



France Arms Russian Navy

In what has been described as “the first sale to Russia of such technology by a NATO country,” French President Nicolas Sarkozy announced Tuesday that France had finalized and signed an agreement with the Russian Federation for the purchase of four Mistral class amphibious assault ships to the Russian Navy.



Until this agreement, the bulk of Russia’s naval fleet was comprised of old ships from the Soviet Union’s Red Fleet. Now, Russia will acquire vessels from a Western European country configured with NATO technology, which was made available through the collaborative effort of member states — predominately the United States.

“But does Russia need navy ships of this class? The General Staff is confident — most certainly, as Russia does not have this kind of technology,” Russia’s state-run newspaper *Pravda* [reported](#).

On December 16, 2009, halfway through the Democratic controlled 111th Congress, Republican Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (FL-18) introduced [House Resolution 982](#): “Expressing the sense of the House of Representatives that France and other member states of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the European Union should decline to sell major weapons systems or offensive military equipment to the Russian Federation.”

Congresswomen Ros’ bill reads in part:

Given Russia’s increasingly aggressive actions and rhetoric, the sale of major advanced weaponry and offensive military equipment, such as naval warships, to the Russian Federation could have a destabilizing effect on the Baltic and the Black Sea regions and on other parts of the former Soviet region and Eastern Europe...

...the President and the Secretaries of State and Defense should urge France and the other member states of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union allies not to sell major weapons systems or any offensive military equipment, such as naval warships, to the Russian Federation...

The resolution was co-sponsored by 27 other members of the House, including now Senator Mark Kirk of Illinois. It was referred to the House Foreign Affairs committee where it expired. The new Republican controlled House has yet to take any action on the Franco-Russian naval ship agreement.

The first of the four ships will be laid down and assembled entirely in France, the second, although laid down in France, will be for the most part assembled and completed in Russia, with the last two ships completely manufactured in Russia, giving Russian naval engineers an unrestricted firsthand look in the



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full construction of a NATO warship.

The ships are set to be slightly modified than their French counterparts. “In particular, *Pravda* reports, “the Russian side has already asked the French manufacturer to increase the thickness of the take-off deck for landing of heavy Russian helicopters and provide anti-ice security through the strengthening of the ship’s hull.”

The Kremlin plans to construct the third and fourth Mistral class ships in new shipyards set to built on Kotlin Island, just 20 miles west of St. Petersburg in the Baltic Sea, where in the future Russia hopes to construct additional ships for both its civilian and military maritime — a clear sign of a naval build up, which Putin admitted as such in December.

Nearly a month and half prior to the finalization of this agreement, Russian Prime Minister Putin announced: “We are allocating very serious, significant funds for the re-armament program. I am even scared to pronounce this figure: 20 trillion roubles.”

Putin expressed Russia’s “need to finally move beyond the years during which the army and the navy were seriously under-financed,” he told to a group of top government officials and military officers at the Sevmash naval shipyard in Severodvinsk, located on the coast of the White Sea.

Mistral class ships are known for their multi-purpose functions, able to carry up to capable of transporting and deploying 16 Tiger helicopters, four landing barges, an additional 70 tanks or other armored surface vehicles and 450 troops. The ships are also equipped with 69 hospitable beds, making them ideal for humanitarian relief as a floating hospital ship.

These multi-purpose sea fortresses are currently used by NATO Response Forces. Considering the efficiency and potential lethality of these ships it comes as no surprise that the former Soviet Baltic states Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are in uproar over the agreement.

“I think this is a mistake,” Lithuania’s Minister of Defense Rasa Juknevičienė told reporters, adding that “This is a precedent, when a NATO and EU member sells offensive weaponry to a country whose democracy is not at a level that would make us feel calm.”

Senator John McCain (R-Az.) strongly condemned the purchase of the Mistral ships to Russia, saying that it is “a threat to some of America’s friends and NATO allies.”

France’s Minister of Defense Alain Juppé had a different opinion of the sale.

“NATO allies decided at the Lisbon summit to start cooperation with Russia in the development of a missile defense network. Benefits of strategic cooperation with Russia in the military sphere are much more important than negative factors. This is a common position of France and Germany, which is also shared by the UK with certain reservations,” Minister Juppé said in an interview with *Le Monde* on January 18, according to the Russian news service [Itar-Tass](#).

Although in a recent visit to France U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates expressed the United States’ “concern” over the sale, France did not heed to the side of the United States and instead went forward with the high-tech naval ship sale to Russia.



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With language like that of French Defense Minister Juppe it is likely that France will sell additional military hardware to the Russia's armed forces in the future.

The Mistral ships are expected to be completed by the end of the decade, by which time Russia's naval fleet will have great expanded from its current status.

Photo: A French Mistral class amphibious assault ship.



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