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Kerry to Discuss Syria With Putin, Lavrov in Moscow

By Anna Dolgov

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U.S. Foreign Secretary John Kerry

U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry said in official statements Tuesday that he would travel to Moscow next week to discuss the Syrian crisis with President Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.

Kerry is traveling to Moscow "to discuss how we can effectively move the political process forward and try to take advantage of this moment," he said, the U.S. Department of State reported on its website.

"Today, as we mark the fifth anniversary of the start of this horrific war, we may face the best opportunity that we've had in years to end it," Kerry said.

Putin had announced on Monday he would be pulling out the "main component" of Russian forces from Syria. The announcement, which was timed to coincide with the resumption of

peace talks in Geneva, came as a surprise to Western leaders and Syrian factions alike.

“We have no insight at all into Russia’s strategy, Russia’s thinking and Russia’s tactics, so we are left guessing,” British Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond was quoted by The Independent as saying.

Although the motives behind Putin's tactics remain open to interpretation, Moscow appeared to be following through on its plans, Western officials said.

As the withdrawal began Tuesday, UN special envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura praised Putin's move as “a significant — I repeat, a significant — development.”

“We hope, and we shall be expecting and hoping that this will be happening, that we will be seeing this decision bringing some positive influence on the actual progress of the talks,” he said.

The partial withdrawal of Russian forces — the key international backers of Syrian President Bashar Assad — was seen to weaken Assad's negotiating position and likely make his government more inclined to compromise with the opposition.

But the scope of Russia's withdrawal remained unclear. Putin said Moscow will maintain its two air bases in Syria, and Deputy Defense Minister Nikolai Pankov said Tuesday the Russian air force will continue bombing “terrorist targets” in the country.

The Russian air strikes helped Assad's forces regain control over some 10,000 square kilometers of land, according to figures cited by Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu during a Monday meeting with Putin.

The campaign has allowed Moscow to showcase its military capabilities, such as firing missiles from warships in the Caspian Sea, and from a submarine in submerged position in the Mediterranean.

The military campaign — which began on Sept. 30, 2015 — may have cost Moscow a total of about 38.5 billion rubles (about $546 million) so far, according to an estimate published Tuesday by Russia's RBC business news agency.

Putin said he was ordering a partial withdrawal because Russia's goals in Syria had been mostly accomplished.

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