

France balks on delivery of Mistral helicopter-carrier to Russia

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Tensions surged between Paris and Moscow this month, after French President François Hollande's government refused to deliver a first Mistral helicopter carrier to the Russian government on the November 14 deadline. This comes after the confirmation several weeks ago that Paris would deliver these warships based on whether or not it believed Russia was obeying the demands of NATO and the European Union (EU) in Ukraine.

The government has refused an export licence for the company building the Mistrals. The CEO of the naval construction group DCNS has sacked the director of the delivery mission of the two warships for inviting Russian representatives to attend the delivery of the first of the two last Friday. Last week, the French authorities barred 550 Russian sailors who tried to board one of the Mistral-class vessels built for Russia in St Nazaire.

On November 25, Hollande signaled that the sale of the warships was suspended “until further notice.” Russian Deputy Defense Minister Yury Borisov said Russia would wait for fulfillment “strictly according to the contract,” and would sue France if the warships were not delivered.

At the end of August, the Russian government had threatened to sue France and demand large cash compensation if the contract was not honoured. As delivery was not carried out, it declared that it was giving Paris until the end of November to deliver the already operational first ship, the Vladivostok, before taking action. France has already received half of the cost of the two vessels that had been ordered according to the contract signed in 2011—that is, over half a billion euros.

On November 14, Prime Minister Manuel Valls responded to the pressure of the Russian government

with a provocative and hysterical tirade to the press: “France honours its commitments, but France is a nation which counts, which has influence in the concert of nations and demands peace in Ukraine. And which takes its decisions as a sovereign nation, without anyone dictating her foreign policy.”

PS First Secretary Jean-Christophe Cambadélis upbraided Russian President Vladimir Putin on Europe1 radio, saying: “That's not the way things work, Mr Putin, France is an independent country which decides whether or not it delivers the Mistral. If there is a democratic advance and peace in Ukraine, we shall see.”

Since the beginning of the crisis in Ukraine, set off by the Western-sponsored, fascist-led putsch in Kiev, and the bellicose US-German campaign against Russia, pressure on Hollande to cancel the sale of the Mistrals has increased significantly from the US, and from within NATO and the EU.

In June, the government was persisting with the sale, despite opposition from Washington which used legal action against France's largest bank BNP to pressure the Hollande government. For its part, the French government rejected the idea that the sale could be cancelled. When sanctions were imposed on Russia by the EU a little later, Paris managed to get the sale of the ships exempted. In September this year, the government “suspended” the sale of the Mistrals, without, however, cancelling them.

In mid-October, the Hollande government definitively made the delivery of the Vladivostok conditional on “complete observation” of the cease-fire between the Ukrainian army and the pro-Russian separatists—a cease-fire which the Ukrainian regime, backed by the US and Germany, did not in fact observe. Apart from the fact that such conditions amounted to

blackmail, the Hollande government lined up with the aggressive and warmongering stance of US and German imperialism.

The helicopter-carrier construction project dates from 2008; its signing in 2011 was considered a symbol of strengthened cooperation between Russia and France. At the time, it was said that this was the beginning of a long collaboration between the two countries.

Economically, Russia also seemed to be a highly profitable, 600-billion-euro market coveted by French capitalists. The development of economic collaboration was seen to be in direct competition with German companies.

The building of these high-tech warships to benefit the Russian navy was decided as tensions rose with Germany inside the EU after the 2008 stock market crash and the ensuing euro crisis. These tensions reached a breaking point at the height of the Greek financial crisis in 2010, to the point that Sarkozy threatened to pull out of the euro.

French imperialism has traditionally sought alliances with Russia to control and counteract German imperialism in Europe. This dictated President Raymond Poincaré's policies in relation to Russia before the First World War, and again after the Second World War with President Charles de Gaulle in relation to the Stalinist bureaucracy and the USSR. It is in the context of such an "alliance to the rear," that is of Germany, that the Mistral helicopter-carrier contract was signed.

Several weeks ago, in the Ukrainian conflict, Berlin changed its tone towards Russia and adopted an openly warmongering attitude. The sale of warships to Russia became less and less acceptable.

Demands for compensation by Russia could, apart from losing a 1.2 euro billion contract and the reimbursement of the money already paid, lead to penalties of up to several billion euros as France's trade deficit is exploding and numerous arms contracts have been cancelled. In September, *L'Opinion* newspaper quoted "the boss of one of the big arms manufacturing firms, 'if Paris cancels, our big clients will feel at the mercy of a unilateral political decision by France' and, 'What is at stake, is the credibility of the state's signature'. ... All eyes are on India, with which France is negotiating the sale of 126 Rafale [fighter jets]."

An economic conflict with Russia would undermine

hundreds of French firms in Russia. French banks would lose on the order of 35 billion euros if their Russian debtors defaulted.

The Mistral affair shows not only the extreme sharpening of tensions between the imperialist powers, but also the conflicts within the French ruling elite. Former President Nicolas Sarkozy's counsellor and Yvelines UMP (Union for a Popular Movement) deputy Henri Guaino said on November 14: "France made commitments. She should deliver. ... If she does not keep her word on this sale, what will all the others think? What will France's word be worth?," adding that a cancellation would constitute a "very, very dear" cost, notably "on the issue of credibility."

On the same day, former Left Party leader Jean-Luc Mélenchon said that Hollande "was exposing France to ridicule by preventing the delivery" of the first Mistral.

Within the armed forces, however, a part of the navy is hostile to the sale of the helicopter-carriers to Russia, which it fears could be used against it.

According to a Ria Novosti agency report, opinion polls showed that 58 percent of French people were for the government honouring its commitments to Russia and only 42 percent against.



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