

Medvedev to Host Afghan, Pakistani Leaders

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President Dmitry Medvedev will host the leaders of Afghanistan and Pakistan on Wednesday, a sign that the nations are seeking closer ties ahead of any eventual U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Moscow has sought to regain regional influence that it lost after the 1989 Soviet withdrawal following a disastrous 10-year war in Afghanistan, and analysts say Afghanistan and Pakistan are looking to Russia as a source of support.

Russia traditionally has had far warmer ties with India than with Pakistan, but the Kremlin has been broadening its contacts across Asia and the Middle East as it seeks more clout.

Medvedev is to meet Afghan President Hamid Karzai and Pakistani President Ali Asif Zardari in the Black Sea resort of Sochi for talks on security and drug trafficking — issues on which Moscow has found fault with the U.S. approach.

Tajik President Emomali Rakhmon, whose impoverished country is a major route for Afghan

drugs, is also to attend.

Moscow's ties with Pakistan have been strained since Soviet forces fought Pakistan-backed militants in the 1980s war. Longtime Russian friend India — eager to counter Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan — may bristle at the meeting.

Russia and Pakistan have made efforts to improve ties. Russia sent an Il-76 jet loaded with humanitarian aid to flood-hit Pakistan on Monday, said Medvedev's top foreign policy adviser, Sergei Prikhodko.

Russian officials have said they would not send soldiers to Afghanistan, where Moscow lost 15,000 troops in the Soviet-era war, but the Kremlin is holding out the prospect of supplying helicopters.

"We are ready to discuss this topic if the Afghan side raises it," Prikhodko said. "The Russian side is interested in this, and we have no limitations."

The American commander of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan said Sunday that meeting President Barack Obama's goal of starting to withdraw troops by July 2011 would depend on conditions at the time.

"The U.S. withdrawal is inevitable, and there is a strong need for new intermediaries in the region," said Alexander Kramchikhin of the Moscow-based Institute of Military and Political Analysis.

"Moscow has very strong ties with Afghanistan and knowledge of the situation," he said.

Russia has provided supply lines for U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan, a source of illegal drugs that feed an epidemic of abuse in Russia and a factor in the instability in former Soviet Central Asia.

But Moscow has repeatedly warned that military action alone will not solve Afghanistan's problems — playing to Afghan anger over civilian casualties — and has loudly criticized the U.S. and NATO strategy for fighting Afghan drug production.

"The Afghan drug threat should be fought on an all-out basis, striking massively all of its segments, starting from destroying drug crops within the country to eradicating the supplies of chemical precursors," Prikhodko said.

NATO earlier this year rejected Russian calls for the eradication of Afghan opium poppy fields, saying the best way for Moscow to help control the drug would be to give more assistance against the insurgency.

Prikhodko indicated that Russia would discuss how two regional groups in which it holds influence — the Collective Security Treaty Organization and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which includes China — could help Afghanistan attain security.

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