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U.S. Should Condemn Spain and France's Military Support to the Russian Federation

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As Russia continues to occupy Crimea and back political instability in eastern Ukraine, there are some NATO members that continue to provide Russia with military support. Spain allows the Russian navy use of its ports, and France is selling two amphibious assault ships to Russia.

This behavior is unbecoming of 21st-century NATO allies. The U.S. should work with likeminded NATO partners to apply pressure on France and Spain to end their military assistance to Russia.

Europe Is Divided

Although the secretary general of NATO described the crisis in Ukraine and Russian aggression as the biggest threat to Europe since the end of the Cold War, Europe has been divided on its response. Some countries, such as Germany and Italy, have strong economic ties to Russia. Other European nations are dependent for 100 percent of their natural gas and oil requirements on the Russian Federation.

These complex economic relationships do not justify Europe's unwillingness to enact meaningful sanctions on Russia, but they certainly make it understandably more difficult. However, there is no excuse for the support given by Spain and France to the Russian navy.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at
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Spain Welcomes the Russian Navy

Spain possesses two sovereign enclaves called Ceuta and Melilla that border Morocco. They are both sizable cities, with populations of 73,000 and 79,000, respectively. They are legally part of Spain, and they are the only two European Union (EU) cities located in mainland Africa. They are also part of the Schengen Agreement and the eurozone. The Russian navy has been using their port facilities for years.

On April 28, during the same week that the EU announced a new round of sanctions against Russia, Spain played host to the Russian destroyer *Vice Admiral Kulakov* at Ceuta.¹ During its stay, the destroyer took on nearly 740 tons of fuel and 100 tons of water. In the same week, two Russian navy tankers, the *Duban* and the *Sergey Osipov*, visited the Spanish port. Earlier this year, the landing ship *Alexander Shabalin* and the tug ship *Khorov* also called into Ceuta. It has been reported that a total of six Russian ships have visited Ceuta in 2014.²

Spain's policy of allowing the Russian navy to use Ceuta in North Africa is also hypocritical in relation to its reluctance to allow visits by NATO ships to or from the British Overseas Territory of Gibraltar directly to or from Spanish ports. Therefore, under certain circumstances Spain would rather have a Russian ship visit a Spanish port than a NATO ship. In addition, Spanish authorities routinely deny any request by military aircraft from NATO members that arrives or departs the Gibraltar airfield and overflies or lands in Spain.

France: Arming the Russians

It is not only Spain providing support to the Russian navy. The French are literally equipping

it as well. France is proceeding with a €1.2 billion (\$1.6 billion) defense deal involving the sale of two *Mistral*-class amphibious assault ships to the Russian navy. The first ship, named *Vladivostok*, is due for delivery at the end of the year. The second ship, coincidentally named the *Sevastopol* (the name of the naval base in Crimea, which Russia has just annexed from Ukraine), will follow soon after.

Although France will not be selling any weapons systems with the ships, the ships themselves provide a platform from which an array of offensive military capability and weapons can be deployed. *Mistrals* can carry 16 helicopters and have a flight deck with six helicopter landing spots. Russian *Mistrals* are expected to be armed with eight Ka-52K attack helicopters and eight Ka-29 assault transport helicopters. The ships can carry four mechanized landing craft or two hovercrafts, 70 armored vehicles, and up to 450 troops. Each ship comes equipped with advanced communications capabilities that make it capable of operating as a command-and-control vessel and has a 69-bed hospital. Admiral Vladimir Vysotsky, the former head of the Russian navy, said that his country would have won the war against Georgia in 2008 in “40 minutes instead of 26 hours” if it had had these ships back then.³

France is also hosting Russian sailors to train them to operate the ships. Russia sent 354 sailors and 60 instructors to France in February to undergo training on manning the ship; this first phase of training will be completed at the end of May. The second phase of training, consisting of around 400 troops, will begin in June and last until October.⁴

Although Russia has publicly stated that the two ships will be based with its Pacific fleet, there is no guarantee this will be the case forever—especially

considering that the service life of a *Mistral*-class ship is several decades. The *Mistral* variant that Russia will be purchasing will have a reinforced hull and special deck-warming devices in order for it to operate in the Arctic Ocean.

Even with Russia’s recent aggression in the Ukraine, France has no plans to cancel the deal. In fact, French politicians have taken a flippant attitude to the deal. The French defense minister, Jean-Yves Le Drian, recently claimed that France was only selling “civilian hulls” to Russia.⁵ Bruno Le Maire, a former government minister and current member of the French National Assembly, justified continuing with the sale by stating, “It’s the only way to show Vladimir Putin we’re serious.... Putin is playing on Europe’s divisions and hesitations.”⁶ Paris is in denial about the potent maritime capability these two platforms will offer the Russian navy.

Pressure from All Sides

French and Spanish support to the Russian navy weakens NATO’s opposition to Russian aggression against Ukraine and projects an image of a divided alliance. The situation requires:

- **Leadership from the White House.** President Obama should make his disappointment about Spain and France’s behavior public. He should also request that each country cease their support to the Russian navy while the crisis in Ukraine continues.
- **Pressure from Foggy Bottom and the Pentagon.** Secretary of State John Kerry and Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel should use every opportunity, including the upcoming NATO ministeri-

1. *Gibraltar Chronicle*, “Russian Warships Refuel in Ceuta as EU Condemns Moscow over Ukraine,” April 30, 2014, http://www.chronicle.gi/headlines_details.php?id=33765 (accessed May 16, 2014).

2. *Ceutaldia*, “500 Tripulantes Rusos Llegan Estos Días a Ceuta en Tres Buques,” April 29, 2014, <http://www.ceutaldia.com/content/view/102736/36/> (accessed May 16, 2014).

3. Stacy Meichtry, “France on Track to Supply Russian Warships, Despite Ukraine Crisis,” *The Wall Street Journal*, March 3, 2014, <http://blogs.wsj.com/brussels/2014/03/03/%EF%BB%BFfrance-on-track-to-supply-russian-warships-despite-ukraine-crisis/> (accessed May 16, 2014).

4. ITAR-TASS News Agency, “French President Assures Russia Mistral Contract to Be Fulfilled in October,” May 10, 2014, <http://en.itar-tass.com/world/731101> (accessed May 16, 2014).

5. Pierre Tran, “French DM: Cancellation of Carrier Sale to Russia an ‘Extreme Measure,’” *Defense News*, March 19, 2014, <http://www.defensenews.com/article/20140319/DEFREG01/303190028/French-DM-Cancellation-Carrier-Sale-Russia-an-Extreme-Measure-> (accessed May 16, 2014).

6. Eleanor Beardsley, “The French Ask: Should We Be Building Warships for Russia?” NPR, May 13, 2014, <http://www.npr.org/blogs/parallels/2014/05/13/311907827/europe-could-tighten-screws-on-russia-but-it-doesnt-why> (accessed May 16, 2014).

al meeting in June and the NATO summit in September, to raise this issue with their French and Spanish counterparts.

- **A coordinated effort with European allies.** The Administration should be coordinating with like-minded allies in NATO to apply pressure to force a change in policy in Paris and Madrid.
- **Action from Congress.** It is incumbent on the U.S. Congress to make it clear that French and Spanish support to the Russian navy is unbecoming of a NATO ally.

Completely Unacceptable

It is unacceptable that two major NATO member states would offer support to the Russian navy at a time when Moscow is actively attempting to dismember Ukraine and undermining the security of the Baltic states. The U.S. government should make it clear at the highest levels that it views any support to the Russian navy in terms of equipment sales and port access as completely unacceptable in light of Russian aggression.

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