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When It Comes to Letting Down Allies, Trumpism and Bidenism Have Much in Common



Photograph by Nathaniel St. Clair

Trumpism was never quite what it seemed to the rest of the world when it came to America's actions as opposed to his words. The tone was always belligerent, but Trump went out of his way not to start any wars. As for the slogan "America First", this was not so much about an isolationist US and more about the US acting unilaterally in what Trump saw as its own best interests.

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Bidenism is turning out to be not so very different from Trumpism. Joe Biden carried out to the letter Donald Trump's ruthless deal with the Taliban, agreed in February 2020, to abandon the Afghan government, which had been excluded from negotiations about its fate. European allies of the US learned little about the American pull-out plan from Kabul airport, even as it was under way.

Now Biden has followed up his unilateralism in Afghanistan with his surprise announcing of an agreement for the US, along with Britain, to help Australia build nuclear-powered submarines to deploy against China in the years ahead. By arbitrarily cutting out the French from their \$66bn contract to supply diesel-powered submarines, Biden behaved in the true Trump tradition of causing greater outrage to an ally than dismay to a potential enemy.

The response of China to an alliance clearly directed against it was angry, but this was still mild compared to the apoplexy among senior French leaders at their public humiliation. "This brutal, unilateral and unpredictable decision reminds me a lot of what Mr Trump used to do," said French foreign minister Jean-Yves Le Drian. "I am angry and bitter. This isn't done between allies. It's really a stab in the back."

A betrayal it may have been, but the French showed a certain naivete, as well as poor intelligence, in not seeing that something like this might be on the cards. When it comes to back-stabbing an ally, there was the recent precedent in Afghanistan and, a couple of years back, another ominous pointer when Trump shocked the Saudis, with whom he was so close, when he failed to retaliate against a devastating missile attack on Saudi oil facilities in September 2019 that was clearly orchestrated by Iran.

Gulf monarchies discovered to their extreme alarm that the American protective umbrella, in which they had previously trusted, was not quite what it seemed to be. It turned out not to include going to war on their behalf, a realisation that will have been reinforced by the Afghan shock and is radically reshaping regional politics.

Complaints by those let down by the US – be they in Paris or Riyadh or in wherever the dispersed Afghan government has sought refuge – are common enough in the history of diplomacy. After all, it was President Charles de Gaulle who said that, "treaties are like young girls and roses – they last as long as they last."

True this piece of realpolitik about the impermanency of relations between nation states may be, but the Australia-UK-US (Aukus) submarine deal – coming after the Kabul rout and the non-defence of Saudi Arabia – gives a sense that tectonic changes are shaking the

way the world works. Biden, who was full of “America-is-back” rhetoric at the start of his presidency, is now treating some of his allies as cavalierly as Trump ever did.

The Aukus alliance is just the sort of Anglo-Saxon line-up most likely to infuriate the French and worry the EU. It will energise European states to try to pursue a distinct and less confrontational policy towards China than before. If they fail to do so, and the omens are not good given their impotence in successive crises in the Middle East and the Balkans, then they become even more marginalised.

But rejoicing among Brexiteers that Britain was right to leave a foundering EU vessel are premature, because British reliance on the US is greater than ever. This carries unpredictable risks as well as dubious advantages, as Britain discovered during the Iraq war, which Britain joined as America’s principal foreign military ally in 2003 and spent the following six years trying to escape without offending the Americans. The calamitous method chosen was to send British military forces to Helmand province in Afghanistan, which turned out to be an even deadlier place than Iraq.

Joining the US and Australia in upping the confrontation with China carries similar risks. It is not “a profound strategic shift”, as Boris Johnson claims, since nothing much is going to happen for over a decade. Cold war threat inflation about China having the world’s largest navy is absurd, since ships that are little more than minnows have been counted as part of the Chinese fleet.

But what Britain would do if the new cold warriors are correct in their warnings and China does indeed invade Taiwan? This is an important question for “global” Britain because it means standing tall against even taller opponents like China and Russia in the hope that they show restraint or the US gives unstinting support.

The dependency is risky because American foreign policy is determined by its domestic political agenda, and never more than at present. A motive for Biden trumpeting his new alliance against China is that it projects strength and diverts attention away from the weakness displayed during the chaotic US exit from Kabul. Dominating American TV screens over the last month, the rout sent Biden’s approval rating in the opinion polls spiralling down to 42 per cent and his disapproval rating up to 50 per cent – the first time his ratings have been negative since he took office.

Britain wants to posture as a great power, but has less and less means of doing so, except as a humble spear carrier for the US. Not all this can be blamed on Johnson and his jingoistic flag wavers in government, because they are only taking advantage of a public assumption that Britain possesses levers of power that no longer function.

Dominic Raab may have lost his job as foreign secretary because he lolled too long beside the swimming pool at his luxury hotel in Crete as the Taliban was capturing Kabul. But had Raab hastily returned to London – or drowned in the hotel pool – it would not have made the slightest difference to events in Afghanistan.

Public and media misperception of the real power of the British government gives an air of unreality to much of British political life at home and abroad. Six years ago, debate raged on whether or not Britain should launch bombing raids against Isis in Syria, with all sides ignoring the fact that Britain did not have the planes or the intelligence to do anything significant – something subsequently admitted by the RAF officer in charge.

The pretence that Britain is once again a power in the South China Sea and Pacific can only be achieved by complete reliance on the US, ignoring the lessons of the Iraq and Afghan wars.

Patrick Cockburn is the author of [War in the Age of Trump](#) (Verso).

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