

Groundwork Laid for Medvedev-NATO Talks

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NEW YORK — A planned summit between NATO leaders and President Dmitry Medvedev will significantly boost cooperation on the Afghan war, missile defense and fighting drug trafficking and piracy, a senior U.S. official said.

U.S. NATO Ambassador Ivo Daalder said a foreign ministers' session with Sergei Lavrov scheduled for Wednesday in New York would lay the groundwork for the November summit of the 28 NATO members and Russia in Lisbon, Portugal. Medvedev was invited earlier this month.

"I hope what we get out of this is that everyone will leave with an understanding that there is a good basis for trying to achieve some significant breakthroughs by the time we are able to get together at the leaders' level in November," Daalder told journalists Tuesday.

Russia, which wants to quash Islamist militancy and drug trafficking in its neighborhood, has opened a land route to resupply the 140,000-member NATO force in Afghanistan. The main supply route through Pakistan has come under repeated attack by Taliban guerrillas.

Moscow is also training hundreds of Afghan and Central Asian drug agents. It is currently considering a NATO request to equip the nascent Afghan air force with transport and gunship helicopters, and to train their pilots and mechanics.

"Russia has no interest in seeing us fail in Afghanistan; it has every interest that Afghanistan is not a source of instability," Daalder said. "In that sense we are working together in seeing how we can transform those shared interests into [more cooperation]."

Daalder said he expected that NATO nations would decide on whether to proceed with a proposed anti-missile shield.

Some of the 28 member states are skeptical about the proposed system, citing declining defense budgets at a time of economic crisis. It would protect much of Europe and North America from ballistic missiles launched from nations such as North Korea and Iran. Russia has been invited to participate.

"It is certainly something we are in dialogue with the Russians, and expect that it will bear fruition soon after the Lisbon summit," Daalder said.

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