

John Torpey 00:05

The United States, Australia, and the UK have just signed an agreement to provide nuclear submarines to Australia that France had thought it was contracted to deliver. Hailed as a strategic victory in the West's competition with China, the French withdrew their ambassadors from the US and Australia in response. What's happening here? Does this agreement sharpen the antagonisms between China and the US and other Western countries? How serious is the rift with France? What are the long term consequences of this deal for Europe and the rest of the world?

John Torpey 00:39

Welcome to International Horizons, a podcast of the Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies that brings scholarly and diplomatic expertise to bear on our understanding of a wide range of international issues. My name is John Torpey, and I'm director of the Ralph Bunche Institute at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York.

John Torpey 00:59

Today we discuss the AUKUS agreement with Gareth Evans, former Foreign Minister of Australia, and holder of a number of other ministerial posts in the Australian government as well. He also spent nearly a decade as president and CEO of the International Crisis Group from 2000 to 2009, followed by 10 years as Chancellor of the Australian National University. We speak to him today from Melbourne. Thanks so much for taking the time to be with us today, Gareth Evans.

Gareth Evans 01:33

My pleasure, John.

John Torpey 01:34

Great to have you. Thanks so much. So maybe just for starters this is a bit of a complicated story, maybe you could just start by explaining for our listeners, just what this AUKUS agreement entails?

Gareth Evans 01:49

Well, it's basically a technology cooperation agreement. It's not a new treaty. But it does signify a much greater commitment to giving Australia access to high quality technology, not only these new nuclear power submarines, which is the focal point of the current attention, but also a whole lot of other stuff relating to artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, missile defense capability, and so on. So it will further deeply enmesh Australia in its technological dependence on the United States when it comes to this whole security space, which is not something new. This will be a change in quantum rather than kind, but it is significant clearly, and it's certainly being painted as such.

Gareth Evans 02:36

There's a hell of a lot of hyperbole going around about this in terms of its significance, its implications, what it all means in terms of the whole sort of "anti-China Hawk brigade" implications, as you say, for France, and so on. Implications but for a proliferation of nuclear safety. Every one of these issues is on the table and every one of them has been hyped, basically, I think in the in the current debate. But it is significant and what it will involve basically, is Australia making a commitment to go nuclear propelled, which makes a hell of a lot of sense from our own internal, logistic and defense capability perspective.

And doing so in cooperation clearly, with the United States and the UK, which is the only other country to which the US is currently made available that nuclear propulsion technology.

Gareth Evans 03:27

It will mean tearing up a contract --that with France-- which involved the supply of 12 diesel propelled, non-nuclear propelled boats. There was an option for us to choose the French nuclear propelled alternative (we can go into it if you'd like that), reasons why that might not have seemed attractive either in the past or now to the Australians. But the truth of the matter is, even though it will take another 18 months of negotiations to bear down before this is sort of finalized, and there's a whole bunch of issues that need to be clarified before that happens.

Gareth Evans 04:01

What we do have is a deal on the table, the centerpiece of which is for Australia to acquire eight or more really capable nuclear powered submarines, plus a whole bunch of other technology over the future, which will certainly add a lot to our own capability, which I think any sovereign country is entitled to do; whatever the risk environment, it's a legitimate position to take. But none of this is going to happen, the submarine stuff is not going to happen for at least a decade, in terms of the lead time for building, acquiring, and training, the capability we need domestically. And some people are saying it might not be until even 2040 by the time these things become, you know, fully operational. So that means we all need to quiet down a bit in terms of the implications of this; for the current strategic environment, the rather volatile environment we're in East Asia at the moment.

Gareth Evans 04:53

And it should be seen I think, basically, it's just an exercise in a sovereign country ourselves, Australia, building a defense capability we may need in the foreseeable future. We have been attacked in the past, we were bombed during World War Two by the Japanese in our northern approaches. We've got a huge continent to defend, and we've got legitimate defense capability needs. But there's a lot of sensitivities about this particular deal as your introduction has already acknowledged.

John Torpey 05:19

Right. So what explains all the hype? I mean, you know, you've referred to this several times now that a lot of this has been overblown and partially it may not happen for 20 years. To what do you attribute the hype?

Gareth Evans 05:34

Well, there's a lot of hot button issues here. There's the whole nuclear proliferation issue. Does this signal some kind of intent by a non-nuclear weapon state to start playing games that ultimately might lead to nuclear weapon acquisition? That's something that, you know, I'm totally opposed to. And even just to raise that issue obviously generates a lot of emotion. It raises issues clearly about the Australia-US relationship and the extent of the alliance commitment on both sides, but in particular, the extent to which it is going to bind Australia inexorably into following the US down every rabbit hole you might want to take us in the future.

