

France Sells Weapons to Russia: Russia Presses Demands for High-Tech French Warships

Negotiations on most ambitious bid to reach out to Russia have stumbled

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PARIS: Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin met with President Nicolas Sarkozy on Friday as Moscow pressed demands that French warships it wants to buy should come with high-tech equipment.

The sale of the Mistral-class assault ships is widely seen as France's most ambitious bid yet to reach out to Russia, but negotiations have stumbled, notably over Moscow's demands for a transfer of technology.

The deal would be the first sale of advanced military hardware to Russia by a NATO member country.

Speaking in central Paris at the opening of a big exhibition showcasing Franco-Russian cooperation, Putin said France and Russia must work together to keep their competitive edge in science and technology.

"The world is going through a difficult time and we have to stand together to remain competitive," Putin said at the event, standing alongside Prime Minister Francois Fillon.

"In scientific and technological areas, we must unite our efforts," he said before heading to the Elysee palace for talks and lunch with Sarkozy.

Putin told AFP in an interview on the eve of his visit that a deal on the Mistral, now under negotiation for more than five months, is possible only if the vessel comes equipped with cutting-edge technology.

France has said it will not lump sophisticated navigation systems and other sensitive technology into the deal for the ships, that cost about 500 million euros (\$600 million) each.

"For us the most important thing is to buy technology. That is the future," reiterated Russian Industry Minister Viktor Khristenko on Friday.

The sale of the Mistral warships, which can carry 16 helicopters and a 750-strong landing force, has also run into complications over Moscow's insistence that three of the four vessels be built in Russia.

"For us, this deal is interesting only if it is accomplished with a parallel transfer of technology," Putin told AFP.

Russia's neighbours in the Baltics and Georgia, along with the United States, have raised objections over the sale but France has countered that Russia must be treated like a partner and not a threat in Europe.

There have been concerns that the warships could be deployed in the Black Sea, where tensions are high following the 2008 war between Russia and Georgia and among ethnic Russians living in Ukraine's Crimea region.

Russia's military chief of staff, General Nikolai Makarov, said in Moscow this week that the vessel could be used to patrol waters near Pacific islands that are the subject of a long-running dispute with Japan.

The Russian leader met with his former French counterpart, Sarkozy's predecessor Jacques Chirac, first thing on Friday and was to have talks later with the head of French oil giant Total, Christophe de Margerie.

Two other major French energy companies are involved in Russian-led projects to bring gas to Europe: EDF in the South Stream gas pipeline and GDF in another known as North Stream.

The prime minister is leading a delegation of top businessmen from Russian aerospace, energy and transport who will be looking at prospects for new partnerships during a series of round-table discussions.

Putin last held talks in France in November and President Dmitry Medvedev was warmly received during a state visit in March that yielded a string of deals in energy, transport, aeronautics and aerospace.

The countries also cooperated in pushing through fresh sanctions this week against Iran over its suspect nuclear programme.

Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov on Friday said Russia will comply strictly with the sanctions, but did not make clear whether a controversial planned sale of S-300 air defence missiles to Iran would go ahead.

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