

# 4 Things France Can Do With Its Russian-Ordered Mistral Warships

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Russian sailors board their Russian Navy frigate Smolny as they leave the STX Les Chantiers de l'Atlantique shipyard site in Saint-Nazaire, western France, Dec. 18, 2014.

What do you do with two 600 million euro (\$680 million) warships when you can't give them to the buyer, but don't need them yourself?

With the delivery of France's Mistral-class helicopter carriers to the Russian navy indefinitely postponed over Moscow's role in the Ukraine crisis, rumors have abounded regarding the warships' ultimate fate.

While some of the suggestions have been mundane, others have been truly creative. The Moscow Times takes a look at four of the most popular suggestions floated since November.

## **Sink Them**

One of the most creative ideas was carried by French newspaper Le Figaro last week, when unidentified French defense officials were quoted as saying that scuttling the two ships would save taxpayers money.

In a column published in the L'Opinion newspaper in April, French journalist Jean-Dominique Merchet estimated that upkeep for the ships costs 5 million euros (\$5.7 million) a month.

What's more, because the ships have been built to use Russian hardware, retrofitting them for French use would cost millions.

With the ships' delivery already delayed by more than 6 months, the measure could prove economical — but only if France really has no other options but to keep the ships docked forever.

## **Sell Them to NATO**

One suggestion that won't die is selling the ships to NATO. The big problem here is that NATO doesn't actually have an army. Its forces are composed of designated elements of its member nations' armed forces.

France could, however, sell the ships to a NATO member interested in expanding its naval capabilities, such as Canada. The two Mistral vessels built for the Russian navy feature special modifications to the hull that make the ships better suited for Arctic duties — an active theater of interest for the Canadian navy.

## **Turn Them Into Floating Casinos for China**

In 1998 Chinese businessman Cheng Zhen Shu bought an old Soviet aircraft carrier, the Varyag, for \$20 million. Shu said he would turn the ship into a floating casino, a renovation that news agency Bloomberg reported would cost up to \$200 million.

The Varyag in fact never turned into a tourist destination, but emerged in 2011 as China's first serving aircraft carrier.

Several other Soviet aircraft carriers did make the transition from warship to pleasure boat, though. China in 2011 opened up an old aircraft carrier called the Kiev as a luxury hotel, while the aircraft carrier Minsk became part of a Chinese theme park called "Minsk World."

A Chinese entrepreneur may be interested in buying the Mistral for similar purposes like the Varyag or Kiev.

## **Sell Them to the Chinese Military**

Of course, France could just cut out the middle man and sell the Mistral directly to the Chinese navy, which in recent years has amended its naval doctrine to move beyond a coastal defense force and become a true blue water navy with aircraft carriers.

Rumors that Paris is considering selling the Russian Mistral to Beijing were stoked

by Chinese media reports last week, which interpreted the visit of a French naval formation led by a Mistral-class vessel as signs that France wanted to show the design off before making an offer.

There is also the risk, of course, that China could be a back door for Russia to get its ships.

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