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France: Mistral Delivery to Russia Will Be Decided By End of October

By The Moscow Times

October 03, 2014

U.S. Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel (L) and French Minister of Defense Jean-Yves Le Drian hold a joint news conference following their meeting at the Pentagon in Washington.

France will review its decision to deliver the first of two French-built Mistral-class helicopter carriers to the Russian Navy at the end of October, France's Defense Minister said at a meeting with U.S. Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel.

France has come under strong pressure to nix the 1.2 billion euro Mistral deal because of Moscow's annexation of Crimea and support of separatists in eastern Ukraine.

Jean-Yves Le Drian's comment, made at the tail end of a press conference dedicated to U.S.-French cooperation against radical islamist group IS and published on the Pentagon's website Thursday, reiterates the position staked out by the French government last month, when President Francois Hollande said the deal could be ditched if tensions in Ukraine don't subside by the time of the scheduled delivery in early November.

"That is when [the decision] was supposed to be taken ... at the end of October or the beginning of November," Le Drian said. "[Hollande] is going to take his decision at that time."

Although a ceasefire in Ukraine has since been declared, it remains tenuous — with sporadic fighting flaring between separatist militias and Ukrainian armed forces. Russia continues to deny having any involvement in the conflict.

The Mistral ships, if delivered as planned, would represent a serious boost to Russian naval power, as the ships act as capable combat command centers from which the navy could conduct landings on foreign soil from both the air and sea.

Such capability does not currently exist in the Russian Navy, and cannot be immediately provided by the domestic shipbuilding industry.

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