

France stops deal to deliver Mistral helicopter carrier ships to Russia

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The French government announced this week that it was suspending the delivery of the Vladivostok, the first of two Mistral class helicopter-carrying assault ships sold to Russia, amid the escalating war scare between NATO and Russia over Ukraine.

The decision to suspend the deal amounts to theft against Russia, as France has pocketed €1.2 billion Russia already paid for the warships, and the contract only includes a €250 million penalty for non-delivery. Hundreds of jobs in the Saint Nazaire region depend on the deal, however. The French armament industry also fears that this will dissuade other countries from doing business with them. It appears, however, that French President François Hollande hopes that France's share of the spoils from the imperialist subjugation of Ukraine and Russia will provide ample compensation.

The deal for the ships was signed in January 2011 by then-French President Nicolas Sarkozy and then-Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, and the first ship was to be delivered in October 2014. There are currently 400 Russian sailors training on the Vladivostok out of the port of Saint Nazaire in France.

When Hollande took over the presidency from Sarkozy in 2012, he confirmed that the sale of the Mistral ships would go ahead as planned. However, the pressure on French officials from other NATO countries to scrap the deal intensified in the run-up to this week's NATO summit, held in Wales.

Manfred Weber, the president of the right-wing European Popular Party (EPP), the largest political group in the European Parliament in Strasbourg, stated in a communiqué on September 2 that "France must immediately stop the delivery of the two helicopter carriers to Russia."

He continued, "In the context of unprecedented tension with Russia, where the European Union is

trying to unite and speak with one voice, it is totally unthinkable that France carries on with the delivery of the Mistral helicopter carriers to Russia and train Russian soldiers to operate them. This hypocrisy has lasted long enough. It's time for France show a minimum of coherence in its approach to Russia. I call upon President François Hollande to immediately stop the delivery of the two helicopter carriers."

Behind such criticisms is the fear that if Russia takes delivery of the ships, the Vladivostok and the Sebastopol, as planned in the Black Sea port of Sebastopol in the Crimea, it would be far better equipped to attack the NATO puppet regime in Ukraine.

The Mistral class ships allow rapid deployment of helicopters, troops and tanks in coastal areas. Once these forces are deployed, the ship then acts as a command center to coordinate attacks. The Mistral class of ships can hold two fast hovercrafts for beach landings, from 13 to 40 tanks, from 450 to 900 troops and from 16 to 35 helicopters. It can be armed with two "Simbad" sea-to-air/land missile systems and four 12.7-mm Browning machine guns.

Referring to the previous 2008 Russo-Georgian war over South Ossetia, Russian admiral Vladimir Vyssotsky told the *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*: "With a Mistral-type vessel during the South Ossetian conflict, the Russian military could have accomplished all its missions in 40 minutes instead of 26 hours."

US President Barack Obama had publicly voiced "concerns" to the French president about the deal, leaving it to European politicians like Weber to hammer the message home.

Polish Foreign Minister Radek Sikorski was even more blunt in calling on France to cancel the deal, because "Russian generals have already said what these

ships will be used for: to threaten Russia's neighbors in the Black Sea and that means Europe's partners."

The Mistral sale was from the beginning tied to rising inter-imperialist tensions provoked by the brigandage of the NATO powers. Sarkozy launched negotiations for the deal in 2010, as Paris tried to convince Russia to allow Western-organised regime change in Iran, and amid growing tensions between Paris and Berlin in the first stages of the Greek debt crisis (see: "Russian President Medvedev signs strategic, business deals in France").

To defend the deal from international criticism at the time, Sarkozy said, "In the morning, we say to the Russian leadership, 'We need you to resolve a certain number of crises in the world, especially the Iranian crisis, which is very important, vote with us on the Security Council, let us elaborate together a common resolution,' and then in the afternoon we say: 'No, no, sorry, since we do not trust you, we are not giving you the Mistral.' What is the coherence of this position?"

The French press also made clear at the time that the Mistral deal was part of a trade war with Germany for influence in the Russian market. "Our country intends to profit from the possibilities offered by the Russian market and cannot allow itself to leave it all to Germany who, many years ago already, made the decisions we are making today," France's conservative daily *Le Figaro* wrote, "As the seventh-largest investor and ninth-largest exporter to Russia, France absolutely must do better."

Sarkozy also provocatively had Medvedev's car convoy cross the Alexander III bridge in Paris, built in 1896-1900 to celebrate the 1892 Franco-Russian alliance, directed against Germany, that played a major role in the outbreak of World War I.

Only a few months later, in crisis talks with German Chancellor Angela Merkel over the Greek debt crisis, Sarkozy threatened to pull France out of the euro—a move that would have undermined the EU and destroyed the financial arrangements underlying European capitalism.

Amid the escalating war scare over Ukraine, the tensions between the imperialist powers are even deeper than they were four years ago, as are the divisions inside France's political elite. A series of nationalist politicians, including right-winger Nicolas Dupont-Aignan, Marine Le Pen of the neo-fascist

National Front (FN), and Jean-Luc Mélenchon of the Left Front criticised Hollande's decision to suspend the Mistral deal.

"France is lying down before Germany and the United States," Dupont-Aignan complained, while Marine Le Pen concluded that the decision was proof of "our submission to American diplomacy."

Mélenchon criticised the "vassalisation of our country to the hand of the USA," a formula echoed by FN president Louis Aliot, who said, "We have become vassals of the United States."



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