On November 18th 2014 Sputnik news reported that the French government has denied access to the Russian training crew for the Mistral ship Vladivostok docked at St. Nazaire. The French Ministry of Defence denied knowledge of the action but their denial is in line with the French President’s continual habit of saying one thing and meaning another. The alarming question now has to be asked whether this is just a commercial breach of contract or a hostile act, because the French government has not just “failed” to deliver the first of the two Mistral ships contracted and paid for as the press reports state, it has refused to deliver them and will not unless certain conditions are met, political conditions, which have strategic importance for Russia and conditions that can never be met unless Russia surrenders its strategic position and its defence of the Ukrainians of the Donbass.

The announcement of the Mistral deal by President Sarkozy was made on December 24th, 2010. Russian Deputy Prime Minister Igor Sechin and French Foreign Minister Alain Juppe signed the contracts, on January 25, 2011. In retrospect, alarms about the deal should have gone off even before the ink was dry, as the signing came not long after France re-joined Nato in March 2009. This major change in French foreign policy sent the clear message that France was now strategically aligned with the United States, abandoning over 40 years of French independence from US military command. France’s re-entry into Nato was the logical culmination of a long history of French cooperation with Nato. Since France, as a member of Nato, has to act in the interests of its master, it should come as no surprise that the French have taken another hostile action against Russia by taking part in the illegal economic embargo instituted by the Americans. France has taken actions against Russian interests for years.

In 1999, France took part in the Nato aggression against and occupation of Yugoslavia that succeeded in placing American bases in the Balkans directly threatening Russia’s southwest flank. Just a few months after announcing the Mistral deal, Sarkozy was one of the most rabid of the dogs of war who betrayed Russia’s trust in a UN no-fly zone resolution by using it as a trick to attack, and destroy Libya and murder Muammar Gadhafi, eliminating a Russian ally in the Mediterranean and North Africa. Since then, France has assisted the financing and training of anti-Assad forces in order to overthrow the government of Syria and force Russia out of its base at Tartus and the Mediterranean Sea.

Yet it is during these events that the contract for the ships went forward despite criticism in Russia about the ability of the ships to cope with a cold climate because of fuel problems, the refusal by Nato to hand over necessary military and electronic technology so the ships could function effectively, concerns about its high vulnerability to anti-ship missile attack requiring the assistance of several escort vessels in order to operate in hostile waters, and criticism
about becoming reliant on other nations for defence requirements.

The French support for the overthrow of the elected government in Ukraine, its support for the Kiev regime’s attacks on the civilian population of the Donbass and French participation in the economic warfare against Russia being conducted by the Nato allies, taken in the historical context, means that the refusal to hand over the ships due under the contracts is meant to weaken Russia militarily and politically.

The military effects are several. One of the ships was to be stationed on the Pacific Coast for operations to protect the Kuril Islands in particular, and one of them was to be used as the flagship of the Russian navy in the Mediterranean. Their ability to move a reinforced battalion of troops along with the capacity to launch multiple helicopters, transport landing craft and act as a command and control centre had both strategic and tactical importance. Further, Russia hoped to obtain advanced technology and the ability to build other Mistral's in Russia.

Politically the French refusal is meant to humiliate Russia on the world stage in order to weaken its prestige and support in the world, a refusal compounded by the insulting cat and mouse game being played by the French, first promising to deliver the ships, then hesitating, then promising again, but in the end never delivering. A cynical person could even wonder whether Russia was tricked all along and paid almost 1.2 billion euros in advance in early 2011 for ships it was never intended to get and was lured into wasting three years that could have been spent on developing similar vessels to be built in Russia.

The simple fact is Russia has handed over the money but France now has the ships and the money. Even if the French repaid the money plus penalties Russia’s interests will have been damaged but the idea that France will willingly give back the money already paid plus penalties is naïve. France wants to hurt Russia and France cannot hurt Russia and then cover Russia’s losses and any talk of France honouring the penalty clauses in the contract for failure to deliver when it has refused to honour the contract in the first place is just whistling in the dark.

Already there is talk in the French press about relying on the force majeure clauses in the contracts to avoid any Russian legal action to recover the money. President Putin reacted by stating that the French cannot rely on force majeure, as the contracts are very specific and not in favour of France. The positions of the parties are already being drawn and long years of arguing before courts and trade tribunals will not change the situation.

It is not just Russia that will suffer a loss. The repercussions are very serious for both countries. In France the union that represents the workers at St. Nazaire where the ships are built expressed “shock and outrage” Le Figaro reported, after Paris delayed delivery due to pressure from the US and EU and stated that the decision risked the loss of 2500 jobs in a country on the verge of recession or worse. It has given the far right party ammunition to attack President Hollande. Marie LePen demanded the ships be delivered or else risk undermining French credibility, its reliability in arms sales and its national honour.

Hollande’s response is to play the game of denying the contract has been rescinded or breached by stating that it is still in effect and delivery will be made but then contradicts himself and states that “I will take my decision without any pressure, wherever it may come from, and based on two criteria; the interests of France and the appreciation I have of the situation.” He also stated that the delivery of the ships is contingent on two conditions being met: a ceasefire in Ukraine and a peace deal between the Kiev regime and Moscow.

He said this when he knew that the Kiev regime is deliberately breaking the ceasefire on a daily basis and has no intention of abiding by it and that Poroshenko and the Americans have no intention of allowing peace in Ukraine. The fact is that France is locked into the American war logic and Hollande’s statement that he is subject to no pressure is as laughable as his popularity ratings in France. The statements by President Obama at the G20 meeting Australia that Russia will be economically “isolated” unless it bows to US diktats and the deliberately insulting behaviour towards the Russian head of state by Nato leaders at the meeting and the current oil price war are glaring evidence that Nato’s hostile intentions against Russia are becoming more acute with every day.

The fact is that France has acted to wound Russia and is acting in accord with the United States and its other Nato allies and is willing to do so because it has greater interests in mind which pale beside the predictable job losses, lawsuits and loss of reputation. Those interests are the interests of the Nato alliance as a whole that is preparing for war against Russia.

Russia has stated it will respond to the French refusal to deliver the Russian ships at the end of November. The Russian Upper House has suggested cancelling the contract. But this also has serious implications and will not make Russia whole as the French are unlikely to pay back the money. Poroshenko has threatened all out war against the
Donbas and the fact that Ukraine cannot obtain coal supplies for the winter from other sources at a price it can afford suggests that an offensive to seize the Donbas coal mines is being considered and this will once again bring Nato and Russia in direct confrontation.

The countries of Nato and its allies in Japan and Australia are suffering serious problems as their economies sink into recession and fade into the shadows of the BRIC economies that are shaking off US dollar hegemony. Their leaders are mediocrities who think like gangsters. Their democracies have ceased to function in any real sense. They have painted themselves into a corner and see war as the only way out. Russia’s response to the Mistral Affair will be interesting to see but whatever the response is it will be made in a world context and in the search for a peaceful resolution of the war that threatens us all.

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