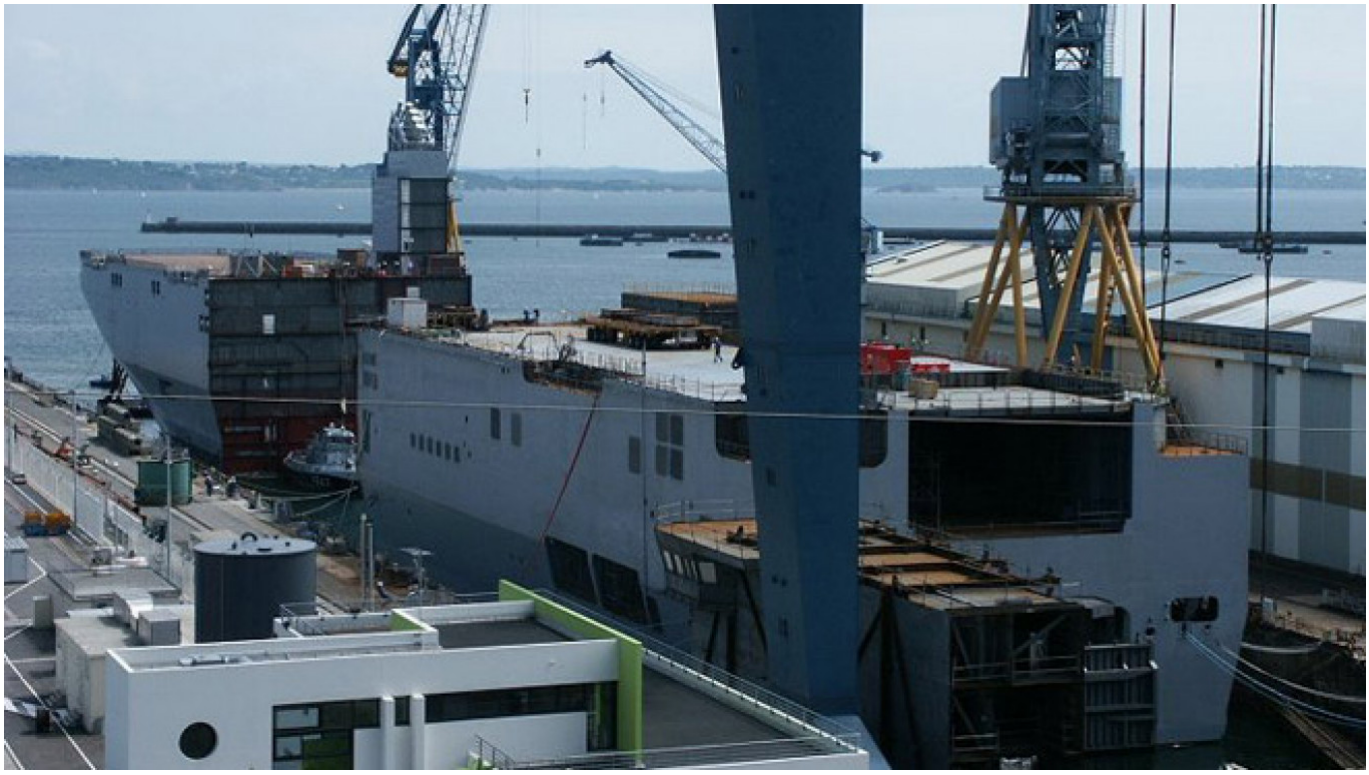
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France Suggests No Mistral Delivery – Yet

By Gabrielle Tetrault-Farber

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The signing of the $1.7 billion contract for the delivery of two Mistral ships in June 2011 has placed France in a conundrum since the outbreak of the crisis in Ukraine.

France's Finance Minister cast doubt Thursday on what Russia had said was the imminent delivery of the first of two Mistral helicopter carriers, feeding uncertainty that French political analysts view as authorities' reluctance to be seen as caving in to Russian pressure.

Finance Minister Michel Sapin said Thursday that the conditions set by French President Francois Hollande last month for delivering the first Mistral — i.e., upholding the tenuous cease-fire and reaching a political settlement in Ukraine — "had not been met at this time."

