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U.S.-Russian Sochi Cooperation 'Subject to Mistrust'

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U.S. Congressman, Rep. Michael McCaul standing on a balcony in Sochi. **Nataliya Vasilyeva**

As the U.S. expressed concern over the safety of the upcoming Winter Olympic Games in Sochi and offered to send its own warships to assist in case of a terrorist threat, observers said that cooperation between U.S. and Russian security agencies on the matter is not much more than a formality.

U.S. President Barack Obama and President Vladimir Putin spoke by phone on Monday, though it is unclear whether they discussed the matter of security. The Kremlin's statement on the phone call made no mention of it.

The full details of the phone call are unknown, but the U.S. has offered major assistance in providing security at the Games and earlier warned its citizens to take precautions in light of terrorist threats. The Games, which are widely seen as Putin's own pet project, are located in close proximity to the volatile republic of Dagestan, where Islamic insurgents have

threatened to attack the games and the tourists in attendance.

It is in this context that the Pentagon on Monday offered to provide warships in the Black Sea and fighter jets to the Russian authorities if the latter needed them to fight a terrorist threat in Sochi.

"Putin has made it clear there is ongoing cooperation with U.S. agencies for the Sochi Olympics' security," Vyacheslav Nikonov, deputy head of the State Duma Foreign Affairs Committee, said by phone on Wednesday, adding that the U.S. could provide a great deal of useful information on possible threats.

But he was skeptical that cooperation between the countries' security agencies would boost U.S.-Russia ties.

He cited last year's Boston bombings as evidence that the two sides have trouble cooperating with each other.

The bombing, which killed three people and injured many, was allegedly carried out by ethnic Chechens Tamerlan Tsarnaev and Dzokhar Tsarnaev, who Russia's security services reportedly warned had been in touch with Islamic extremists in Dagestan shortly before the attack.

"The U.S. ignored help offered by Russian security services concerning the Boston Marathon bombings," Nikonov said.

Reuters on Sunday cited an unidentified source as saying that the main obstacle for U.S. security services' work in Sochi was a historical distrust on the part of Russia. Russian authorities are generally unwilling to allow foreign military forces, especially those of the U.S., to operate on Russian territory, the report said.

A similar statement was made in the wake of the Boston bombings, with finger-pointing ensuing between the two sides and distrust blamed for the tragic disconnect between security agencies.

A U.S. State Department official said in e-mailed comments that the U.S. had increased cooperation with Russia after the Boston bombings, adding that "we welcome closer counterterrorism cooperation for the Sochi Olympic Games."

Observers interviewed by The Moscow Times agreed with Nikonov's statement that cooperation between U.S. and Russian security agencies was a standard practice that would not have an impact on the poor state of bilateral relations.

At a meeting with Russia's military Chief of Staff General Valery Gerasimov in Brussels on Tuesday, the chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey seemed more upbeat, saying that even though "on political tracks, the U.S.-Russia relationship is a bit bumpy, on the military track there are ways these two powerful forces can cooperate," the U.S. Defense Department said in a statement.

Dempsey said that the U.S. could share with Russia technology for countering improvised explosive devices, something Gerasimov has expressed an interest in.

"The U.S. would share technical information on the counter-IED [improvised explosive device] efforts ... and if it is compatible with Russian equipment, we will look to provide that information to Russia in time for the Games," the statement said.

In addition to offering naval and air support, the U.S. is also sending three dozen FBI agents to Sochi and Moscow for the duration of the Olympics to assist Russian security services.

Some 15,000 Americans will travel to Sochi for the Olympics, according to U.S. House Homeland Security Committee Chairman Michael McCaul, who in an interview with CNN on Wednesday said improvement was needed in intelligence-sharing between Russia and the U.S. McCaul visited Sochi this week.

Despite political tensions between the two nations, there is regular cooperation between the FBI and Russian security services, said Valery Garbuzov, deputy director of the Institute for U.S. and Canadian Studies in Moscow.

"The U.S. Administration tries to cooperate with Russia where it is possible. They are not stubborn Russophobes but people with a pragmatic approach. On this basis, Obama offered Putin assistance in Sochi," he said by phone.

Masha Lipman, an analyst with the Moscow Carnegie Center, said that the U.S. proposal to help with security during the Olympics was standard practice, since all the nations sending athletes to the Olympics were concerned about their safety.

But, like Nikonov, she emphasized that cooperation between security services would probably not make U.S.-Russia relations any warmer.

"Such issues as security services' cooperation have a very short agenda and they cannot make relations better, since there are too many disagreements in other areas between the two countries," she said.

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