

2 Mistral's' Construction Delayed

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The deal, worth \$1.9 billion, entailed the construction of two Mistral carriers, like the one seen above, with an option for two more.

The Defense Ministry has postponed from 2013 to 2016 the construction of two Mistral-class helicopter carriers ordered from France last year, RIA-Novosti said Friday, citing a source in the defense industry.

Vedomosti reported earlier that the ministry had declined an option to build two French-designed Mistral carriers locally, citing the high cost of construction and maintenance expenses as the reason for the decision.

Later, however, Alexei Kravchenko, a spokesman for United Shipbuilding Corp., which was commissioned to build the ships, said he was unaware of any such decision by the Defense Ministry. Furthermore, he said, while there was in fact an option in the original contract for the construction of two more ships, "no subcontracts were ever signed," Interfax said.

Deputy Defense Minister Yury Borisov also denied reports that a decision had been made to

pass on the construction of the two ships in Russia. “How is it possible to stop construction of something whose construction hasn’t even started yet?” Itar-Tass cited him as saying Friday.

The deal, worth \$1.9 billion, entailed the construction of two Mistral carriers with an option for two more. It was the biggest purchase of foreign arms by the Russian government in the post-Soviet era as well as the first contract on such a scale with a NATO country.

Experts say the postponement marks more backtracking on plans left behind by former Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov, fired from his post in November by President Vladimir Putin.

“This is a revision of Serdyukov’s heritage,” defense industry expert Igor Korotchenko told The Moscow Times Friday, referring to the previous minister’s plans to purchase a selected number of foreign-made weapons for the Russian army.

Korotchenko added that the Mistral situation highlights the lack of an overall strategy for the country’s defense forces.

The planned purchase of Mistral ships raised the eyebrows of military experts, who said that such ships would be needed only if Russia intended to take part in “expedition-type operations” around the world.

Nikolas Gvosdev, professor of national security studies at the U.S. Naval War College, said in e-mailed comments that Russia needs the Mistral carriers “to have options to project power in any maritime areas of interest and to be able to protect and secure islands and offshore installations.”

“Mistral gives the Russian Navy new offensive capabilities. But the question is whether or not having these capabilities — in this type of expensive platform — is the best use of the Russian Navy’s resources,” he said.

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