

Obama Urges France to Halt Sale of Mistral Warships to Russia

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U.S. President Barack Obama (L) and France's President Francois Hollande participate in the G7 summit at the European Council headquarters in Brussels, Belgium.

U.S. President Barack Obama has urged France to "press the pause button" on a sale of two Mistral helicopter carriers to Russia under a deal that has stoked fears that increasing Russia's naval capabilities could present a threat to its neighbors.

"I have expressed some concerns — and I don't think I'm alone in this — about continuing significant defense deals with Russia at a time when they have violated basic international law and the territorial integrity and sovereignty of their neighbors," Obama told a news conference in Brussels on Thursday, according to a transcript published by the White House.

"I think it would have been preferable to press the pause button," Obama said. "President Hollande so far has made a different decision."

The 199-meter-long Mistral warship is capable of carrying more than a dozen heavy combat helicopters as well as hundreds of troops, and the deal for the two carriers — signed with France in 2011 — made former Soviet republics and other countries uneasy even before Russia's annexation of Crimea. Hawkish remarks by Russian military commanders did little to assuage the fears.

"If at the time of the [2008] conflict with Georgia we had a ship of the Mistral class, the Black Sea Fleet would have accomplished its mission in 40 minutes, instead of the 26 hours it took it," Russian Navy commander Vladimir Vysotsky said a few years ago.

Some analysts have warned that Russia's possession of the ships would change the balance of power at sea. But France, which has created 1,000 jobs under the \$1.6 billion contract, has played down the concerns of its Western allies, including senior U.S. policymakers.

More than 400 Russian sailors are scheduled to arrive in France on June 22 to undergo training on the Mistral-class ships and prepare for taking them home, the Wall Street Journal reported Wednesday, citing unidentified sources familiar with the agreement.

The training would precede the planned delivery this fall of the first of the two helicopter carriers that Russia had commissioned.

Obama said Thursday that he recognized the contract was "a big deal" for France, but urged it to reconsider.

He said, however, that the U.S. and France were still united on opposing Russian President Vladimir Putin's actions in Ukraine.

"That does not negate the broader cooperation we have had with France with respect to its willingness to work with us on sanctions to discourage President Putin from engaging in further destabilizing actions," Obama said in Brussels, according to the White House transcript.

The U.S. president was attending a meeting of the Group of Seven wealthiest nations in the Belgian capital — a gathering that convened without Russia's participation for the first time in two decades.

Hollande held separate talks with Putin in France later Thursday, and Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov praised the meeting as constructive, Ekho Moskvyy reported.

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