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Kerry Brings Cautious Signs of Russia Detente to NATO Meeting

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U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry speaks at the NATO Foreign Minister's Meeting in Antalya, Turkey May 13.

ANTALYA, Turkey — After his whirlwind visit to Sochi on Tuesday for marathon talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry has headed across the Black Sea to Turkey, where he wasted no time in briefing his counterparts on the prospect of renewed cooperation with Russia.

Kerry's comments came at the start of a two-day gathering of NATO foreign ministers in the resort city of Antalya.

"I was privileged to brief my NATO colleagues about my meeting with President Putin and Foreign Minister Lavrov. I think there was a strong agreement among all of the NATO members that this is a critical moment of action by Russia and the separatists to live up to the Minsk agreements," Kerry told a group of journalists first thing Wednesday morning.

"Everybody here is united in that our preference is not to have sanctions, but the sanctions will [remain in place] in an effort to secure the peace that everybody needs in Ukraine," he said.

In Sochi, Kerry had said that "if and when [the Minsk agreements are] fully implemented, it is clear that the United States and European Union sanctions can begin to be rolled back."

Speaking immediately after Kerry in Antalya, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg noted that he appreciated having gotten a sense of Kerry's meeting with Putin before the overall meeting started.

"It was a very useful exchange and a very useful briefing from Secretary Kerry because it is useful for foreign ministers to get an update just a few hours after the talks in Sochi. It wasn't just about Ukraine; it was also about Afghanistan and North Africa," Stoltenberg told journalists.

"We have suspended all practical cooperation with Russia. We support economic sanctions, but at the same time we urge for political dialogue to remain open, and I think that the talks that Secretary Kerry held are in line with this practice," he said.

Later, during the first day of the NATO gathering, German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier told journalists that "significant progress" has been achieved in the realization of the Minsk accords, drawing attention to the creation of relevant working groups.

Earlier on, several senior NATO officials indicated during a media briefing that NATO will attempt in its bilateral relations with Russia to prioritize issues on which the alliance and Moscow can see eye to eye, rather than focusing on issues of contention.

"We have to keep the avenues for dialogue open because the escalation could reach dangerous levels," a senior NATO official said. In media briefings such as these, NATO officials generally decline to be identified as a matter of protocol.

The ongoing civil war in Syria and the political instability in Libya were mentioned as areas rich with possibilities for cooperation between the two sides.

"At the same time, we will continue to emphasize Russia's special responsibility for what happens in Ukraine's east and for actively supporting the separatists there," the official said.

There was a slight but palpable change in the overall atmosphere and rhetoric since Kerry's talks with Putin and Lavrov. No one has mentioned the possibility of sending weapons to Ukraine, and the word "separatists" has been broadly used instead of "Russia-backed insurgents," which was more commonly utilized previously.

In addition, there was talk of the need to maintain working ties with Russian military commanders. According to a NATO official, an emergency communication link could help de-escalate situations that threaten to explode.

He stressed that while there is no "exchange of military information on a regular basis ... there is an effort to avoid misunderstandings in any event possible," adding that "our relationship is not frozen; it is the [formal] partnership that is frozen."

Despite indications of a renewed dialogue, there was no mention of any specific plans for further cooperation.

The meeting took place in Turkey, to emphasize that NATO faces challenges both from the East — in Ukraine — and from the South — where the feared terrorist organization the Islamic State has gained control of large swathes of territory in Iraq and Syria.

Turkey's Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu moved to emphasize Turkey's new role in the ongoing Russia-West crisis. He told journalists during a news conference on Tuesday that "nothing can justify Russia's actions in Ukraine, Crimea and Abkhazia. However, as a country that has good relations with Russia, Ukraine and the West, Turkey is calling for the crisis to be resolved through a constructive dialogue."

"Despite the physical fall of the Berlin Wall, the wall in [people's] mentality has remained intact," he added.

Despite attempts to re-establish dialogue, Russia and NATO remain vociferously opposed to each other. Russia's military doctrine, adopted at the end of 2014, lists NATO as a leading external threat.

NATO was established in the aftermath of World War II in an attempt to counter the military power of the Soviet Union.

Thursday marks the 60th anniversary of the formation of the Warsaw Pact, which was established in 1955 in a bid to counter NATO. It was dissolved upon the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Since then, many Russian officials have argued that NATO has lost its purpose.

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