

Putin, Bush to debate missile defence plans

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Global Research, April 05, 2008

Associated Press 5 April 2008

Region: [Russia and FSU](#), [USA](#)

Theme: [Militarization and WMD](#)

SOCHI, Russia (AFP) — President George W. Bush was to arrive in the Russian Black Sea resort of Sochi on Saturday for talks with President Vladimir Putin, with the two men looking to narrow differences on US missile defence plans and burnish their legacies.

US and Russian officials have said they are working on a “strategic framework” document designed to put bilateral relations on a solid footing and map out a way forward as the two leaders prepare to leave office.

Putin leaves the Kremlin next month while Bush quits the White House in January.

The meeting at Putin’s residence on the Black Sea coast caps a busy week for Bush in Europe that centred on a NATO summit in Romania where the alliance endorsed Bush’s missile shield despite Putin’s deep concern about the scheme.

Pushed by Bush and backed strongly by new alliance members from eastern Europe, NATO also told ex-Soviet states Ukraine and Georgia that they would be admitted in the future, again shrugging off Putin’s strong objections.

The United States says its plan to install missiles in Poland and a radar in the Czech Republic must go forward to counter threats from “rogue states” like Iran. Russia says the plan directly threatens its own security.

Both sides have said the missile defence plan — and their disagreements on whether and how it should be implemented — will be on the agenda at Sochi.

Briefing reporters in Bucharest on Thursday, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said Bush hoped Putin would acknowledge “the usefulness and the importance” of US moves to allay Russian worries about the missile plan.

“We hope that we can move beyond that to an understanding that we will all have an interest in cooperation on missile defence,” Rice said.

Putin adviser Sergei Prihodko raised hopes of a positive response from Putin, saying that the US moves “might be useful and remove part of the Russian concerns” on missile defence, Interfax news agency reported.

Prihodko was quoted separately by RIA Novosti news agency as saying that the Sochi document, which was still being drafted ahead of the Bush-Putin talks, would contain “a mention of missile defence,” but gave no details.

Other issues like to be addressed included the upcoming expiry of the START I nuclear disarmament treaty, a ban on weapons in space and the revival of the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) treaty, Prikhodko said.

START expires at the end of next year. Russia wants to follow it with a comprehensive and legally-binding agreement that would compel both countries to pursue deep cuts in their nuclear arsenals. Washington is less enthusiastic.

Russia suspended compliance in December with the CFE treaty, a landmark Cold War pact limiting conventional force deployments in Europe, in protest at the failure of NATO states to ratify an updated version even as the alliance expands into former Warsaw Pact territory.

Kosovo, the Middle East and bids by ex-Soviet states Georgia and Ukraine to join NATO will also be on the agenda, he said.

The NATO statement on Thursday promising that both countries would eventually join the alliance upset the Russian delegation, prompting Putin to hold an unscheduled press conference at the NATO summit on Friday, Russian daily Kommersant reported.

With the alliance's promise to take Ukraine and Georgia in later — despite refusing to put them formally on track to join at the summit — “the context of the Russia-NATO meeting changed,” Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov was quoted by the daily as saying.

Bush was scheduled to have a private dinner late Saturday with Putin and his successor, president-elect Dmitry Medvedev, at Putin's seaside residence in Sochi before meeting both men again on Sunday.

The meetings will take place on “home territory” to match the hospitality shown by the Bush family during a trip to their summer compound at Kennebunkport in Maine in 2007, Prikhodko said.

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