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Putin says Russia needs to go back to Cuba: media

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MOSCOW (Reuters) - Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin on Monday said it was time for Russia to rebuild links with former Cold War ally Cuba, news agencies reported.

The Kremlin is angry at U.S. plans for a missile defence system in Eastern Europe, and last month a news report suggested Russia might use Cuba, a thorn in America's side for half a century, as a refueling stop for nuclear-capable bombers.

The Russian Defence Ministry denied the report and said it had no plans to open any military bases abroad, but a top U.S. general was drawn to say such a move would cross a "red line".

Moscow was the Caribbean island's key oil, arms and grain supplier for 30 years, until subsidies propping up the economy of Fidel Castro's revolutionary government fell to a trickle and then dried up entirely after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

"We need to reestablish positions on Cuba and in other countries," news agency Interfax quoted Putin as saying at the weekly presidium meeting of key government ministers.

Just 144 km (90 miles) from the coast of U.S. state of Florida, Cuba still has no formal diplomatic ties with Washington D.C.

At the height of the Cold War in 1962, a two-week crisis over Soviet missiles on the island nearly led to full-blown war.

Putin's remarks came after Russian Deputy Prime Minister Igor Sechin reported on a recent three-day visit to Cuba, where he discussed a raft of trade and investment issues and met with Raul Castro, Fidel's brother and now the island's leader.

"We agreed on a priority direction for cooperation, this being energy, the mining industry, agriculture, transport, health care and communications," news agency RIA quoted Sechin as saying.

(Reporting by Chris Baldwin, editing by Toby Reynolds)

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