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France Defends Possible Warship Sale to Russia

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UNITED NATIONS — France's defense minister on Friday defended the possible sale of French Mistral helicopter carriers to Russia and dismissed concerns that it could undermine the security of Georgia.

"Russia is no longer the U.S.S.R.," Herve Morin told reporters after meeting with Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and other top UN officials.

"Furthermore, can we consider for even a moment that the sale of a few vessels can significantly change the balance of force and the strategic situation between Georgia and Russia? We need to be serious on this issue," he said through an interpreter.

Morin said he had made those arguments to NATO members who voiced concern about the possible Mistral sale, making clear to them Paris' view that it was vital to have a "dialogue with Russia" — including dialogue on military and security issues.

Moscow wants Mistral class warships to modernize hardware exposed as outdated during its

war against Georgia in 2008. Earlier this month, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Moscow was in exclusive talks with France on the matter.

The helicopter carriers are built by French naval shipyard DCNS, owned by defense electronics group Thales. French President Nicolas Sarkozy said in July that he was "certain" France would build the two ships.

Moscow has said that if it had had the Mistral during its 2008 war with the former Soviet republic Georgia, it would have achieved its military goal in 40 minutes instead of 26 hours.

However, the potential sale by France of one or more of the carriers, which cost 400 million to 500 million euros ($488 million to $600 million), has alarmed Washington and some East European NATO nations.

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