

The top diplomats of France and the United States said Thursday that repairing ties will take time as Paris demanded action to assuage its anger over the cancellation of a massive submarine contract.

French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian, after days of giving the cold shoulder, met on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly with Secretary of State Antony Blinken on the allies' worst crisis in ties since the Iraq war.

France's top diplomat told Blinken that US President Joe Biden's telephone conversation a day earlier with his French counterpart Emmanuel Macron had been the start of a process of repairing trust.

"He recalled that a first step had been taken with the call between the two presidents but underlined that resolving the crisis between our two countries would take time and require actions," a French foreign ministry statement said.

France was infuriated when Australia last week canceled a multibillion-dollar contract for French submarines, deciding instead that it needed US nuclear versions amid rising tensions with China.

Le Drian accused Australia of back-stabbing and the United States of betrayal, calling the move reminiscent of the unilateralist attitude of Biden's predecessor Donald Trump.

Blinken, a fluent French speaker who grew up partly in Paris, appeared remorseful as he spoke to reporters later in the day following the closed-door, one-hour meeting at France's UN mission.

He voiced his personal respect for Le Drian and, reiterating a White House statement, said that the episode would have "benefited from open consultations among allies."

'Unshakable' bonds

Blinken vowed to work to rebuild trust with France, America's oldest ally, and pointed to shared interests including in the French campaign against the Islamic State extremist group.

“I am convinced that our interests together are so strong, the values that we share so unshakable, that we will carry forward and get some good work done, but it will take some time; it will take some hard work,” Blinken told reporters.



Image source: Getty

Blinken said he would keep up talks with Le Drian, much as Biden agreed to meet late next month with Macron.

Le Drian, however, maintained his frigid distance from his counterparts from Australia and Britain.

Macron agreed to return the French ambassador who was pulled from Washington as a protest but has shown no sign France will soon send back its envoy to Canberra.

France's Naval Group said that it will soon send a detailed invoice to Australia for canceling the contract.

Australia became only the second nation after Britain to gain access to US nuclear submarine technology and announced a new three-way alliance with Washington and London.

Blinken promised to work closely with France in the US strategy toward the Indo-Pacific, seen by the Biden administration as the paramount priority amid the growing assertiveness of China.

Other European nations including Germany voiced solidarity with France, saying that the US move went counter to Biden's push for closer relations with allies.

But US officials said the new three-way alliance also found support including from Japan, another nation with longstanding concerns about China.

Biden on Friday holds a first-ever four-way summit in Washington with the prime ministers of Australia, India and Japan.

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