

Russia Says it Could Build its Own Mistral Warships

By [Matthew Bodner](#)

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Laborers work on the Mistral-class helicopter carrier Vladivostok at the STX Les Chantiers de l'Atlantique shipyard site in Saint-Nazaire.

A Russian minister said Moscow could build its own helicopter carriers if it wanted, after France last week halted plans to deliver two cutting-edge Mistral assault warships to the Russian navy because of ongoing bloodletting in Ukraine.

"If the objective will be to build analogous ships, we will do that," Trade and Industry Minister Denis Manturov was quoted as saying by RIA Novosti Monday.

Russia's 1.2 billion euro deal with French shipbuilding firm DCNS involved extensive knowledge and technology exchange, and gave Russia the right to construct two Mistral-class ships in domestic shipyards after delivery of the first two. Russian engineers and naval forces have been on site in France during Mistral construction. It is not clear how much expertise has been transferred.

According to Manturov, while the hulls of the Mistral were French, the project was cooperative and "the insides, the control systems, were Russian."

Despite the importance of the deal to French dockyards, French President Francois Hollande's administration said last week that Paris would halt delivery of the first of the two Mistral, the Sevastopol, due to Moscow's perceived escalation of its involvement in eastern Ukraine, where separatists began counterattacking Ukrainian armed forces.

The move was initially seen as a stark shift in French policy after months of lobbying by the U.S. and several of its NATO allies to axe the deal, which would significantly boost Russia's ability to launch amphibious strikes and project naval power.

However, analysts say the announcement was hollow, and nothing has really changed.

Though it said sending the warships was impossible now, the French said a final decision would only be made before the contractual delivery deadline of Nov. 1, said Mikhail Barabanov, a naval analyst with the Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, an independent Moscow-based think-tank.

This allows nearly two months for the Ukrainian conflict to cool before the deal would truly be scrapped — an outcome that would expose France to massive fines for breach of contract.

Russia would certainly feel the loss of valuable French shipbuilding technologies and know-how if the deal fell through, said Dmitry Gorenburg, a naval analyst with U.S.-based naval think tank CNA.

But its impact on Russia's military clout will be minimal, he added: "amphibious operations are not at the core of the country's naval doctrine."

Contact the author at bizreporter@imedia.ru

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