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Kerry and Putin to Discuss Ukraine, Iran in Sochi

By The Moscow Times

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U.S. Secretary of State with former Ambassador Michael McFaul at a 2013 meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and President Vladimir Putin

U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry is heading to Russia to meet with President Vladimir Putin on his first visit to the country since relations between Washington and Moscow plummeted to post-Cold War lows amid disagreements over Ukraine and Syria.

The State Department said Kerry would meet Putin and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on Tuesday at the Black Sea resort of Sochi. But in a sign of the considerable strains, the Kremlin said Putin's attendance had yet to be confirmed.

"This trip is part of our ongoing effort to maintain direct lines of communication with senior Russian officials and to ensure U.S. views are clearly conveyed," State Department spokeswoman Marie Harf said in a statement.

In addition to Ukraine and Syria, she said the talks would also focus on the ongoing nuclear negotiations between Iran and the group of nations known as the P5+1 — Russia, the United States, Germany, Britain, France and China.

The short trip to Sochi will be only Kerry's second to Russia since taking office. He first visited Moscow in May 2013 and had meetings with Putin and Lavrov before the Ukraine crisis erupted and Russia annexed the Ukrainian territory of Crimea in early 2014.

In Moscow, Russia's Foreign Ministry said in a statement that it hoped Kerry's visit will "normalize bilateral relations on which global stability largely depends."

Ukraine has served as the main source of discord in dialogue between Moscow and Washington.

The western-backed government in Kiev continues to be embroiled in a sporadic conflict between government and separatist rebel forces in its eastern regions of Donetsk and Luhansk despite a cease-fire agreement sealed in mid-February.

Western nations have accused Russia of supporting the separatists with arms and manpower — a claim that Moscow has denied.

Underscoring the animosity, the Russian Foreign Ministry on Monday blamed the United States for the unrest in Ukraine and said Washington was trying to isolate Russia on the international arena.

Moscow has bristled at Washington's pledge to provide Ukraine with military assistance in the form of hardware and training.

In late April, troops from the United States and Ukraine kicked off joint training exercises intended to help bolster Ukraine's defenses. The exercises, dubbed "Fearless Guardian-2015," sparked outrage from Russia, which described them as a potential cause of destabilization.

Ukraine says more than 8,000 people have died in the conflict that began in April 2014.

Russia has stuck firmly to the line that the Ukrainian government retains the bulk of responsibility for bringing about a settlement.

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