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With France Arming Russia, What is NATO For?

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In theory NATO is still supposed to protect Europe from untold dangers. The list of likely aggressors is small--whatever their neighbors say about Germany, Serbia, Iran, and China, none look to be would-be conquerors of Europe. Which leaves Russia.

Yet France plans on supplying Moscow with an advanced ship, the Mistral. Reports the *New York Times*:

The boxy, 600-foot-long Mistral vessel is an advanced helicopter carrier equipped with a command center and hospital for military landing operations. It is the first major arms purchase by Russia abroad and the first sale by a NATO country, illustrating the shifting role of an alliance once conceived to counter Soviet military power.

One of the sticking points in negotiations was whether the deal would include advanced naval weapons and defense systems. In the months leading to the deal, a series of French officials softened their stand, saying that France was willing to supply the technology without restrictions.

Indeed, Paris has been treating the sale like a sporting event. The big contract means France is the winner. Explains the *Times*:

Since a low-key Christmas Eve announcement of a French sale of assault ships to Russia, high-level government deal makers have boasted about the multimillion-euro deal like it was a soccer game triumph. "France wins," declares the Web site for the Élysée Palace.

Of course, the likelihood of Russian aggression is small and the Mistral sale alone won't change Europe's balance of power. But just what is NATO for if its members are arming the one country which it is directed against? The U.S. has better things to do with its manpower and money than defend nations which don't believe they need defending.

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