

Harper to push free trade with EU at G8 summit

CAMP DAVID, Md.— The Canadian Press
Published Friday, May. 18, 2012 9:30AM EDT

U.S. President Barack Obama welcomes Canada's prime minister and five other world leaders today to this bucolic presidential retreat as he kicks off two international summits.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper joins the leaders of the UK, France, Germany, Italy and Japan at the G8 meeting at historic Camp David, a rural retreat tucked away in the Blue Ridge Mountains in the remote northwestern reaches of Maryland.

The Obama administration had moved the meeting to Camp David from Chicago in part to accommodate Putin. Instead, Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev will take his place.

Mr. Obama welcomes three fresh faces to the G8. France, Italy and Japan all have new heads of state. Mr. Harper, on the other hand, is the longest-serving leader at the summit.

He's expected to have a one-on-one chat with Francois Hollande, the recently elected French president, as Canada and the European Union work toward a free-trade agreement.

British Prime Minister David Cameron, meantime, has been pushing Mr. Obama to consider a U.S.-EU free-trade pact.

In a series of working sessions at Camp David, the leaders will tackle everything from Afghanistan to Europe's economic woes and the Iranian and Syrian crises, Harper aides say.

The leaders kick off the summit with a dinner tonight before retiring to private cottages on the compound.

After a packed schedule of sessions on Saturday, they'll then jet off to Chicago for meetings of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. In contrast to the peace and quiet of isolated Camp David, where small

numbers of protesters are kilometres away in Thurmont, Md., thousands of demonstrators are expected to greet them in the so-called Windy City.

At both the G8 and NATO summits, Afghanistan's economic future and security will be a key topic of discussion.

The U.S. doesn't want to be entirely on the hook for the estimated \$4.1-billion it will cost to sustain Afghan security forces when international troops withdraw at the end of 2014.

Australia, Great Britain and Germany have already contributed funds but Canadian officials wouldn't say in advance of the G8 summit whether Ottawa plans to pony up too.

"We want progress towards a state that is not a threat to global security and one that is able to take care of its own security," Andrew MacDougall, a spokesman for the prime minister, said Thursday.

"So we do expect a good discussion on how best to achieve that. The government is still considering its options."

He wouldn't comment on reports that Canada has been asked to leave some special forces in Afghanistan after 2014. Mr. Hollande, meantime, wants to withdraw all French combat troops by the end of this year, nearly two years ahead of the agreed NATO schedule.

Europe's economic crisis will also dominate G8 discussions. That's a shift for G8 leaders, says the director of the G8 Research Group at the University of Toronto.

It used to be that the G20 focused on the economy while the G8 tackled global security and development issues, said John Kirton. The Camp David summit changes that.

"It's going to be about a G8 strategy for growth which will be smart, sophisticated and, it is to be hoped, it will be sufficiently clear and compelling to convince markets, citizens, voters across the G8 and beyond that it will work," he said.

“So that’s new for the G8. It’s been many, many years since the G8 has focused like a laser beam on the economy and in containing the great economic crisis that’s burgeoning at the moment.”

Camp David, with its winding trails and lush woods, has a storied past.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill met at the retreat in 1943 to discuss plans to invade Normandy during the Second World War.

Under Jimmy Carter, Egypt and Israel signed a peace treaty at Camp David. George W. Bush, meantime, was so fond of the retreat that he spent almost 500 days at Camp David throughout his two terms as president.

Part of the appeal is the retreat’s tightly controlled location within Catoctin Mountain Park. The public can’t get anywhere near Camp David; protesters, indeed, were descending upon Thurmont, almost six kilometres away, to make their feelings known.

By Saturday, hundreds could line the streets of the town of 6,000 to protest everything from the U.S. government bailout of banks to the American military’s use of unmanned drone aircraft. Others will push for nuclear disarmament and civil rights in Ethiopia.