



Putin to Obama: Let's talk about Ukraine

By Lesley Clark and David Lightman

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RIYADH, [Saudi Arabia](#) -- [Russian President Vladimir Putin](#) called President Barack Obama on Friday to discuss a U.S. proposal to resolve the crisis in Ukraine – and they agreed to have Secretary of State [John Kerry](#) meet with his Russian counterpart to discuss it, the White House and Kremlin said.

The rare call from Putin came as Obama wrapped up a weeklong visit in which he secured European commitments to isolate Russia for the military seizure of Ukraine's Crimean region. Experts warned against reading too much into the call and said it may only be Putin's "opening bids."

The White House said Kerry "had again presented" Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov with a U.S. offer of a diplomatic resolution when the two met earlier this week at The Hague. The two talked for hours just two weeks ago in Paris in a round of discussions the White House had hoped would head off a vote for Crimea to join Russia.

The White House has suggested an "off ramp" for Russia that would include sending Russian troops in Crimea back to their barracks and opening direct talks with Ukraine's provisional government.

The White House said Obama suggested to Putin that Russia put a "concrete response" in writing and the presidents agreed that Kerry and Lavrov would meet to discuss the next step.

The Kremlin had a different take on the call but agreed that Kerry and Lavrov would meet "in the near future" to talk.

A Kremlin statement said that Putin "drew Barack Obama's attention to continued rampage of extremists who are committing acts of intimidation towards peaceful residents, government authorities and law enforcement agencies in various regions and in Kiev with impunity."

"In light of this," it added, "the president of Russia suggested examining possible steps the global community can take to help stabilize the situation." It said Putin and Obama agreed that Kerry and Lavrov would discuss the "specific parameters for this joint work."

Foreign policy experts cautioned that the call does not mean Putin is in retreat.

“I don’t think he’s seen the light. I just sense no give here,” said Heather Conley, director of the Europe program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington research group. “I always felt the diplomatic off ramp was more for us than for Putin.”

The experts warned that Putin’s motives remain unclear, nor it is obvious what he’ll discuss.

Does he want to buy time and keep Ukraine in a tense situation? Maybe the Russian president thinks “a less stable Ukraine will have less of a chance of integrating into the [European Union](#). He may want to keep diplomatic discussions going on even as his forces remain on the border,” said Christopher Chivvis, a senior political analyst at the RAND Corp. who specializes in European and Eurasian security and NATO intervention.

The latest offer fits a Putin pattern. “It may be he thinks he’s in a good position to negotiate,” said Benjamin Friedman, a research fellow in defense studies at the [Cato Institute](#), a libertarian Washington think tank. “The Russians have objectives that can be accomplished _ at least some _ diplomatically. They want a Ukraine that is friendly to them.”

Friedman speculated that Russia may have broader goals having to do with what NATO and the United States can and cannot achieve in what Russia considers its neighborhood

This latest diplomatic maneuvering should be viewed as simply “opening bids,” said Jeremy Shapiro, a fellow in foreign policy studies at Washington’s Brookings Institution.

Keep in mind, said Shapiro, that “there’s a pattern for Putin.” While it’s not clear he’s following that pattern, Shapiro said Putin often “pushes the escalation a little bit beyond where he wants to go and then offers to negotiate so he back off the things he never wanted in the first place.”

And, said the analysts, Russia tends to be more skilled at being tough than the U.S., so don’t take Putin’s resolute talk to mean he won’t give.

“It’s really a mistake to say look, they can’t agree because the proposals don’t say anything,” said Shapiro. “The Russians open hard. We don’t do that quite as much because we really aren’t very good at negotiating that kind of thing.”

The White House statement said Obama urged Putin, who has amassed troops along the Russian border with Ukraine, to avoid what he called “provocations” and said the crisis can only be resolved “if Russia pulls back its troops and does not take any steps to further violate Ukraine’s territorial integrity and sovereignty.”

Obama flew to Europe almost a week ago seeking support for greater sanctions against Russia. Leaders of the world’s largest [industrialized countries](#) on Monday expelled Russia from the Group of Eight until it “changes course” in Ukraine, and they formally canceled plans to attend an economic summit in Russia in June.

They also declared that they “remain ready” to intensify sanctions if Russia takes further action in Ukraine.

Obama also visited NATO on his trip, seeking to reassure some of the smaller countries in the region worried that they could be the next likely target should Putin continue to look to expand.

In the Kremlin statement, Putin brought up the Republic of Trans-Dniester, a sliver of contested land that declared its independence from Moldova, Europe's poorest nation, back in 1990 but has yet to be recognized by any government around the world.

Trans-Dniester, the Kremlin said, "is essentially experiencing a blockade, which significantly complicate the [living conditions](#) for the region's residents, impeding their movement and normal trade and economic activities."

The White House said the call, which lasted about an hour, came after Obama returned to his hotel in Riyadh after meeting with Saudi King Abdullah at his desert retreat.