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Russia's Mistral Warships Won't Have French Weapons

By Matthew Bodner

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French-built Mistral-class warship.

A Russian defense official said two French-built Mistral-class warships on order for the Russian navy will be retrofitted with Russian weapons systems after their delivery, signaling that Western sanctions against Russia may have succeeded in scaling back the military technology transfer proposed in the Mistral sale deal.

"The construction of the Vladivostok [the second Mistral ship] is being completed. ... She will be retrofitted with Russian-made weapons at port [in St. Petersburg]," Igor Sevastyano, a spokesman for Russia's state arms import and export agency was quoted by news agency Interfax as saying Wednesday at an arms expo outside Moscow.

France's 2011 deal to supply Russia with two Mistral assault ships was part of a 1.2 billion euro ($1.6 million) technology transfer agreement. Officials have remained coy about exactly what cutting edge French technology would be supplied along with the ships, but the expectation

was that the deal would be a major boost to Russia's technical military expertise.

But since Russia's annexation of Crimea from Ukraine in March, the West has been expanding sanctions against Russia. In July, the country's defense industry was hit by an EU arms embargo. While stopping short of actually prohibiting the delivery of the ships and transfer of related shipbuilding technologies, this appears to have nixed the possibility of the warships from being outfitted with advanced French gear.

The first of the two warships, the Sevastopol, has already been launched and is undergoing final preparations for its delivery to the Russian navy later this year, while its sister ship, the Vladivostok, is not expected to be delivered until November 2015.

Washington and several of its NATO allies have pressured Paris to ax the deal, which Western leaders believe will enable potential Russian military aggression against NATO member states and pro-Western post-Soviet states near the Black Sea.

France, for whom the loss of the contract would be a major economic blow, has resisted pressure to withhold delivery of the first Mistral. French President Francois Hollande said in July the decision to follow through on the second vessel would "depend on Russia's attitude," referring to Moscow's support of separatists in eastern Ukraine, Reuters reported.

If everything goes according to plan and Moscow receives its new warships, the vessels will begin their induction into the Russian navy by stopping off at St. Petersburg's Northern Wharf shipyard to receive a full complement of Russian-made weapons systems.

Russian sailors are currently training on how to operate the warships, which are unlike anything else currently serving in the Russian navy. Although one Soviet-era aircraft carrier remains in service, it is plagued by technical troubles. The Mistral-class amphibious assault helicopter carriers are significantly more advanced in the areas of command and control systems, as well as communications.

Contact the author at bizreporter@imedia.ru

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