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U.S. Wants France's Mistral Deal With Russia Called Off For Good

By The Moscow Times

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People wearing masks of French President Francois Hollande (R) and Russia's President Vladimir Putin hold up models of the Mistral-class helicopter carrier warship during a demonstration against a contract to deliver the warship to Russia, at the STX Les Chantiers de l'Atlantique shipyard site in Saint-Nazaire.

WASHINGTON — The U.S. on Wednesday threw its weight behind efforts to ensure that the sale of two French warships to Russia, the first of which has been delayed due to international concerns about the Ukraine crisis, is called off permanently.

France, facing pressure from Washington and other allies to halt the sale, said on the eve of a NATO summit last week that it would not deliver the first of two Mistral-class helicopter carriers for now because of Moscow's actions in eastern Ukraine.

Speaking at the Reuters Aerospace and Defense Summit in Washington, U.S. Navy Secretary Ray Mabus welcomed the decision.

Asked about suggestions by U.S. and European lawmakers that NATO should buy the ships as a permanent alternative to the sale, Mabus said, "We had made our concerns very well known about giving Russia this capability, and I think you ought to explore any way you can to keep these two amphibious ships out of Russian hands because it will give them capabilities that they don't have today."

The ships are being made at the French state DCNS shipyard, in which French defense company Thales SA has a minority stake.

In late May, a group of U.S. politicians wrote to NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen suggesting that France cancel the sale and that NATO buy or lease the vessels instead, according to a copy of the letter obtained by Reuters.

There have also been tentative suggestions that the EU should buy the ships, according to defense sources.

Hollande told reporters on the sidelines of last week's summit in Wales that the contract to supply the ships was neither canceled nor suspended, but that the conditions for delivering the first ship — due in October — were not ripe.

"What are the conditions? A cease-fire and a political settlement," he said. "Today these conditions are not in place."

If there were further complications, delivery would be delayed but the contract would not be suspended, he added.

Russia's industry and trade minister has said Moscow still expects France to provide it with the two warships and has accused Paris of bowing to U.S. pressure by suspending delivery of the first one.

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