Gareth Evans 06:22

And there's real questions of sovereign independence here, real questions that go to some of the things we've done in the past, Vietnam, Iraq in 2003, being the most obvious ones, when there was, frankly, neither international law legitimacy nor moral legitimacy in us joining those particular wars. But we did so you know, for insurance policies sorts of reasons, because we thought the United States wanted us to or because we wanted the United States to want us to. So that's a hot button issue, particularly in Australia and not so much elsewhere.

Gareth Evans 06:57

It's a hot button issue, generating a lot of hype at the moment, because it has been so obviously and easily painted as part of this whole reaction against Chinese rise, Chinese assertiveness in the region. This --however much I and others paint this as a longer term legitimate decision to build capability, to deal with any particular contingency that might arise in the future as any country is entitled to do-- of course, it's being painted and not very well disguised as such by some of our political participants. Of course, it's being painted as an immediate reaction to an immediately perceived anxieties as far as China is concerned.

Gareth Evans 07:39

Another dimension of it, which has generated some emotion, particularly in Australia, is the fact that the United Kingdom has come back into the picture. It's not just a two-way thing, it's a three-way thing. So here we are getting the old Anglosphere story out and about again. That's a hot button in the region. Australia, particularly when I was Foreign Minister, Labour governments have mightily striven to avoid that characterization of us being obsessed with the Anglosphere. I and others have said on on multiple occasions that, you know, our future lies with our geography, not with our history.

Gareth Evans 08:15

It's one thing to be closely linked to the United States, because of the United States as a power and obviously commitment, economic power, as well as commitment to the East Asian region, the role is played in status to stabilizing the region. But to have another sort of burst of nostalgia with the United Kingdom is for many people, just an emotional bridge too far, and certainly generates some sense of reaction in our immediate region, 'What the hell is Australia up to? We thought you guys were serious about being enmeshed with us.'

Gareth Evans 08:47

So I mean, that's not a bad collection of reasons, I think, why a lot of emotion has fed into this. You've got a whole whole bunch of people who are invested at one side or other of these various debates, who are keen to sort of talk them up. And then my basic perspective is that it's time for, it's time to take a breath and just look at things one by one, issue by issue in their proper perspective, and take some of the hype out of this, but that hard to do in the current environment.

John Torpey 09:18

Understood, well, a certain amount of the emotion has certainly come from the French side in all this and I wonder if you could comment. I mean, the New York Times ran two articles which said seem to me exactly opposite things about the French emotion. Serge Schmemmann, who once was

correspondent there I guess, said that "they're upset but they'll get over it". Whereas Sylvie Kauffmann from Le Monde was much more inclined to take it all very seriously. So I wonder how you see all that?

Gareth Evans 09:52

Well, the French reaction has been very strong stab in the back terminology, lies terminology, treason terminology, perfidious Albion Rides Again, Anglosphere Rides Again. I mean, it's a very, very strong French reaction. And I do have to say that the Australian handling of this diplomatically has not been a thing of beauty. The Americans left it essentially to us --you left to us to manage that relationship-- but I don't think we managed it very well. The view was taken that secrecy had to be maintained in terms of putting together the AUKUS deal. And that the French simply could not be given any heads up in advance, they just had to be told the very last minute, and obviously, that's generated one hell of a negative reaction.

Gareth Evans 10:38

How serious is it all? Look, the contract was in trouble with the French. And both sides knew that it was in trouble and needed some fundamental rethinking. And it's silly to pretend otherwise. The costs had wildly blown out from AU\$ 50 billion, even you know, when we're only just five years down the track of what a 20, 30 year project, it costs are already blown out from an anticipated \$ 50 billion Australian which is what about 35, or something US to \$90 billion dollars, an eye watering figure already before any boats anywhere near delivery.

Gareth Evans 11:17

Delivery times are blown out. Endless discussions about whether or not the French had fully met their pre-commitments to having a significant Australian component in the building of these things, and so on and so on, and so on. Fundamental rethinking, of course, going on about whether the whole enterprise was misconceived from the start by buying basically a French nuclear propelled boat, but on the basis that they'd take out the reactors and put in diesel power and fit it together in that sort of cobbled together fashion.

