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AUKUS: Recalling Legacies of Anglo-Saxonism and Muffling the Voices of Island Nations

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JEFFREY GEIGER, SEP 25 2021

On 15 September 2021, Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States announced the trilateral security pact developed under a cloak of secrecy known as AUKUS. Though ‘not about any one country’, according to the White House press secretary, it was immediately interpreted as a means to counter China’s influence in the Pacific and to challenge the growth of its military and nuclear capabilities. The pact, designed to help Australia develop nuclear submarines, has been seen as the next step beyond the existing ANZUS agreement between Australia, New Zealand, and the United States – seemingly now swept aside due to New Zealand’s nuclear ban. The announcement came as a shock to some of AUKUS’s closest allies, notably France.

As French foreign minister Jean-Yves Le Drian put it, France had received a ‘stab in the back’ with the cancellation of its contract to provide Australia with *Attack*-class submarines – a deal worth a reported A\$90 billion. France withdrew ambassadors from the US and Australia and cancelled the scheduled Franco-British defence summit. China’s foreign ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian further hit back at the pact, stating the AUKUS ‘intensified’ the regional arms race and reflected a ‘Cold War zero-sum mentality’. As the political fallout increases, the AUKUS pact threatens to damage western strategic alliances for years to come.

A History of Anglo-American Strategic Alliance

AUKUS is a new development regarding what is being called the Indo-Pacific region, and marks a new turn in the politics of the Anglosphere. But it also draws on the deep roots of Anglo-American strategic alliances and imperial legacies, which have long worked both to capitalize on and compete with China’s regional influence while sidelining the interests of the nations and peoples of the Indian Ocean and Pacific Oceania themselves.

In 1877, Britain’s presence in the Pacific region was consolidated with the creation of the British Western Pacific Territories (BWPT), designed to oversee colonial possessions such as Tonga, Fiji, and the Solomon Islands. US aims at overseas domination date as far back as Abraham Lincoln’s secretary of state William Henry Seward, who envisioned the Pacific as central to the quest for a US ‘empire’ that could gain control of world markets. Though Seward’s wider goals were never realized during his lifetime, shortly after the end of the Civil War he was responsible for bringing both Alaska and the Midway Islands under US control.

The scale of the events that took place over an eighteen-month period between 1898 and 1899 took Seward’s ideas to the next level, when the US took possession of Hawai‘i, the eastern islands of Samoa, Wake Island, Guam, the Philippines, and in the Caribbean, Puerto Rico and Cuba. In 1898 President McKinley argued: ‘we need Hawaii just as much and a good deal more than we did California. It is manifest destiny’.

The ‘Weary Titan’ and its Heirs

While it might seem that British colonial power, already becoming stretched by the late 1800s, would have seen American overseas designs (ultimately resulting in the post-Second World War ‘American Pacific’ era) as dangerous competition, the scenario was more complex. In terms of British attitudes towards its colonial responsibilities, British

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colonial secretary Joseph Chamberlain's comments at the Colonial Conference of 1902 can be seen as emblematic: 'The weary Titan staggers under the too vast orb of its fate. We have borne the burden for many years. We think it time that our children should assist us to support it'.

As postcolonial scholar Peter Hulme points out, these colonialist 'children' were specifically defined along the lines of linguistic and presumed cultural affiliations. For poet William Watson, writing in 1898, Britain and the US were 'sons of the self-same race', united in the task of maintaining the 'vast orb' of global imperial order. Indeed some colonial powers, such as France, were seen as troublesome competitors rather than as allies. It was hardly surprising when a rumour circulated in 1907 that the United States wanted to buy Tahiti from France for five million dollars in the interests of bolstering the American presence in the region.

These rivalries were reinforced in the manifestation of imperial Anglo-Saxonism and the idea of a higher order of 'English-speaking peoples'. Hulme observes that this privileged category was promoted in the writings of Teddy Roosevelt (the first volume of his *The Winning of the West* was titled 'The Spread of English-Speaking Peoples') and was a sentiment still perpetuated after the Second World War in Winston Churchill's *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples*.

Projecting a 'New Imperialism'

In 1898, John R. Procter, serving on the US Civil Service Commission, prophesied a 'New Imperialism', praising the systems developed by 'Teutonic ancestors' as models of social organization, and finding them regenerated in US imperial aims. Procter summed up the American imperial acquisitions with characteristically inflated rhetoric: 'The year 1898 will be one of the epoch-marking years in the history of the United States. In this year is to be decided the great question of whether this country is to continue in its policy of political isolation, or is to take its rightful place among the great World-Powers, and assume the unselfish obligations and responsibilities demanded by the enlightened civilizations of the age'. For pro-imperialists, the issue went beyond politics to claim moral and cultural superiority for Anglo-Saxon and English-speaking peoples. Procter wrote: 'from the blood of our heroes, shed at Santiago and Manila, there shall arise a New Imperialism, replacing the waning Imperialism of Old Rome; an Imperialism destined to carry world-wide the principles of Anglo-Saxon peace and justice, liberty and law'.

Popularly represented as a benevolent global mission, expansionism was underpinned by explicit political and economic motives. For example the watershed year of 1898 would also see the founding of the American Asiatic Association, with its mission of working to 'foster and safeguard American trade and commercial interests' (lobbying to protecting US trade routes across the Pacific). In 1899, the Association's Secretary swept aside prevailing messages about a 'civilizing mission' in the Pacific and offered a blunter analysis of the US annexations of 1898: 'had we no interests in China,' he noted, 'the possession of the Philippines would be meaningless'.

Casting Aside Island Nations and the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW)

With AUKUS, the US-British so-called special relationship takes a new turn in promoting post-Brexit 'Global Britain' military and policy aims. It also reinforces a broader definition of a strategic regional construct – the Indo-Pacific – that overrides a notion of 'Asia-Pacific' while cementing Australia's strategic centrality and its links to western world powers, and effectively squeezing China out of the regional imaginary. At the same time, the pact returns us to prevailing nineteenth and twentieth-century conceived alliances between 'English-speaking peoples'. These allied peoples were meant to take responsibility for the dominance of global waters while spreading 'Anglo-Saxon peace and justice, liberty and law'.

What remains largely absent in this longstanding political and cultural jockeying for power is an understanding of the Indian Ocean and Oceania not as defined by China and the superpowers of the West, but as constituted of maritime flows and what Fijian writer Epeli Hau'ofa called 'our sea of islands'. The island nations and peoples of these vast oceanic stretches should be seen as the primary stakeholders and decision makers in these processes.

Many of these island nations – The Comoros, Maldives, Seychelles, Cook Islands, Fiji, Nauru, Palau, Samoa,

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Tuvalu, Vanuatu, New Zealand, and others – underpinned the international Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), which came into force only at the start of 2021, and speaks not only to the future of the planet but to a history of nuclear testing and population displacement by western powers in overseas island territories.

Conclusion

AUKUS might be seen not just as undermining the interests of nations such as France or as a strategic counterbalance to Chinese power, but as an elision of the island nations of the Indian Ocean and Oceania – not only in decision-making processes regarding security and defence, but in defining regional affiliations and identities themselves. The TPNW alliance has been working to stem the proliferation of nuclear weapons in the interest of the survival of the signatory nations and that of the globe itself, but AUKUS appears determined to run a sword through these efforts.

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