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Head of U.S. Navy Calls for NATO to Buy Mistral Ships

By The Moscow Times

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U.S. Navy Secretary Ray Mabus has said NATO must purchase the two Mistral class helicopter carriers that France has withheld from Russia as a punishment for Moscow's perceived support of separatists in eastern Ukraine.

"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," Mabus said at the Reuters Aerospace and Defense Summit in Washington, D.C., BBC reported Thursday.

French President Francois Hollande announced last week that Paris would not deliver the ships amid reports that Russian forces has entered Ukraine. The move represented a stark shift in French policy after months of unsuccessful lobbying by Washington and several of its NATO allies to axe the delivery. France later said that it would reassess the situation in October.

In May, several U.S. politicians wrote a letter to former-NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen proposing that the 28-nation military alliance either buy of lease the ships so that Paris would not have to shoulder the burden of reneging on its 1.2 billion euro ($1.5 billion) deal with Moscow, Reuters reported.

Russia has already paid 700 million euros ($900 million), and France is liable for a 251 million euro ($325 million) fine if they fail to deliver the two vessels.

The first ship, the Sevastopol, is due for delivery to the Russian Navy on Nov. 1.

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