

Lavrov, Kerry Dismiss Cold War Talk

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U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry talking with Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov at a meeting between foreign and defense officials in Washington Friday. **Charles Dharapak**

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu met with U.S. officials in Washington to show that "there is no Cold War" despite President Barack Obama's cancellation of a summit with President Vladimir Putin.

At a meeting with U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel on Friday, Lavrov said that despite current tensions and disagreements between the two presidents, "there is a very strong partnership that can be strengthened further."

The meeting comes days after an announcement that Obama had canceled a scheduled bilateral summit with Putin due to a "lack of progress" on major issues, as well as controversy over former NSA contractor Edward Snowden and human rights concerns.

Russia's refusal to extradite Snowden and subsequent granting of asylum to the whistleblower ignited an uproar from several U.S. officials, with some even calling for a boycott of the

Sochi Olympics in retaliation for the move.

But Lavrov, apparently shrugging off talk of any serious strain on bilateral relations, called the recent disagreement over former NSA contractor Edward Snowden and his one-year asylum an "anomaly" and an "episode" that "should not undermine our mutual interests, which often overlap."

The Snowden controversy was one of many blows to U.S.-Russian relations in recent months, starting with the failure to achieve progress on issues including arms control, the Iranian nuclear issue and the Syria crisis, all of which were later amplified by U.S. concerns over gay rights in Russia.

Several U.S. officials and celebrities have spoken out against Russia's new anti-gay propaganda law, saying it creates an atmosphere of intolerance and infringes on the rights of gays in Russia.

Some Western figures have even gone so far as to compare Russia's current state of affairs to that of Nazi Germany.

But Lavrov suggested taking a more level-headed approach. Speaking about the disagreements, he said, "We need to work as grown-ups. And this is what we are doing. And we hope this will be reciprocal."

James Nixey, head of the Russia and Eurasia program at the Chatham House, said the recent downturn in U.S.-Russia ties could ultimately turn out to be a good thing.

"I believe the recent spat might prove a necessary step in order to make this relationship healthier," he said by phone from London. "The dynamics between Russia and the U.S. are cyclical. Some issues will bring the two sides together, some will pull them apart."

Obama acknowledged to reporters at a news conference on Friday that the two sides were in fact "pulled apart" at the moment, citing a shift in the relationship.

"When President Putin came back into power I think we saw more rhetoric on the Russian side that was anti-American that played into some of the old stereotypes about the Cold War contest between the U.S. and Russia," he said.

In order to improve this situation, he said, the U.S. needs to "take a break" and "calibrate the relationship so that we are doing things that are good for the U.S. and good for Russia too."

President Putin has not yet commented on Obama's decision to cancel the summit.

But it appears that the two sides are still working to smooth relations, and the presence of defense ministers at Friday's meeting shows quite clearly that arms control and missile defense issues are still the most important ones on the agenda.

In June, Obama called on Russia to cut stockpiles of deployed nuclear weapons by a third, and that was in addition to commitments already made in the framework of the New Start treaty, widely seen as the highlight of the U.S.-Russia "reset."

But Russia was reluctant to accept the deal, perhaps due to its reliance on nuclear weapons as the backbone of national security. The Russian leadership also said it did not see enough American concessions with its missile defense program in Eastern Europe to make the project acceptable.

Thus, it would seem that the reset has been put on hold for now.

Dmitry Trenin, director of Carnegie Moscow Center, said "the cancellation of the U.S.-Russian summit marks the formal end of President Barack Obama's reset policy."

Steven Pifer, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, described the current situation as a lull brought about as the pendulum swings toward the negative side of the spectrum, waiting for new opportunities for cooperation to emerge before it can swing back to the other side, says Steven Pifer, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution.

"The U.S. president needs Moscow much less than four years ago," he said in a column written for The Moscow Times.

In this situation, Nixey said, a meeting between the two countries' top diplomats and military specialists may actually prove more fruitful than one between the two leaders, which would inevitably be politicized.

"Meeting between two top level ministers is a very helpful and sensitive thing to do. There were a lot of criticisms on each side and I think it is good to come back, clear all this bubbling rhetoric away and work on pragmatic issues," he said.

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