

Biden gives Johnson short shrift even as UK ruling class lines up behind AUKUS

Thomas Scripps
22 September 2021

Prime Minister Boris Johnson's trip to the United States has underscored the foreign policy crisis confronting British imperialism in the wake of Brexit, amid the breakup of the post-Cold War order of international relations.

Having angered France and other European powers with the announcement of the Australia-UK-US (AUKUS) military pact last Wednesday, signing the UK up to a frontline role in America's war drive against China, Johnson visited President Joe Biden's White House yesterday in hope of a reward.

He was especially eager to make progress on a new free trade deal, with Britain now outside the European Union's single market—annual trade between the UK and the US was worth £200 billion in 2019. But nothing was forthcoming.

In questions with the media, Biden said noncommittally that he and Johnson were “going to talk a little bit about trade today and we're going to have to work that through”. Johnson had played down the prospect of a trade deal the day before, refusing to comment on whether an agreement could be reached before the next general election in 2024 and insisting, “we're going as fast as we can”.

After his meeting with Biden, Johnson was left to tout the ending of export bans on British beef and lamb as “solid incremental steps in trade”.

Biden also repeated his warning to the UK government not to jeopardise the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland during its Brexit conflict with the European Union. Sitting next to Johnson in the Oval Office, he stressed, “We spent an enormous amount of time and effort, the United States, it was a major bipartisan effort made.

“And I would not at all like to see, nor I might add would many of my Republican colleagues like to see, a change in the Irish accords, the end result having a closed

border in Ireland.”

He told the media he felt “very strongly” about the issue, earning him the moniker “Irish Joe” with the *Times* newspaper's political sketch writer. The paper's cartoonist commented on the meeting by portraying Johnson as Biden's loyal dog, with the caption, “US-UK relations as good as in decades”.

Johnson's intention with the AUKUS pact was summed up in a comment on Saturday by Dr Robin Niblett CMG, director and chief executive of Britain's influential Chatham House foreign policy think tank. “AUKUS,” he wrote, “reveals much about the new global strategic context”. Under the heading “America is still back”, he argued, “The AUKUS announcement showed that China's growing hard power is now eliciting a genuinely tough and structural political-military reaction.

“Across the Atlantic, it also allowed President Biden—flanked ‘virtually’ by the British and Australian prime ministers—to send the global message that America is indeed back, just three weeks after the ignominious retreat from Afghanistan and chaotic exit from Kabul. And it offered him the opportunity to remind the world that the Indo-Pacific is where the US will be putting its main effort in the future.”

He continued, “While the US is stepping up, the UK has shown it is in the mix, leveraging opportunities as they arise.” Meanwhile, “The EU looks like a bystander in comparison and ill-equipped for the geopolitical competition inherent in this new strategic context.” The UK and US should, Niblett concluded, “reach out to find ways to involve France and its EU partners in a meaningful, shared transatlantic approach to the Indo-Pacific.”

In other words, the UK, having detonated the European pillar of its foreign policy with Brexit, is responding to the sharpening US-Europe conflict by placing itself in pole position behind America's war drive against China. In

doing so, it hopes to secure a first share of the spoils in the Indo-Pacific and to use its role in the region as leverage with the European powers.

This policy has been largely supported and justified in the UK media, most bluntly by the BBC, whose Paris correspondent Hugh Schofield wrote on Sunday to advise France on the “hard truths” delivered by the AUKUS pact and the cancellation of its prior agreement with Australia.

Schofield explained, “The French must see there is no point in wailing about having been shoddily treated. They were.

“But who ever heard of a nation short-changing its defence priorities out of not wanting to give offence? The fact is that the Australians calculated they had underestimated the Chinese threat and so needed to boost their level of deterrence.

“They acted with steely disregard for French concerns but, when it comes to the crunch, that is what nations do.”

The traditional right-wing media, enthusiastic supporters of Brexit and ardent campaigners for a hardline anti-Chinese stance, have revelled in this first triumph of “Global Britain”, the undefined slogan of Johnson’s post-Brexit foreign policy. AUKUS has justified “the ambition outlined in the Government’s Integrated Review for British policy to ‘tilt’ towards the Indo-Pacific”, helped the UK break out of “European regionalism”, move “beyond NATO and the EU”, rekindle the “special relationship” and put itself “at the forefront of the development of new military technologies”, according to writers in the *Daily Telegraph*.

Its editors concluded Saturday, “The UK is an attractive geopolitical partner, with significant military and diplomatic advantages... Mr Macron will just have to get used to that.”

Other commentators have been more wary. The *Times* warned Johnson of the need “to repair the transatlantic relationship,” but stressed, “Confronting China’s growing assertiveness and threat to western values requires nations to work together. As the main EU strategic actor in the Indo-Pacific region, France has an important role to play”.

The *Financial Times* wrote of “trade-offs in rebuffing France... particularly when it comes to managing the threat from Russia. The purpose of NATO, so undermined by recent events in Afghanistan, needs now to be reaffirmed.”

These criticisms, however, were based on a fundamental agreement with the Johnson government’s Indo-Pacific strategy as the only way forward for British

imperialism. The *Times* wrote that the deal, “reaffirms links with traditional allies while helping contain an emerging threat from China”, while providing Britain “the continued assurance that it retains a pivotal place in the defence of the West”.

The FT’s chief foreign affairs correspondent explained a few days later, “Why AUKUS is welcome in the Indo-Pacific”. Its main worry over the treatment of France was that “Upsetting Paris could also have direct consequences for Washington’s efforts to constrain Beijing.”

The loudest note of caution was sounded by the *Observer*, which editorialised Sunday to accuse Johnson of “over-reliance on an unreliable America” and of failing to grasp “the need to keep the UK and Europe aligned on security, defence and other issues.” It warned, “Biden promised European partners last summer that post-Trump America was ‘back’ in terms of transatlantic cooperation. That’s not how it looks now as Paris, Berlin and Brussels contemplate a major rift over the conduct and structure of security policy in the Indo-Pacific.”

The paper’s editors speak for the concern in the British ruling class that the US takes fundamentally the same attitude to the UK as it does to the European powers and that the “America First” policy declared by Trump and still essentially pursued by Biden will ride roughshod over UK interests when it suits.

Yesterday’s events prove these fears well-founded. But so dependent is the UK government on proving itself a loyal ally to the US that Johnson followed up his failed appeals to Biden with a provocative jibe at France.

Asked about the reaction of Paris to the AUKUS deal, Johnson replied with the insulting *franglais* declaration, “I just think it’s time for some of our dearest friends around the world to *prenez un grip* about this and *donnez-moi un break*” .

Johnson’s empty-handed welcome in the US, far from cowing British imperialism, drives it to pursue an increasingly reckless foreign policy in desperate search for a way out of a deepening crisis.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact