

November 2009

FRENCH SHIP SALE TO RUSSIA MUST BE BLOWN OFF COURSE

David J. Smith

Director, Georgian Security Analysis Center, Tbilisi

Senior Fellow, Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, Washington.

The French Navy amphibious assault ship *Mistral* will visit Saint Petersburg, Russia next week. This port call signals that Franco-Russian relations thrive despite the fifteen months since the Russian invasion of Georgia during which Moscow has unflinchingly flouted the ceasefire agreement negotiated by French President Nicolas Sarkozy. But the *Mistral's* mission is not just a port call; it is a sales call—with ominous geopolitical implications.

"We plan to buy one *Mistral* class ship in France and with technical support from the French to build four helicopter carriers of this class under license," Vice Admiral Oleg Burtsev, First Deputy Chief of the Russian Navy Staff, told a November 2 press conference. French sources say that the deal is nearly done—it may be announced while the *Mistral* is in Saint Petersburg. It would be the biggest ever NATO country military supply to Russia.

The *Mistral* class of ships is designed to attack the shore from the sea, an ideal weapon for Russia to intimidate its neighbors. *Mistrals* can carry 16 heavy or 35 light helicopters, 4 landing craft, 900 soldiers and up to 70 military vehicles, including as many as 40 tanks.

Selling Russia *Mistral* class ships during hard economic times may appear a deft diplomatic move. Many western countries have turned a cold shoulder to Russia's crude demeanor while tripping over themselves to curry favor with Moscow through a number of back door approaches. Selling a few modern ships to Russia's barnacle-ridden navy will hardly threaten American dominance at sea; moreover, Washington is thoroughly distracted by Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran. Meanwhile, the notion of Georgia or Ukraine in NATO is on hold. And the west is seized with a general sense of *malaise* in which few countries want to squabble with France.

However, such short-sighted diplomacy often backfires at home and abroad. Is Paris prepared not only to overlook but to reward aggression, ignore the shredding of a ceasefire crafted and signed by its president, accept the help of Georgian soldiers in Afghanistan but enforce an unacknowledged arms embargo against Georgia and meanwhile sell advanced arms to Russia? Does France really want Russia to have this littoral combat capability?

Ignoring these questions will evoke pleasant noises in Moscow for a time, but Russia will not reciprocate in any concrete way. Indeed, it will demand ever more to be appeased. And eventually Russia will employ the *Mistrals* in another act of aggression, thereby making France complicit.

Regrettably, the potential sale of *Mistral* class ships to Russia appears to spring from worse than unprincipled economics or misguided diplomacy. France's partnership with Russia, Prime Minister Francois Fillon said on October 9, "can take several forms in the defense sphere, from military cooperation to close industrial partnership." Recall that Fillon a day before the April 2008 NATO Bucharest Summit objected to the idea of Georgia and Ukraine in NATO "because we think that it is not the right response to the balance of power in Europe and between Europe and Russia."

It is difficult to imagine what power the prime minister imagines France is balancing with the sale of *Mistral* class ships to Russia. However, it is easy to discern Russia's motivation for the purchase.

Despite the flourish of dispatching the battlecruiser *Pyotr Veliky* to the Caribbean Sea last autumn and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev's more recent promise to "rebuild a strong Russian navy in 10 years," the Russian Navy will for the foreseeable future be a green water navy that operates close to home.

Beyond rhetoric, Moscow does not soon intend to challenge US Navy dominance of the oceans. Rather, Russia intends to halt NATO's eastward enlargement, particularly to Georgia and Ukraine; to retain its Black Sea Fleet headquarters in the Ukrainian port of Sevastopol beyond the 2017 expiration of its leasehold; to discourage NATO from planning and exercising the defense of Baltic and Black Sea allies; to challenge US forward operating bases on Bulgarian and Romanian shores; and eventually to roll back what it characterizes as encroachment from the west.

A handful of *Mistral* class ships in the Baltic and Black Seas would make a big difference. "In the conflict in August last year a ship like that would have allowed the Black Sea Fleet to accomplish its mission in 40 minutes, not 26 hours, which is how long it took us," Russian Navy Commander Admiral Vladimir Vysotskiy, recently said, referring to Russia's August 2008 invasion of Georgia.

Consequently, the *Mistral's* passage through the Baltic Sea next week must capture the attention of every NATO ally. The French sale of *Mistral* class ships to Russia would be a major adverse geopolitical development and a potential alliance buster—it must be blown off course.

© David J. Smith, 2009

All rights reserved

The Cicero Foundation is an independent EU think tank

www.cicerofoundation.org