Gareth Evans 11:49

So that the whole contract, you know, and that the French knew that there was some rethinking going on. And I think under those circumstances, we could have been a lot more honest with them in the way the issue was handled. How much of that indignation is, is genuine, how much is given a little bit of extra momentum by forthcoming French presidential elections, and all the rest of it? I mean, that's a matter for judgment. I mean my view is that the French reaction, even though some of it is a little bit over the top, perhaps more than they realistically were or should be doing given the background with all this.

Gareth Evans 12:31

My judgment is that a lot of the resentment is very, very real, indeed, that is not going to play at all well, in terms of Australia's aspirations to have free trade agreements, and so on with the Europeans. More generally, given the dominance, the French are now going to have in Europe with Merkel's departure. And of course, the French are significant players in the whole Indo-Pacific region, much more than any other European power. I mean, the French and the territories in the Pacific, their role in the Indian

Ocean, their relationship with India is long standing. It's not very smart, from our point of view, to burn in one gigantic conflagration, you know, the trust and the relationship that we have with them. It's going to take a long time to put those pieces together.

John Torpey 13:17

Right. So there's another country that may have reason to be aggrieved by this development and that's not mentioned in any of the agreement itself. And that, of course, is China. And I wonder what you would say about how China is reacting, how they should react and what they how they see all this?

Gareth Evans 13:39

Well, I mean, you've got the four negative blasts from the Foreign Ministry spokesman saying this is absolutely unconscionable. And you've got the the Chinese "wolf warrior" media, the Global Times and so on, saying this is Australia is setting itself up as a target in a nuclear war. I mean, the language has been very, very tough.

Gareth Evans 14:01

My own instinct is that there's nothing in this that really will faze the Chinese and will be regarded by them as something beyond any expectation. They know very well that our security relationship with the United States is strong, unchallengeable, and is going to continue to exist. They know that their own build up of even more significant military capability in recent times. They know perfectly well that their overreach, as we would describe, it in the South China Sea has been generating reaction elsewhere. They know that it's necessarily the case that all countries, with the establishment of the Quad being another piece of the equation. They know that there's a lot of thinking going on in the region about the necessity to build stronger defense capability against future contingencies and in stronger cooperation.

Gareth Evans 14:59

They know that they've got to expect much more significant pushback of a more visible kind than they've had in the past, to some of that sort of military adventurism. And you know that they'll take on that on board and won't be particularly spooked by it. Obviously, it's not going to help our presently very fragile and very broken, bilateral relationship. Broken, I have to say, not just because of Chinese actions, which have been problematic in a whole number of dimensions; ones I've mentioned already plus, you know, human rights issues, Uyghurs, Hong Kong, and so on, issues about Taiwan. It's also been put at risk that Australian relationship with China because a lot of missteps of our their own. I've written about this at some length in the past, we've overdone the hype ourselves, about China threats, about foreign interference, about God knows what else. Our language has been impolitic, to say the least. And, you know, we've got ourselves into a bit of a hole and this latest AUKUS deal is not going to help us get out of that hole.

Gareth Evans 16:06

But at the same time, look, the basic relationship with China is going to be for Australia, the way it is for many other countries now in the East Asian region, that is to say, our primary security relationship is going to go on being with the United States. Whatever doubts we might have about the degree of commitment to the region of the United States, or the degree of commitment to any of us, if we get into trouble, that's a separate issue, which we can come back to. And they know perfectly well, everybody

knows perfectly, there's a whole bunch of countries that have a primary security relationship with the United States and the primary economic relationship with China. Every one of us, country after country after country in the region, has China as its major economic commercial partner. And that's just a reality. And we've got to somehow navigate this without taking complete sides. And it's going to be hard to do. But we should.

Gareth Evans 17:05

The final point, I think, it won't be the final point in our conversation, but for now, the final point to make is, look, the notion that China is a military risk now or in the foreseeable future, to any of us, in the region, is I think wildly wildly overstated. There's nothing in the Chinese psyche or nothing in the Chinese national interest that would remotely want them to wage aggressive war against any other sovereign country in the region now or for the indefinitely foreseeable future. Taiwan's a separate issue, we all know the volatility of that and the absolute need to walk on eggshells to stop that one careening out of control. We all know the possibilities of small, small dust ups becoming major conflicts because of miscalculation and all the rest of it.

