

Lies, Lies and Nuclear Submarines

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It looked like something of an ambush, but a coterie of Australian journalists had their man where they wanted him. Between sessions at the G20 Summit in Rome, and French President Emmanuel Macron found himself blunter than usual. The sundering of the relationship between Australia and France over the new trilateral security relationship between Canberra, Washington and London, and, more importantly, the rescinding of the submarine contract with Australia, was playing on his mind. Did he think, came the question, whether he had been lied to by the Australian Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, about the intended scrapping of the Franco-Australian submarine deal with the creation of AUKUS? “I don’t think, I know,” [came the definitive answer](#).

The [response](#) from Morrison was one of shameless dissembling. Making sure that Australian audiences and the news waves would only pick up select gobbets, he told the press that the French president had attacked, or “sledged” Australia and its good burghers. He expressed concern about “the statements that were made questioning Australia’s integrity and the slurs that have been placed on Australia”. He was “not going to cop sledging at Australia.”

A full [reading of Macron’s words](#) in the brief encounter suggests nothing of the sort. Australia and France were bound up in history and blood enriched ties going back to two world wars. “Your country was shoulder to shoulder with us during the wars. You had fighters with us when our freedom was at stake. We have, we do have the same values.” He respected “sovereign choices” but it was also vital to “respect allies and partners.” It was the conduct of the Australian government he had issue with, something that Macron thought “detrimental to the reputation of your country and your Prime Minister.”

Morrison’s [defence](#) proved shoddy, confusing the issue of having difficulties with the contractual relationship with France to build twelve diesel electric submarines with the issue of announcing an intended divorce. As with lovers who read off different relationship scripts, the Australian Prime Minister is convinced that Macron must have known when they met in June that something had soured. He had “made it very clear that a conventional diesel-powered submarine was not going to meet Australia’s strategic requirements. We discussed that candidly.” He did, however, say that alternatives were not discussed, they

being “in confidence”.

The strategic environment, claimed Morrison with tediousness, had changed. There were also issues specific to the contract with the French defence firm Naval, including “following through with commitments on Australian industry content.” There were issues with delays; issues with cost. “These were matters that we raised quite regularly and indeed I raised with President Macron at each opportunity when we either spoke over the phone or we had our bilateral meetings going on for a number of years.”

Morrison’s mendacity is also pronounced in how he justifies pursuing the nuclear submarine option with the United States. Wishing to cuckold France, the Australian prime minister began to look around, with eyes firmly fastened on Washington’s formidable hardware. But, using the reasoning of any adulterer who is found out, it wasn’t a true relationship at that point; Washington and Canberra were dealing with “the nuclear stewardship issues”. “At the same time, we were working through in good faith with Naval to address the problems that we had in the contract.” Such a marriage; such a commitment.

In the Scotty from Advertising appraisal of the world, dissatisfaction can be retooled and packaged as separation and nullification. What Macron thought he heard or understood is less relevant than what Morrison thought he said. He might even believe it.

The Biden administration has also done its fair share of dissimulative manoeuvring in this affair. In [his meeting](#) with Macron at the Villa Bonaparte in Rome on October 29, President Joe Biden was fluffy and buttery. France, he assured the French President, was “the reason, in part, why we became an independent country.” Asked on whether the relationship between France and the US had been “repaired”, Biden was apologetic: “Well, the answer is: I think what happened [over the announcement of the submarines] – to use an English phrase, what we did was ‘clumsy’. It was not done with a lot of grace.”

This gave Biden the cue to place Morrison before an oncoming truck. “I was under the impression certain things had happened that hadn’t happened.” To clarify, he was “under the impression that France had been informed long before that the [French-Australian submarine] deal was not going through. I, honest to God, did not know you had not been.”

What, then, had Morrison told Biden he was doing about the French and ending the conventional submarine affair? *The Australian*, [equipped with a confidential document](#) detailing a communications timeline on the new submarine nuclear announcement, suggests that Biden’s full grasp of the verity should also be questioned. The 15-page document, approved by officials of Biden’s National Security Council, makes the point that France would only be informed of the new arrangements on September 16.

Time was also spent in the Eisenhower Executive Office building pondering how Australia might best calm an indignant France. There was also concern expressed on how other powers might react. Little consideration was given to the fact that any anger might be directed against the US, least of all from France. Perhaps, [suggests](#) Greg Sheridan of the same newspaper with a degree of charity, Biden has reached a point in his life where he can’t remember what he can’t remember.

The Morrison government has also taken to the distasteful practice of selective leaking in bolstering its quicksand position, a tactic which further suggests a diminution of an already less than impressive political office. A [prodding text](#) from Macron to Morrison, sent two days

prior to the AUKUS announcement and the cancellation of the contract, involved a query as to whether good or bad news could be expected about the French submarines. The vulgar insinuation here is that Macron supposedly had an inkling that something was afoot from the Australian side, which hardly counts as fully informed awareness. Naturally, Morrison's response is not noted. The Elysée further denies suggestions that Canberra made several warning efforts regarding the AUKUS announcement.

An Elysée official [expressed bafflement](#) at the tactic. "Disclosing a text message exchange between heads of state or government is a pretty crude and unconventional tactic." It may be crude, and it may be unconventional, but this furnishes an apt summation of the Australian Prime Minister's view of diplomacy.

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