

France recalls U.S. and Australia envoys over submarine deal

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Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian says decision 'justified by exceptional seriousness of announcements' made by Australia and the United States.

Paris, September 18 (RHC)-- France has recalled its ambassadors to the United States and Australia for consultations, in a backlash over a submarine deal.

Australia on Wednesday cancelled a multibillion-dollar deal for conventional French submarines to enter a strategic Indo-Pacific alliance with the United States and Britain in which it will obtain US nuclear-powered submarines.

Calling the cancellation “unacceptable behavior,” Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said in a statement on Friday the decision to recall the envoys, on request from President Emmanuel Macron, “is justified by the exceptional seriousness of the announcements” made by Australia and the United States.

Earlier on Friday, a top French diplomat spoke of a “crisis” in relations with the United States. The diplomat, who spoke to The Associated Press news agency anonymously in line with customary government practice, said that for Paris “this is a strategic question concerning the very nature of the relationship between Europe and the United States about the Indo-Pacific strategy.”

The French diplomat said on Friday that Macron received a letter from Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison on Wednesday morning announcing the decision to cancel the submarine deal. French officials then decided to reach out to the U.S. administration “to ask what was going on,” he said. He added that discussions with Washington took place just two to three hours before Biden’s public announcement.

Le Drian on Thursday expressed “total incomprehension” at the move and criticised both Australia and the United States. “It was really a stab in the back. We built a relationship of trust with Australia, and this trust was betrayed,” he said. “This is not done between allies.”

He also compared U.S. President Joe Biden’s move to those of his predecessor, Donald Trump, under Trump’s “America First” doctrine. Paris had raised the issue of the Indo-Pacific strategy during the June 25 visit to Paris of U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, expressing the importance of its submarine programme with Australia, the diplomat said.

“We said that it was for us a very important and critical component in our Indo-Pacific strategy,” he said. Blinken met with Macron during the visit.

The French diplomat said Australia never mentioned to France before its will to shift to nuclear-powered submarines, including during a meeting between Macron and Morrison in Paris on June 15.

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