

International

US and France leaders try to defuse submarine row

Biden, Macron have a 'friendly' phone call

PARIS: US President Joe Biden and his French counterpart Emmanuel Macron had a "friendly" phone call Wednesday to defuse a deep row over submarine sales to Australia, promising to meet in person to repair the transatlantic relationship. The call, which the White House said lasted about 30 minutes, was the first between Biden and Macron since France recalled its ambassador over the surprise US announcement of a deal to build nuclear submarines for Australia - scuppering a previous French deal to sell conventional submarines.

Paris called the US-Australian plan, which was launched as part of a new Indo-Pacific security group along with Britain, a stab in the back and also pulled its ambassador from Australia. In a joint statement after the call, the two leaders vowed to launch "in-depth consultations... for ensuring confidence" and to meet in Europe at the end of October. The statement also said Macron would order France's ambassador back to Washington next week.

White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki told reporters the talk "was friendly" and Biden was "hopeful this was a step in returning to normal." The statement said the US recognized the need for stronger European defense to complement the NATO military alliance, a key idea repeatedly floated by the French leader. In what amounted to an acknowledgement of French anger, the English-language version of the statement issued by the White House said that the management of the dueling submarine deals "would have benefited from open consultations among allies."

The French-language version issued by the Elysee Palace was even more explicit, saying consultations "would have avoided this situation." There was no word about where the October meeting

will be but Biden will already be in Rome and Glasgow at that time for the G20 and COP26 climate summits. At the annual United Nations summit, French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian, after giving the cold shoulder for days, spoke with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on the sidelines of a meeting and the two expected to meet again Thursday, a US official said.

'Good messages'

France's Naval Group said it will send a detailed invoice in the coming weeks to Australia for cancelling the contract originally worth Aus\$50 billion (\$36.5 billion, 31 billion euros). As well as a huge commercial setback, the loss of the deal was also a blow to France's security strategy in the Indo-Pacific region, where it has a presence through overseas territories.

The submarine row plunged Franco-US ties into what some analysts viewed as the most acute crisis since the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, which Paris opposed. After four years of tumultuous relations with ex-president Donald Trump, the spat also dashed hopes of a complete reset under Biden, who took office in January aiming to rebuild frazzled ties with Europe.

Wednesday's call sought at least to settle the mood, with the White House soon after releasing a photo of Biden smiling while speaking to Macron. "The messages from the call are good. It was recognized that communication should have been better," said Benjamin Haddad, director of the Europe Center at the Atlantic Council, a think tank. "The US understood that the main shock in Paris did not come so much from the commercial aspect as from the breakdown in confidence," he said. In another welcome step



CARBIS BAY: In this file photo US President Joe Biden (left) and France's President Emmanuel Macron speak after the family photo at the start of the G7 summit in Carbis Bay, Cornwall. —AFP

for Paris, the joint statement added that the US committed "to reinforcing its support to counter-terrorism operations" in the Sahel region of Africa, where French forces are deployed to fight jihadists.

Observers and some of France's European partners had begun wondering how and when Macron would call an end to the face-off, which is playing out just seven months ahead of French presidential elections. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson showed he was out of patience, using a French-English mix to say it was "time for some of our dearest friends around the world to 'prenez un grip' (get a grip)." —AFP

Algeria closes airspace to all Moroccan planes

ALGIERS: Algeria said Wednesday it has closed its airspace to all Moroccan planes due to "provocations and hostile practices" by its neighbor, in the latest dispute between the countries at odds mainly over Western Sahara. The move comes after Algeria broke off diplomatic ties with Morocco on August 24, accusing it of "hostile actions" following months of heightened tensions between the two North African countries. Morocco called the severing of ties "completely unjustified" and said the decision was based on "false, even absurd pretexts".

Relations between the neighbors have been tense for decades due to Algeria's support for the Polisario Front, which demands a self-determination referendum in Western Sahara, while Morocco, which controls around 80 percent of the desert territory, has offered only autonomy. The Algerian presidency said in a statement on Wednesday the decision had been made "to shut its airspace immediately to all civilian and military aircraft as well as to those registered in Morocco." The decision was announced after a meeting of the High Security Council chaired by President Abdelmadjid Tebboune. The presidency said the meeting examined the situation on Algeria's border with Morocco and took into account "the continuation of provocations and hostile practices by Morocco", without providing details. The decision will not have a major immediate effect because Algeria closed off air links in March due to the COVID-19 pandemic, reopening to seven countries in June - of which Morocco was not one. A source close to the state-owned carrier Air Algérie said no direct commercial flights between Algeria and Morocco had flown

since. "Algerians travelling to Morocco transfer via Tunis," the source said on condition of anonymity. The decision will more immediately effect Moroccan flights that have routes over Algerian territory. Algerian Foreign Minister Ramtane Lamamra told CNN International on Tuesday that cutting diplomatic ties was "sending the right message" to Morocco. "This is a civilized way of putting an end to a situation that could not last anymore without running the risk of costing more casualties and taking the two countries into a path that would not be desirable".

'Make wisdom prevail'

In July, Morocco's King Mohammed VI deplored the tensions and invited Algeria's President Abdelmadjid Tebboune "to make wisdom prevail" and "work in unison for the development of relations" between the neighboring countries. Earlier this month, more than 200 Moroccan and Algerian civil society figures appealed for a "return to reason" after Algiers' decision to cut diplomatic ties. Intellectuals, academics and other civil society actors, most of them Moroccan, signed a petition rejecting the "current situation which could lead to an unnatural confrontation... contrary to the interests of the two peoples and the region". Algeria is the key foreign backer of the Polisario Front, which has for decades fought Morocco for the independence of Western Sahara. Morocco sees the former Spanish colony as an integral part of its territory. The sparsely-populated desert territory boasts significant phosphate resources and a long Atlantic coastline with access to rich fishing waters. Algiers was also angered by Morocco's normalization of ties with Israel last year as a quid pro quo for US recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara. Rabat had severed diplomatic relations with Algeria in 1976 for several years after Algiers recognized the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), proclaimed by the Polisario. —AFP

US authorizes Pfizer COVID booster for the elderly and high-risk

WASHINGTON: The United States on Wednesday authorized the use of boosters of Pfizer's COVID-19 vaccine for people aged over 65, as well as adults at high risk of severe disease and those in high-exposure jobs. The announcement means a significant part of the population - amounting to tens of millions of Americans - are now eligible for a third shot six months after their second. "Today's action demonstrates that science and the currently available data continue to guide the FDA's decision-making for COVID-19 vaccines during this pandemic," said Janet Woodcock, acting head of the Food and Drug Administration, in a statement.

The decision was expected and came after an independent expert panel convened by the regulatory agency last week voted in favor of recommending the move. The panel, however, rejected an initial plan by the White House to fully approve Pfizer boosters to everyone aged 16 and over, in what amounted to a rare rebuke of President Joe Biden's administration. The group of vaccinologists, infectious disease specialists and epidemiologists concluded that the benefit-risk balance differed for younger people, especially young males who are more susceptible to myocarditis. —AFP