[**The politics of AUKUS**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1649467/the-politics-of-aukus)

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THE US administration’s [decision](https://www.dawn.com/news/1646779/australia-to-get-nuclear-subs-in-new-us-british-partnership) to get Australia to cancel its contract with France for the supply of conventional submarines and, instead, get nuclear-powered submarines of the type the Americans or British were using came as a rude shock to the French who were informed of the decision only hours before it was made public.

Initial expressions of deep umbrage by the French foreign minister, the [recall of French ambassadors](https://www.dawn.com/news/1647132) from Washington and Canberra and reports that the largely government-owned company that had made the initial agreement with the Australians was capable also of delivering nuclear-powered submarines contributed to what was termed a betrayal. The break between France — backed at least in some measure by Germany — and the Anglophones (the US, UK, New Zealand and Australia) seemed beyond repair.

Yet, within days a [Biden-Macron conversation](https://www.dawn.com/news/1647870) resulted in the return of the French ambassadors to Washington and Canberra. The White House said that “President Emmanuel Macron … and President Joe Biden … spoke on September 22, at the request of the latter, in order to discuss the implications of the announcement on September 15. The two leaders agreed that the situation would have benefited from open consultations among allies on matters of strategic interest to France and our European partners. President Biden conveyed his ongoing commitment in that regard”. This was as much of an apology as the French could get and the French president decided to accept this with alacrity.

**Editorial**: [*The AUKUS military pact has created major fissures between apparent allies*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1647913)

Why did President Macron, normally committed to upholding French ‘honour’, back down so quickly? The answer, I believe lies not in the fact that after the Biden-Macron conversation, “Secretary Blinken and Foreign Minister Le Drian spoke about plans for in-depth bilateral consultations on issues of strategic importance” and “the need for close cooperation with France … in the [Indo-Pacific] region”, but in the lesson France learnt in 2003 when it chose to play a leading role in opposing the US invasion of Iraq.

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According to reports then, a movement was started in Congress to punish the French for their temerity in challenging the US. On March 11, 2003, Republican US representatives Bob Ney and Walter B. Jones directed the three House cafeterias to change all references to French fries and French toast on menus, and replace them with Freedom fries and Freedom toast. This was followed by many complaints from importers of French products that the political disagreement between the two governments was leading to a boycott by American consumers of French products.

While I have not been able to track the exact drop in French exports to the US which usually amounted to $28.9 billion annually, retailers of French wines reported that the latter were being boycotted and Spanish, Italian and Australian wines being bought instead. The damage to the French economy was considerable and all the more noticeable since Germany that had been equally opposed to the Iraqi invasion suffered no such boycott. The French must have realised that, even while they prided themselves on the role they played in the American war of independence, they were not well regarded by the Americans. Possibly the Americans preferred to believe that the French support then was driven by French opposition to the British rather than genuine support for the American bid for independence.

In March 2003, the French embassy wondered whether the Freedom fries issue even merited a response when it was occupied by more serious concerns. But once the boycott began affecting French exports to its most important market outside Europe, the attitude changed. President Jacques Chirac had a “businesslike” conversation with president Bush but as far as one can tell it had little impact on the boycott.

With this memory of economics, the French now obviously decided that discretion was the better part of valour and accepted the apology of sorts that Biden offered according to the White House read-out of the Biden-Macron conversation. Firstly, this said that the call was initiated by President Biden and then went on to concede, as mentioned earlier, that “The two leaders agreed that the situation would have benefited from open consultations among allies on matters of strategic interest to France and our European partners.” The French accepted this with alacrity even though making it a concession for transatlantic unity. It must have rankled when it was only France that had been harmed. This was pragmatism at its best.

Did AUKUS represent breach of the non-proliferation regime the US had long championed? Kevin Rudd, a former Australian prime minister and currently president of the Asia Society is recognised as one of the most knowledgeable ‘China watchers’ in the Anglophone world. He has also been a student of nuclear proliferation issues. If I have understood the views he has expressed in his articles in and interviews to *Der Spiegel*, then the life of a nuclear or conventional submarine is 30 years as is the life of the nuclear power reactor on a submarine. Therefore, there will be no need for Australia to develop independent nuclear power generation. The Australians will therefore get 10 or 12 submarines. But beyond training on how to maintain these submarines there will be no transfer of technology, nor will the Australians get the independence to operate these submarines as they choose. In other words, the Australian submarines will only be adjuncts of the US navy, not an independent military force which they may use as a bargaining chip as they negotiate with their principal trading partner — China.

The Chinese reaction has been to view this as another, perhaps more ominous, step by the US towards military confrontation in the South China Sea. If this view is correct and there seems to be a great deal of merit to it, perhaps the global fears that this will lead to nuclear proliferation may prove to be unfounded. It does nevertheless call into question the US commitment to the non-proliferation regime and marks another step in the sharpening of differences between the two largest economies of the world. On top of the Covid pandemic this will be another burden the developing world has to bear.

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