Gareth Evans 17:55

But if you are talking about Japan, 1930s style waging deliberate war to gain territorial or other acquisitions, I think, you know, that's just basically nonsense. So we all ought to settle down and drop that anxiety. I mean, American concern about maintaining its primacy, the P words primacy, predominance, preeminence, that's another story. I mean, China's obviously going to go on resisting that, but militarily resisting it militarily attacking America militarily detecting any other country in the region? No, I mean, that's just not remotely in China's interest. And I can't believe that they would deliberately go down that path, anytime in the indefinitely foreseeable future.

John Torpey 18:38

At the same time, I mean, you've mentioned the Quad, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue that has been in the news lately and highlights new or at least renewed alliances with partners in the region that seem more or less aimed at China. But in any case, it all sort of fills out a picture of this, you know, long running pivot to Asia. And I wonder how you see the United States really turning itself in that direction, and what are the consequences for Europe? I mean, one thing that I wonder about, what is the UK doing in this particular agreement? Why are they even involved? But the bigger question is really the shift to an Asian centered kind of worldview in Washington.

Gareth Evans 19:36

Well, first on the Quad, just briefly, it's not a new formal alliance, and it's not yet a fully fledged security relationship. It's got other dimensions as well. It's heading in that direction. Clearly because its participants not the US but Australia, Japan and India all feel the need to send a signal to China, that there is some collective resistance to potential overreach by it in East Asia and in the Indian Ocean. It's mainly more than in anything else a signaling device and, you know, multilateral cooperative exercise at the time, we're going to see a bit more of. In terms of, you know, the US position, I mean, clearly the Asian region is where --the East Asian region, the Indo-Pacific, if you want to broaden it out-- is, you know, the centerpiece of what's left of the of the 21st century. We moved from a Euro-Atlantic centered

century to an Indo-Pacific centered century. That doesn't mean the Europeans are relegated to the backstairs of history or world affairs. Clearly, they're very, very significant players.

Gareth Evans 20:52

But in terms of where the opportunities lie, economically where the risks lie, in geostrategic terms, all the action, frankly, now is centered in this part of the world. The US has had to recognize that coming to terms with the implications of all of this, for US primacy is very difficult for US policymakers. And none of them is prepared to talk the talk of, well, talk of coexistence, yes, but not more than equal sort of power sharing. It's so much part of the political psyche in America to have this notion that, you know, 'We are exceptional, we're number one, we're going to stay number one.' This is incredibly counterproductive, I have to say, for everyone else in the region, and is something the Americans are going to have to think about.

Gareth Evans 20:54

I've often quoted in this respect, if I can just interpolate, a wonderful line I heard from Bill Clinton, in a private meeting, never ever said this publicly, so stock a term. Back in 2002, I think it was just a couple of years after he left the presidency, when he said, in response to a question in the small gathering, 'America's got two choices about the way in which we use this great and rivaled, then unrivaled, economic and military power that we have. Choice number one is to use that power to try to stay top dog on the global block in perpetuity. Choice number two, which he obviously preferred was to use that power to create a world in which we are comfortable living when we are no longer top dog on the global block.'

Gareth Evans 22:25

I thought that was a pitch perfect statement from Clinton as to where the American collective political leadership psyche needed to be. I know very well from private conversations that there's a vast number of American policymakers do actually understand that, believe that, and believe that the future in the Asian region with China lies in working out a modus vivendi where there's a genuine sort of power sharing rather than over primacy. There is a recognition that China wants its place in the sun as a global, as a participant in global rulemaking, not just being a rule taker. There is a recognition that China needs its own, wants its own, is entitled to have its own strategic space, along the the whole East Asian literal. These things are sort of a given, but they're not part of the American psyche. And if the American pivot now, to use that word, is given a hugely intense focus, there's a massive shift of US resources; it's one thing for that just to be a stabilizing factor in a region which still does need the American presence as a counterweight as a stable. That's one thing if it's that.

Gareth Evans 23:41

It's another thing if it's an exercise in asserting indefinitely into the future an absolute primacy and unwillingness to have a serious coexistence. It's far, far too much talk, I think of the competitive nature of the relationship and not enough talk about the necessary cooperative dimension in American government. The Biden Administration does pay obvious lip service to the absolute utility of collaborating with China on a whole bunch of global public goods issues, you know, including the big existential ones, climate pandemics, and I would hope, nuclear weapons. But there's still too much focus on the -- and too much of a domestic constituency in the United States that's applauding that

focus -- on the heavy duty competition side of it designed to maintain American supremacy. Push that too hard and it's going to end in tears. So I think everybody's going to be very, very careful about the way this this shift, this entirely legitimate historical shift, is actually handled.

