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The submarine row that is sinking diplomatic relations_20.09.21

The three-way pact between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States to build four new submarines, nuclear propelled but not nuclear armed, for delivery in about four years' time for the Australian Navy, may or may not alter the strategic balance in Southeast Asia and the South Seas. Time will tell.

But the deal certainly takes first prize for diplomatic ineptitude and the creation of bad feelings all round.

France is furious that its plan to supply the four vessels, already far advanced, has been swept aside by the new pact. Ambassadors have been recalled from both Washington and Canberra.

Canada feels left out of the pact as well and Japan has the right to feel the same way. The Chinese, predictably, see it all as a revival of the Cold War, although they have only themselves to blame. The Americans are caught up in an anti-China crusade, maybe to compensate for the Afghan fiasco, and with a leadership obsession in South Asia that belongs to the past.

The U.K. is tagging along with the United States, but is paying a fearful price in damage to cross-Channel relations when a renewed close link — a new entente — with its old ally France has been a primary goal following the break with the European Union as a whole. The Commonwealth dimension to the plan, which it would have paid the U.K. to emphasize, also seems to have been overlooked.

NATO has also taken a hit, with leading European countries regarding the pact as one more sign that trans-Atlantic links are fraying, since no one in Washington bothered to consult them before announcing the deal. Talk has grown in Brussels of a new Euro-centric defense force to look after its own security, with reduced dependence on a less reliable America. It's an old idea and, of course, will fail. But it's airing again, this time by the president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, is evidence of the mounting feelings on the matter.

Altogether, it adds up to a fine harvest of thoroughly soured relations. For the British, the rift with France is particularly unfortunate, both in its timing and its nature. Since 2010, long before Brexit, the U.K. has been building a strong and intimate defense partnership with France. New levels of cooperation have been developing not only at the technical level but also in the field, with British and French forces addressing together some of the never-ending developing security

problems of Central Africa and the Sahel, where terrorist networks have been stretching their tentacles ever deeper.

There is also the plain fact that the British as a whole are fond of France, live there in large numbers and have always welcomed a substantial French population in Britain. London is said to be the seventh largest French city by population numbers and the two nations' cultures are deeply and happily intertwined, regardless of Brexit differences.

Snubbing France now seems like madness. One wonders what our diplomats were doing and what they are paid for.

On the broader strategic level, there is the question of what exactly this new deal, which includes a whole range of associated technical links and intelligence backups, will really do to check China's endless surly behavior and provocations, which have exploded in number during the Xi Jinping era, draining away much of the world's goodwill toward China that existed ten years ago. And will it hinder or speed up the slide toward an outright clash over Taiwan?

The trouble is that U.S. President Joe Biden's China containment policy is based on principles and beliefs that belong to the past. All the talk is of reasserting American primacy and leadership in Asia. Yet most countries in the region, while they may want friendship and trade with the biggest powers, are nowadays not nearly so keen to be tied down under anyone's sphere of influence, whether American, Chinese, or others. That is not the way the digitalized, hyper-connected, networked world now operates. Shifting alliances and entirely new network institutions are more the order of the day.

There is, finally, the matter of what the defense and technology worlds will look like in four years' time. Will these planned super-silent underwater craft that are virtually undetectable be China's best deterrent, or will the conflict of influence and control be fought in arenas other than the vast waters around Australia and in the South China Sea?

Ascendancy is much more likely in the years immediately ahead to result from maintaining dominance over communications and of cyberspace in space itself and in the winning of hearts and minds in Africa where the Chinese are now the largest investors, with a need to counter the Belt and Road initiative with something more attractive.

Above all, just as the Chinese and the Russians are beavering away all the time to undermine democracy, the democratic nations should be working all the time to erode the foundations on which the over-personalized authoritarian regimes and their trouble-making agendas rest.

The digital age empowers the grass roots and protest movements as never before, especially when they are coordinated. Reports grow of the Kremlin being flummoxed by ceaseless online demands for more democracy. Reports grow of the Chinese Communist Party having to search around for new ways to meet surging people power, including taking on the private sector empires that have been the very driving force of China's rising economic power.

This is all to the good and where the struggle for world peace, progress and freedom will be ultimately decided. Our diplomats and strategists should spend more time and resources in these areas and less time offending friends and neighbors over the building of submarines.