

# NATO Ties Hang On Unity, U.S. Vote

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Russia's relations with NATO could improve significantly over the next few weeks, but much depends on U.S. midterm elections and unity among the alliance's member states, analysts said Tuesday.

NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen will discuss possible areas of cooperation with President Dmitry Medvedev on Wednesday in Moscow.

The talks are also part of crucial preparations for Medvedev's planned participation at a Nov. 20 NATO summit in the Portuguese capital, Lisbon.

The summit is expected to decide the alliance's long-expected new strategy for the 21st century, including relations with Russia.

The Kremlin said Monday that it wants the new strategy to contain elements that reflect Russia's own security interests, including the "indivisibility of security," partnership-based relations and a stipulation that NATO expansion does not become automatic in character.

"For us it is important to see [that NATO] takes into account Russian security concerns," the Kremlin said in an e-mailed statement.

NATO's new strategy has been partly cobbled together by an expert group of elder statesmen under former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright. In a sign of respect, the group consulted government officials in Moscow over the strategy in February.

Medvedev and Rasmussen will also speak about NATO's renewed invitation to work together on European missile defense and Afghanistan, the Kremlin statement said.

Rasmussen has made rebuilding ties with Moscow a priority since taking NATO's top political post in August 2009.

He has benefited from the impetus given by U.S. President Barack Obama's goal of resetting relations with Moscow and a much reduced appetite among European members to expand the alliance eastward into countries that Russia sees among its sphere of interests.

Rasmussen's visit follows an unprecedented joint operation in Afghanistan last week that saw Russian counternarcotics agents participate in a NATO-led drug raid that seized heroin worth some \$56 million.

But the raid angered Afghan President Hamid Karzai, who complained that he was not informed about Russian agents operating in his country.

Analysts said the raid was successful and that Karzai's anger just reflected Afghan reservations against a return of Russian troops after the trauma of the country's Soviet occupation during the 1980s.

Rasmussen's spokesman James Appathurai said last week that sending Russian forces to Afghanistan was "not on the agenda," and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Monday that the country's soldiers would under "no circumstances" return there.

Analysts say that Moscow's motivation for cooperation is greatest for anti-drugs policies in Afghanistan because most of the heroin produced there ends up in Russia.

The Kremlin statement noted that Afghan agents also took part in the raid and said Afghan anti-drug experts are currently being trained in Russian universities.

NATO is also promoting the sale of Russian helicopters to Afghanistan, where most local pilots are trained to fly Soviet-built equipment.

Another crucial area of cooperation is missile defense, where many NATO members are now eager for Moscow's cooperation.

U.S. plans for a shield against long-range missiles in Poland and the Czech Republic had roiled relations with Moscow under former President George W. Bush, because Moscow argued that this would undermine its own missile capabilities.

After Obama scrapped the plans last year, countries like Germany have been saying that Moscow must be part of the new shield. "It is very important to invite the Russian

government to take part," German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle said during a visit to Lithuania on Tuesday, Interfax reported.

Washington's new plans envisage setting up parts of a smaller shield in countries like Romania and Turkey.

"The participation offer gets attractive if Russia can integrate its S-300 air defense missiles," said Otfried Nassauer, director of the Berlin Information Center for Transatlantic Security, a think tank.

Another stumbling block could be old topics such as conventional troop numbers. Last week, Kommersant quoted Foreign Ministry sources as saying that any deal with NATO would have include limits on alliance troops in the alliance's eastern member states.

The issue has come up regularly in the past and is complicated by Moscow's 2007 decision to suspend its participation in the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe.

But NATO officials have pointed out that Russia has committed itself in the NATO-Russia Council's founding act to station no extra "substantial" combat forces on a permanent basis.

Nassauer warned that any cooperation hinged on NATO members' ability to agree on a common stance.

He said it remained unclear whether NATO would solve its fundamental inconsistency toward Russia. "So far, some members see Russia as a partner and even potential member, while others see it as a threat," he said in a telephone interview.

The government has made it clear that it will not give up its interests and any cooperation must be struck among equals.

An unidentified Kremlin official told Interfax last week that both sides must find a strategic balance. "We are traveling [to Lisbon] to guarantee our interests, concerns and strategic ambitions," the official said.

Alexei Malashenko, an analyst with the Carnegie Moscow Center, said much depends on the outcome of the U.S. midterm congressional elections Tuesday.

"No important decisions will be made before we find out who has the majorities in the House and the Senate and who controls their foreign relations committees," he said.

Obama's Democratic Party was fighting an uphill battle with the Republicans to retain control of both houses.

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