophic. For instance, according to some estimates, 20 to 25 percent of German exports are sent to the US market, which offers one of the best prices for these products. Its economy is heavily dependent on American buyers. If Berlin decides to side with Paris in this row, it could infuriate Washington, which could harm German economic interests. On the other hand, Berlin cannot run the EU effectively without the help of Paris, which is the second most important member of the union and its only nuclear power.

Canada and Japan are also two big allies of Washington, but at the same time, they want cordial ties with the EU where France wields a lot of influence. Japanese economy is not only heavily reliant on the EU market but lucrative US market is also crucial for the third largest economy. They seem to be facing a great dilemma. Picking any side could be disastrous for them while staying neutral would not be beneficial either. India, which hobnobs with the US, UK and France simultaneously, is also in a dilemma. Throwing support behind any party would be difficult for New Delhi.

So it seems that the row that has erupted between the Western allies will not be over any time soon. The two sides might also quarrel over other issues at the UN and other international forums. French influence is not confined to parts of Europe; Paris is said to be calling the shots in many African states as well where it has been a colonial power in the past. The US and UK also have their spheres of influence. Many fear that the trade row that has erupted in the Pacific may engulf other parts of the world as well. The US, UK and France are all major manufacturers and suppliers of arms. India, Pakistan, Israel, Middle Eastern countries and a number of other states are their buyers. They have fought a clandestine war in the past to secure lucrative arms deals. From Al Yamama to Euro Jet, the UK made all possible efforts to grab weapons sale deals while the US, under Trump, actively worked to capture the Middle Eastern market. The three nuclear powers and UNSC members have also vied for the large Indian market whose ruling elite has a strange fascination with the military build-up and intends to buy military hardware worth over $50 billion in coming years. So, it seems that this mad race of selling lethal arms will only intensify, creating more friction between these traditional allies and comrades of the cold war.

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