

U.S. Lawmakers Want France to Sell Russian-Ordered Warships to NATO

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Washington and some European partners have been urging Paris to reconsider its supply of helicopter-carrier ships to Moscow.

U.S. lawmakers have urged France to cancel the sale of two advanced helicopter-carrier ships to Russia and suggested that NATO buy or lease them instead.

The purchase would send a strong signal to Russian President Vladimir Putin that "the NATO allies will not tolerate or in any way enable his reckless moves," they said in a letter to NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen.

Washington and some European partners have been urging Paris to reconsider its supply of high-tech military hardware to Moscow following Russian action in Ukraine, including its annexation of the Crimean peninsula in March.

Purchasing the ships would also enhance NATO's capabilities at a time when many members have been cutting defense expenditures, and reassure NATO partners in Central and Eastern Europe, the lawmakers said.

Signatories of the letter included Eliot Engel, the top Democrat on the House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee, and the chairman of the U.S. delegation to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, Michael Turner.

France has said it would press ahead with the deal because canceling would do more damage to Paris than to Moscow. The contract, worth \$1.66 billion, has created about 1,000 jobs and includes the option for two more of the advanced vessels.

Four other U.S. lawmakers wrote to Obama earlier this month urging him to oppose the sale of the Mistral ships, which can carry 16 helicopters, four landing craft, 60 armored vehicles, 13 tanks and up to 700 soldiers.

A spokesman for Democratic U.S. Senator Mark Warner, who signed that letter, said he was unaware of any response.

The 2011 French sale was Moscow's first major foreign arms purchase in the two decades since the fall of the Soviet Union. Former French President Nicolas Sarkozy had hailed the signing of the Mistral contract as evidence the Cold War was over.

The first carrier, the Vladivostok, is due to be delivered by the last quarter of 2014. The second, to be delivered by 2016, is named Sebastopol, after the Crimean seaport.

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