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Russia Blames U.S. for Mistral Deal Gone Bad

By The Moscow Times

September 04, 2014



The Mistral-class helicopter carrier Vladivostok is seen at the STX Les Chantiers de l'Atlantique shipyard site in Saint-Nazaire, September 4, 2014.

Russia's industry minister on Thursday said Moscow still expects France to provide it with two warships, despite a decision by Paris to hold off on delivery for now because of the Ukraine crisis.

Russian officials accused France of bowing to U.S. pressure by suspending delivery of the first of two Mistral helicopter carriers on Wednesday and questioned its reliability as a trade partner.

But Industry Minister Denis Manturov told Interfax news agency: "Russia assumes that the contract will be fulfilled according to the agreements."

French President Francois Hollande had for months resisted pressure from Washington and

other allies to scrap the 1.2 billion euro ($1.58 billion) contract to deliver two Mistral helicopter carriers.

On the eve of a NATO summit, his office said on Wednesday France would hold off on delivery of the first warship. It accused Russia of actions in Ukraine which ran "against the foundations of security in Europe."

"Where are the times when Paris did not cave in to pressure from the United States, as, for example, over Iraq?" the Russian Foreign Ministry's deputy spokeswoman, Maria Zakharova, wrote on Facebook.

Under President Jacques Chirac, France, like Russia, opposed the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 that ended Saddam Hussein's rule.

Zakharova described France's decision over the warships as a disgrace and said it was just as well late French leader Charles de Gaulle had not witnessed it.

"France's reputation as a reliable partner that carries out its contractual obligations has been thrown into the furnace of American political ambitions," she wrote.

Moscow has sought to play down the impact of Hollande's decision, saying France would suffer a bigger economic blow than Russia.

"If the contract is unilaterally terminated, the money will definitely be returned to the Russian side and fines and penalties will be paid," Oleg Bochkaryov, deputy chairman of the government's Military-Industrial Commission, which helps oversee the defense industry, told Interfax.

He said France was likely to have problems finding a new buyer as the vessel was built according to Russia's requirements and with Russian equipment.

"If the contract is suspended, the French side's headache will be worse than ours," he said.

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