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Russia, U.S. Maintaining 'Working Relations' With Kerry Visit to Sochi

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President Vladimir Putin hakes hands with U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry during their meeting at the Bocharov Ruchei state residence in Sochi, May 12.

U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry's visit to Sochi to meet with President Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on Tuesday showcased the willingness of Moscow and Washington to continue cooperating on key issues of international peace and security even as bilateral relations have plunged to a post-Cold War nadir, Russian political analysts told The Moscow Times.

Russia and the United States have remained locked in a standoff since the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis in early 2014, marked by Moscow's annexation of Crimea last March and the loss of more than 6,000 lives in clashes between Kiev's forces and separatists in the country's east, according to the United Nations.

In their regular exchange of jabs, Russia continues to blame the United States for fueling

the conflict, while Washington accuses Moscow of providing material support to the pro-Russian separatists of eastern Ukraine, a claim Russian authorities have denied.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov initially said the talks would not revolve around the mutually imposed sanctions over the Ukrainian crisis during Kerry's first visit to Russia since May 2013.

But a Foreign Ministry statement released after Lavrov's meeting with Kerry said that sanctions against Russia were a "dead end" and that the country was ready to cooperate with the United States on the basis of equality. The Russian delegation also said the country was not to blame for the dire state of relations with the United States.

Points of contention were mostly kept at bay, as the focus was turned to the political resolutions of international crises, including the implementation of the Minsk agreements on a cease-fire in eastern Ukraine.

The talks focused on broader regional and international issues — the situations in Ukraine, Syria and Iran — which have fueled heated debate between the countries. Putin's meeting with Kerry lasted for four hours. Afterward, Kremlin adviser Yury Ushakov said that the talks had failed to lead to any significant breakthroughs. He noted, however, that Putin would like to see a normalization of U.S.-Russian relations.

Viktor Kremenyuk, the deputy head of the Institute for U.S. and Canadian Studies at the Russian Academy of Sciences, referred to the Sochi talks as "a working visit devoid of propaganda" in an interview with The Moscow Times. A day prior to Kerry's visit, the Russian Foreign Ministry publicly condemned the United States, accusing it of having fostered unrest in Ukraine and attempting to isolate Russia on the international stage. But the finger-pointing and scathing remarks seemed to have been put on hold, at least temporarily, to address more pressing affairs.

Both countries had in fact presented Kerry's visit as an opportunity. The State Department said the visit would contribute to keeping lines of communication open with senior Russian officials, while the Russian Foreign Ministry said it would serve to "normalize" the countries' fraught bilateral relations. Lavrov told Russian media that his meeting with Kerry had gone "wonderfully," the RIA Novosti state news agency reported. Meanwhile, Kerry wrote via Twitter on Tuesday that he had had "frank" talks with both Putin and Lavrov.

"Russia and the United States need a new roadmap, new rules that regulate their relationship. Like neighbors in a communal apartment," said Kremenyuk. "The two countries are caught in a conflict that has eclipsed their common goals and common international responsibilities. Moscow understands the importance of the United States in addressing international issues. This is what this visit is about."

Both sides also seemed to pay particular attention to the ceremonial element of the visit. Lavrov and Kerry laid flowers at a World War II memorial before holding talks, during which they showered each other in gifts.

Lavrov presented Kerry with locally harvested tomatoes and potatoes, mirroring the Idaho potatoes the Secretary of State had given him in Paris in January of last year, Foreign Ministry

press secretary Maria Zakharova wrote on her Facebook page. Kerry also received a commemorative T-shirt of Russia's celebrations of the 70th anniversary of the defeat of Nazi Germany, which were snubbed by American and other high-ranking Western officials last week.

American officials, according to Zakharova, provided their Russian counterparts with a list of quotes from Russian media that they thought "did not reflect the real potential" of Russo-American relations. Will Stevens, spokesperson for the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, also wrote that Kerry gave Lavrov a brief case.

“Everything is sunny today in Sochi,” Zakharova wrote, embellishing her sentence with a slew of smiley emoticons.

Kerry's visit to Russia, according to Alexei Malashenko of the Carnegie Moscow Center, is simply meant to keep up Russo-American relations, which span far beyond the countries' disagreements over Ukraine and other international issues.

"We should not expect much to come from this visit, which should be understood as a routine encounter between high-ranking officials," Malashenko said. "Neither side is ready to change its position [on the Ukrainian crisis]."

The Russian and American foreign ministers have generally met on neutral territory, in Paris and Geneva, among other places. But this time, Kerry landed on Russian territory amid the worst political crisis between Russia and the United States since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Political analysts did not read any symbolism in Kerry's presence in Russia other than that it sent a clear message to international players about the need to collectively address multilateral issues.

"When Kerry and Lavrov meet, we are always faced with a guessing game," Kremenyuk said. "Where will they meet? What will they talk about? This time everything is clear: Kerry is in Russia to talk to Lavrov and Putin about Ukraine and other international issues. There is no ambiguity in that."

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