

Kerry and Lavrov Expected to See Eye to Eye

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Lavrov showing the way to his Dutch counterpart in Moscow on Tuesday. **Maxim Shemetov**

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and his U.S. counterpart, Secretary of State John Kerry, held their first face-to-face meeting in Berlin late Tuesday, initiating a diplomatic relationship expected to be stronger than that between Lavrov and Kerry's predecessor, Hillary Clinton.

The two top diplomats were expected to discuss the ongoing civil war in Syria, the treatment of Russian orphans adopted by U.S. couples, and the Iranian nuclear program, among other bilateral issues.

Kerry greeted Lavrov by slapping him on the shoulder, after which the two shook hands and smiled, Interfax reported.

"I'm happy to be meeting. We know each other," Kerry said, addressing Lavrov, according to the news agency. Their meeting was to take place behind closed doors.

U.S. State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland said last week that Kerry and Lavrov had chosen to meet in Berlin, as opposed to Washington or Moscow, "to get it early on the calendar."

Kerry is on his first overseas trip as secretary of state, and he has planned visits to allies in Western Europe and the Middle East.

Alexei Pushkov, head of the State Duma's International Affairs Committee, said that both Kerry and Lavrov are "professional pragmatists" and that their cooperation will therefore not be as intensely shaped by a "values-driven agenda" as it was while Clinton was secretary.

After Clinton took office in 2009, she led efforts along with Lavrov to initiate the "reset" in U.S.-Russia relations, although the policy immediately faced a symbolic hiccup when Clinton presented a red button to Lavrov at a kickoff ceremony that used the Russian word for "overload" instead of "reset."

Clinton made human rights a priority in her diplomatic efforts, something Russian officials bristled at, seeing political overtones. At the end of her time as secretary, Clinton also ruffled feathers by accusing Russia of attempting to "re-Sovietize" much of eastern Europe and central Asia under the auspices of the Eurasian Union promoted by President Vladimir Putin.

Pushkov said he thought cooperation between Lavrov and Kerry, both veteran members of their government establishments, could be more successful because "Kerry is much more like James Baker and Warren Christopher," two of Kerry's predecessors.

Baker served under President George H.W. Bush during an era marked by a rapprochement between the Soviet Union, and later Russia, and the U.S. This manifested itself in the signing of the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty and the declaration of a strategic U.S.-Russian partnership, highlighting the end of the Cold War.

Christopher was secretary during the first term of U.S. President Bill Clinton.

Pavel Bayev, a professor at the Peace Research Institute in Oslo, thinks that at least at the beginning of Kerry's term, Lavrov will have the upper hand in the relationship since he is a "mature diplomat who does not have anything to prove."

Kerry, he said, will have to come up with initiatives and will be "very cautious in order to avoid making mistakes."

A spokesman for Federation Council Foreign Relations Committee head Mikhail Margelov refused to comment on Lavrov's talks with Kerry or on the likely nature of their personal relations, citing a policy "not to make comments on other government agencies' foreign affairs engagements."

Lavrov and Kerry's first meeting was expected to focus mainly on the conflict in Syria, over which the two countries have spent months of fruitless negotiations seeking a unified approach.

Lavrov said after Tuesday morning talks with his Dutch counterpart, Frans Timmermans, that

it seemed to him after his recent phone conversation with Kerry that he "understands how acute the Syrian crisis is," according to a Foreign Ministry tweet.

Pushkov said no breakthroughs were to be expected, however, saying the Syrian civil war has become too complex for the U.S. "to form a cohesive set of policies."

Russia has been a staunch ally of Syrian President Bashar Assad, while the U.S. has called for his removal as part of an effort to end the violence.

Also on the agenda was likely to be the issue of the treatment of Russian children adopted by American families, a topic that has been in the media spotlight for months following the passage of a ban on U.S. adoption of Russian orphans.

Russian officials have accused the U.S. government of being indifferent to the death of a 3-year-old boy adopted from Russia by U.S. parents last year. Washington has said an investigation into the boy's death is ongoing, while U.S. Ambassador Michael McFaul has condemned what he called the "sensational exploitation" of the death.

One bright spot in talks could be in the sphere of missile defense, long a source of bilateral tensions.

Kommersant reported Tuesday that the two sides may exchange presidential declarations stating their intention to work together on a European missile defense system. The newspaper cited officials from both countries as sources for the information.

Such an agreement could also include confidence-building measures, including mechanisms for exchanging information, and bilateral research and threat assessment.

U.S. plans for a missile defense system, which it says would protect allies against the threat of an Iranian attack, have been a thorn in the side of U.S.-Russian relations for more than two years, as some Russian officials have speculated that the system is, in fact, aimed at Russia.

Pushkov refused to comment on the Kommersant report, noting that it had not been confirmed by any official source and thus could be "highly speculative."

Bayev said he thought that the missile defense issue was "very much artificial" and that Putin had made it a sticking point to "slow down the reset."

He noted that U.S.-Russian relations are often used to influence domestic public opinion in Russia and that therefore "all issues have to be interpreted through this lens, too."

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