"What are the conditions? The conditions are to have a basis for normalization in Ukraine that contributes to deescalating the situation, and that Russia play a positive role in this process," Sapin said in an interview with France's RTL radio station. "Things have been going better, but some issues remain."

The announcement runs contrary to the statements of Dmitry Rogozin, Russia's deputy prime minister in charge of military issues, who tweeted Wednesday that the Vladivostok, the first French-made Mistral ship, would be handed over to Russia on Nov. 14. Rogozin published a photograph of a letter from DCNS, the French industrial group in charge of constructing the ships, inviting Anatoly Isaikin, head of Russian state arms exporter Rosoboronexport, to the French port city of Saint-Nazaire to attend a ceremony in honor of the ship's delivery.

Dated Oct. 8, the letter is signed by Pierre Legros, a senior vice president in DCNS's surface ships and naval systems division. DCNS has not confirmed the letter's authenticity and said that no delivery date had been confirmed at this time, French media reported Thursday.

The signing of the $1.7 billion contract for the delivery of two Mistral ships in June 2011 has placed France in a conundrum since the outbreak of the crisis in Ukraine, where the West accuses Moscow of fomenting unrest.

France's European and other Western partners have urged it to cancel the deliveries on the basis that they would bolster Russia's military arsenal. Meanwhile, the economic-minded factions of French politics and business circles — including the late CEO of French energy giant Total, Christophe de Margerie, who was killed at Moscow's Vnukovo Airport last week when a snowplow struck his private jet on the runway — have lobbied their government for pragmatism to prevail over politics.

Saving Face

Hollande said in September that the Vladivostok would be delivered by Oct. 31, before postponing his deadline for a decision to November. Observers thought Euronaval, a large exhibition specialized in naval defense held in Paris through Friday, would serve as the stage for Hollande's announcement.

Philippe Migault, a senior research fellow at the Paris-based Institute of International and Strategic Relations, said Hollande's postponement of making a decision — hesitation that some observers have said is simply France waiting for tensions in Ukraine to subside — was connected to Russian authorities' attitudes toward the delivery of the ships.

"The timeline for their delivery depends on the discretion of Russian authorities," Migault said. "If Russia is discreet, France will likely make a quick decision and deliver the first ship. But France cannot be viewed as having made its decision under Russian pressure."

Rogozin's tweet was a deliberate attempt to force Paris' hand, according to Tatiana Kastoueva-Jean, head of the Russia Center at the French Institute of International Relations in Paris. The French government was coerced to confirm, deny or clarify the nature of the document published by Russia.

"Rogozin's tweet is not a coincidence," Kastoueva-Jean told The Moscow Times.

"This is Russia's way of forcing the French government to admit that the Mistral will in fact be delivered [on Nov. 14], or to deny it, which is much more difficult to do when a letter of invitation is published. France's perpetual postponing of the decision has only made the issue more complicated."

Rock and a Hard Place

"France's two options — to deliver or not to deliver the Mistral ship to Russia — are both bad solutions to the problem," Kastoueva-Jean said. "There are so many factors to weigh up here — public opinion, France's bilateral relations with different partners, its role in multilateral forums, the military industry — that greatly muddle the issue."

French political analysts concurred that France would not change its overall stance on the delivery of the Vladivostok. Sapin's concession that the situation in Ukraine has improved attests to France's eagerness to deliver the Mistral while respecting the conditions it outlined with Ukraine and the West in mind. But the country's desire to deliver the Vladivostok without sparking the ire of its European and North American partners is likely unattainable, regardless of Russia's position on Ukraine, according to French pundits.

"Some of France's various partners will be displeased no matter what happens," Migault told The Moscow Times.

"In a situation in which more than 5 million people are unemployed, one in eight children live in poverty and the country's economy is on the verge of recession, it is clear that France will not want to pay a 1 billion euro fine [for not delivering the ships] and risk losing other military contracts just to please Poland and the Baltic States."

French military experts have said that the cancellation of the Mistral deliveries for the sake of politics could jeopardize other military deals, including ongoing negotiations for a multibillion-dollar contract for 126 Rafale combat aircraft to India.

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