Diplomatic clash between Australia and France highlights implications of militarist AUKUS pact

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Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison's attendance at the recent G20 and COP26 summits in Europe was dominated by an escalating war of words with French officials, which threatened a major diplomatic rupture.

The immediate cause of the conflict is Australia's cancellation of a $90 billion contract for France to construct a fleet of 12 diesel-powered attack submarines. The scuttling of the longstanding deal was publicly declared in September, as AUKUS, an aggressive military alliance of the US, Britain and Australia, aimed at preparing for war with China, was unveiled.

As part of the pact, Australia has been given access to American military technology to facilitate its construction of nuclear-powered submarines. It is, however, highly likely that Canberra will simply buy the vessels off the shelf from the US or Britain.

While the financial loss resulting from Australia's shelving of the French contract is undoubtedly a factor in the tensions, more broadly they reflect the far-reaching implications of the AUKUS agreement.

Declared without prior discussion with other NATO states, and explicitly directed against China, AUKUS has sidelined the European powers, which have their own ambitions in the Indo-Pacific, and have voiced concerns over the prospect of a full-scale US-led confrontation with Beijing. France, in particular, which still has colonial territories in the Pacific, considers itself a Pacific power.

Shortly after arriving in Rome for the G20 late last month, Morrison announced that he and Macron had held their first telephone conversation since AUKUS was signed. While the readouts of the discussion differed sharply on the French and Australian sides, Morrison described the call as the start of "the way back" to normalising relations. Initially, the French ambassador was recalled in protest over AUKUS and Macron refused to answer the Australian prime minister's calls.

Morrison then ostentatiously approached the French leader for a photo opportunity as the summit got underway, with the pictures then posted by his office.

The suggestion that the tensions had eased was immediately contradicted by Macron. Approached by the Australian media the next day, Macron declared that "when we have respect, you have to be true and you have to behave in line and consistent with this value." Asked whether he thought Morrison had lied to him by failing to give prior notice that the French deal would be terminated, Macron said: "I don't think, I know."

Morrison's problems then became worse when US President Joe Biden apologetically told Macron that the handling of the AUKUS announcement had been "clumsy." "I was under the impression that France had been informed long before that the [French] deal was not going through," Biden said.

The comments clearly implied that it was the Australian government that had misled France, with much of the Australian media reporting them as "Biden throwing Morrison under the bus."

Whatever the precise details of the discussions leading up to the termination of the crisis-ridden French submarine deal, there is no question that the sudden announcement of AUKUS was intended to send a message, not only to China, but also nominal US allies. It was a declaration that under Washington's leadership the US, Britain and Australia were ratcheting up the preparations for a major war to levels not seen in the past eight decades, and that they would act outside of the old NATO and other alliance relationships in the process.

Biden's comments were aimed at dampening down immediate tensions after France responded to the AUKUS announcement by also withdrawing its ambassador to the US amid official French denunciations of the "unilateral, brutal, unpredictable decisions." Biden reportedly discussed the issue of China at length with Macron as both affirmed their commitment to NATO and their support for "robust"

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collaboration in the Indo-Pacific. At the same time, Macron told reporters after the meeting: "Trust is like love: Declarations are good, but proof is better."

The seriousness of the tensions has been underscored by extraordinary leaking. The Australian media has been provided with a copy of a confidential report prepared by Biden's National Security Council in the lead-up to the AUKUS announcement indicating the US administration knew France would be blindsided by the initiative.

Text messages between Morrison and Macron purporting to show that Australia had given advance notice that the French contract could be terminated have also made their way to the media. In that case, government leaders have all but admitted to the leaking, asserting that it was necessary to refute Macron's claim that the Australian prime minister had lied.

Last Wednesday, the French ambassador to Australia, Jean-Pierre Thebault, delivered an address to the National Press Club in Canberra at which he described the abandonment of the previous submarine contract as a "stab in the back" and insisted that the "deceit had been intentional."

Thebault pointed to the underlying source of the tensions, insisting that France would remain an Indo-Pacific power. He complained that the AUKUS announcement was in "stark contrast with Australia's alleged intent to seek greater involvement by European allies in the Indo-Pacific region."

The clash, still unresolved, has intensified a crisis of the Morrison government. It is faced with widespread popular opposition, as well as concerns within the ruling elite that it is not pressing ahead rapidly enough with imposing austerity measures in the interests of the major corporations, and accelerating Australia's military build-up.

In the press, much of the focus has been on the immediate details of the row and the government's handling of them. The broader implications of AUKUS, as placing Australia on the frontlines of a potential global war, have largely been obscured.

Foreign Minister Marise Payne noted last week that the submarines were just one aspect of the new pact. In addition, it provides for expanded military collaboration across the board between Washington, London and Canberra, as well as expanded basing arrangements for the US in northern Australia and elsewhere in the country.

The turn to more expensive nuclear-powered submarines itself points to the preparations for conflict. The vessels have superior stealth, range, endurance and speed to their diesel-powered counterparts under conditions in which one of Australia's central roles in a war with China would be to assist in dominating the waters of the Indo-Pacific.

The response of the *Australian*'s foreign editor Greg Sheridan to the diplomatic crisis with France was revealing. Having initially lambasted Biden's response as an undermining of the Australian government, he changed tack late last week.

Whatever problems had arisen, Sheridan insisted, the key issue was to press ahead. The Murdoch columnist, who has close ties to the military-intelligence apparatus, revealed that the Australian and US governments "will within the next couple of weeks begin rolling out a series of announcements and initiatives under the rubric of the AUKUS deal to bring the agreement to life, and to demonstrate the work being done—now with some urgency—on the nuclear-propelled submarine project."

Dozens of full-time military operatives are working on the project in both countries, Sheridan reported. The completion of a review of the submarine project could be brought forward from 18 months to 9-12 months. The US could begin leasing nuclear-powered submarines within five to ten years.

Sheridan called for a campaign to "continually" explain the importance of AUKUS to "the electorate." While he did not elaborate, this was a veiled reference to the need for the political and media establishment to overcome mass opposition to militarism and war among workers and young people.

For its part, the opposition Labor Party has responded to the diplomatic stoush with France by questioning Morrison's ability to advance the "national interest" on the international stage. Labor, as a pro-war party of big business and the banks, is pitching that it would be better placed to advance the interests of Australian imperialism, including its preparations for a US-led war with China.

Labor enthusiastically welcomed the announcement of AUKUS. Its federal leader, Anthony Albanese, last week bemoaned that the conflict with France may have "created problems for our relationship with the United States."

The diplomatic rifts, which are a symptom of how advanced the moves towards war are, demonstrate the urgent need for the building of an international anti-war movement of the working class, directed against all of the governments plotting conflict, and the capitalist profit-system which is its root cause.

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