John Torpey 24:43

Right. Sounds right. So you've mentioned the Biden Administration. So perhaps I'll ask a question that somewhat departs from the main subject of our conversation and ask you how you think they're doing on the foreign policy front. I mean, there was this kind of sense that it was gonna be this great departure from Trumpian, "America First-ism" and that sort of thing. And now there's a lot of criticism, in fact, that they're continuing to behave in certain ways as the Trump Administration did, for example, on the border with Mexico, and in the way that they're treating some of the other issues that they confront. And so there's a kind of charge that it's a continuation, in fact, of the Trumpian approach to the world. [For example] on vaccines Biden has now come out and said, "well, we're going to export more than a billion doses of vaccine and take care of the rest of the world, not just ourselves." So how do you see them doing on the foreign policy front and on the credibility front?

Gareth Evans 25:58

Well, there's a lot more inherent intelligence and a lot more inherent decency in the Biden Administration than anything we experienced with a totally dysfunctional and totally disastrous Trump presidency. Let there be no retreat from that. I mean, this is a sea change and it's a hugely welcome one for Australia and for everyone else around the world. That said, there's a certain obvious continuity in the story line has become apparent.

Gareth Evans 26:27

This America first stuff, that domestic politics, American national interest is going to be absolutely preeminent and completely outweigh at the margin, any parallel commitment to what I call good international citizenship, you know, worried about other people's problems in faraway places. We've got to be very careful that the US doesn't shift too far in the other direction, but there's a there's a real concern that it has. The Afghan pull out, the way it was handled, does seem to be as justified in all sorts of ways as extricating all of us from that quagmire might have been. As justified as it was, the handling of it did give rise to a sense that allies weren't being taken, their interests, their concerns, were not being taken particularly seriously that what would govern this first and last was perceptions of American self interest.

Gareth Evans 27:08

I've always had that view, I think the robust view not shared by everyone in Australia, that's exactly the way America really always has approached its alliance relationships, and always will approach them. That as much as we might think we're buying insurance buying, going to unconscionable war, because Americans wants us to, as much as we think we're buying insurance from a century of mateship, and so on, that as much as we think we've we've bought insurance from the terms of the ANZUS Treaty. The reality is that we'll be utterly naive to think that America is going to be with us spending blood and treasure in our defense in any circumstance where it doesn't also perceive its interests, your interests, as being immediately at risk.

Gareth Evans 28:15

I mean that's just the reality. That's the way the world works. But so let's all be realistic about that, but do recognize that there are still some very strong currents of decency running within the American administration, there's plenty of intelligence, and plenty of will. I mean, one of the tests will be --you might know that I'm one of the architects of the policy, the principle, the concept, the norm of responsibility to protect against genocide and other mass atrocity crimes, that the notion that there is a global responsibility, not only to prevent, but to react when Rwanda type or Srebrenica type of Holocaust type, mass atrocity crimes are being perpetrated-- I think it'll be a real test of where America is at when the next one of those cases arises as all too obviously it might will sometime in the not too distant future.

Gareth Evans 28:15

And I would hope that all those voices that are saying, 'don't let America ever again, get into unnecessary wars' or 'bombing for democracy is not a smart thing to do' though true, I would hope that there's still that residual sense of a good international citizens' responsibility to deal with, you know, totally unconscionable assaults on our common humanity. I believe there's enough decency there in the American system to deliver on that. But obviously, you look at the domestic politics. You look at the Republican party at the moment, you look at the congressional dysfunctionality, you look at so many of the domestic currents that are running, and it's hard to have total confidence in that. So the jury's out, I guess, on all of that.

John Torpey 29:59

Right. Well, we'll have to see how things develop. Obviously things are complicated in Washington and part of the reason they're behaving as they are on the on the border, I think, has to do with fear that that's going to undermine their domestic ambitions and plans, because this is a an issue on which the Democrats are, of course vulnerable in American politics.

John Torpey 30:23

So let me say thanks very much for taking the time to be with us. I want to thank Gareth Evans for sharing his insights about the situation unfolding in the aftermath of the AUKUS agreement. I guess we're calling it AUKUS to provide submarines to Australia.

John Torpey 30:40

Remember to subscribe and rate International Horizons on SoundCloud, Spotify and Apple podcasts. I want to thank Hristo Voynov for his technical assistance and to acknowledge Duncan Mackay for sharing his song International Horizons as the theme music for the show. This is John Torpey, saying thanks for joining us and we look forward to having you with us for the next episode of International Horizons.