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THE PUTIN-TRUMP SUMMIT IN HELSINKI: HIGH HOPES, MODEST EXPECTATIONS



In the contemporary history of US-Russia relations, practically every presidential meeting runs the risk of being pinned to a reference point in Cold War history. The coming summit between Presidents Putin and Trump - their third personal encounter but first as a separate meeting - is no exception. Some in Russia liken the importance of this summit to the face-to-face meetings between Nikita Khrushchev and Dwight Eisenhower during the first official visit by the Soviet leader to the US in September 1959. Back then, the promise for a fresh start in relations crashed against core ideological beliefs and opposition on the part of bureaucracy, military and intelligence communities. The confrontation ultimately led to the Cuban Missile Crisis a few years later in 1962.

Others compare the Putin-Trump summit to the historical Reykjavik meeting between Mikhail Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan – one of the few leaders the current US leader looks up to. The meeting was important for the two countries and the rest of the world in that both leaders recognized the impossibility of winning in a nuclear war, which had to be avoided by all means anyway.

The very location of the Putin-Trump summit, Finland's capital city of Helsinki, is meant to emphasize all sorts of **historical parallels** in the relationship between Moscow and Washington. Not only had Helsinki long been a place for presidential and ministerial meetings between the Soviets and the Americans, but it is also where the **Helsinki Final Act** was adopted in 1975 to lay the foundations for the contemporary European security order.

Hence, there's little doubt that the coming summit will be fairly symbolic. In fact, the less substantive the meeting may be, the more the focus will be put on symbolism. While the media coverage and anticipations surrounding the event are high, **expectations for the very practical outcomes of the summit are rather modest in both Moscow and Washington.**

In Russia, this is reflected even at the level of public perceptions. In the run-up to the summit, Russia's Center for the Study of Public Opinion **published** its latest survey according to which 56% of Russians "don't expect substantial results from the summit", while 33% expect a "positive outcome", 1% anticipate a negative outcome, and 10% are

still undecided what to make of it. On a broader scheme of things, 54% of surveyed "don't expect changes in US-Russia relations in 2-3 years, while 25% expect the relations to get better, 9% believe the relations "will get worse", 12% are not sure where it's all heading.

On the one hand, the context creates an environment in which the two countries can finally communicate directly – something they haven't done for a few years except in emergency situations – without expecting too much from each other. In the past, **inflated expectations** in Moscow and Washington vis-à-vis one another have ultimately led to dashed hopes, produced fatigue, and reinforced mutual mistrust.

On the other hand, though, in a situation in which many in the Trump administration and the US government discouraged the president from meeting with Putin, **the absence of deliverables may backfire at home and boost domestic liberals' criticism of President Trump** and his alleged "relationship" with the Russian leader. To be fair, however, even if - hypothetically speaking - there were some practical outcomes, it wouldn't much change the attitudes towards Trump of those opposing his policies and principles.

This represents a major challenge to a root-and-branch review of US-Russia relations: **as long as there's no bipartisan consensus in the US about the need to have constructive relations with Russia, the structural and systemic differences between the two countries will push them to further confrontation.** On the other hand, as long as the pursuit of a non-confrontational relationship with Moscow is merely Trump's own "whim", the domestic opposition in Washington will seek to further impose and codify restrictions on the president's promoting his agenda from fear there's a "collusion" component behind it. Should the Republicans maintain the majority following the mid-term Congressional elections in November, this trend has a slight hope of being averted. If the Democrats get the upper hand, however, there's a risk this tendency will be further reinforced as the domestic environment will get politically more complicated.

Moscow may be right in arguing that **Russia has become a "trump card" in American politics these days.** But this is the card that is played by both Democrats and Trump – each for their own reasons and interests. While the former seek to torpedo the president with the Russia "Witch Hunt", as Trump puts it, the latter views relations with Russia and, personally, Putin, as a popularity booster among his constituency at home and internationally as a great dealmaker. There's certainly an important psychological and personalistic element in that calculation as well. This element should not be discarded as Trump feels emboldened to rush in where others fear to tread - namely **dealing** with Putin, a clever and tough negotiator with eighteen years of high-level political experience. One might have added to it the Kissingerian precept of having good relations with Russia when countering China and vice-versa but, if judged on the merits, the current US policy doesn't seem to follow that line even if it seeks to.

As the two presidents are being "coached" and advised on how to approach each other, diplomats and administration officials have been busy building an agenda for the summit via official and back channels.

Russia's Energy Minister, Alexander Novak, was in Washington meeting with US Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin **to discuss** US sanctions on Russia and Moscow's plan to expand the Nord Stream gas pipeline to Germany. In turn, US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State & Special Representative for North Korea Policy Mark Lambert was in Moscow a few weeks ago for consultations with Russia's Ambassador-at-Large, Oleg Burmistrov, and Deputy Foreign Minister Igor Morgulov who works on the DPRK file. Around the same time, another Deputy Foreign Minister, Alexander Grushko, held talks with US Deputy Assistant Secretaries of State Kathleen Kavalec, who works on Russia, and Bruce Turner, who deals with arms control issues. They focused on the Ukraine conflict, European



security, and the **Treaty on Open Skies**.

These contacts shed light on what may appear on the two-page communiqué that the two presidents will most likely present in Helsinki. Ironically, given the complexity of the conflict, **Syria is looking like an issue where the two may reach some agreement**, at least on the presence, or rather, absence, of Iranian forces in the southwestern de-escalation zone. Yet even here it remains doubtful whether Moscow will be able – or even has an appetite for – providing guarantees to ensure an Iran-free Syria that both Israel and the US seek.

"The very fact of the summit is a deliverable", the US National Security Adviser John Bolton said on his visit to Moscow. Even though the summit may not bring about meaningful breakthroughs on any of the aforementioned fronts, it's critical in at least two more dimensions.

First, the **US-Russia confrontation came as a nightmare for those European countries that seek genuine economic, energy, security and other types of cooperation with Russia**. Caught between the Scylla of Western unity against the "Russia challenge" and the Charybdis of the need to have Moscow on board on many international issues and as a EU partner, the states are increasingly finding it difficult to maintain an acceptable balance. The meeting of the Russian and American presidents may signal that resuming ties with Moscow isn't as fraught with grave political consequences as would have been the case a while ago and that Europeans have leeway in pursuing their own interests with Russia.

Second, the crisis in US-Russia relations has repeatedly shown signs of slipping from under control and "living its own life" with senseless expulsions of diplomats, the blacklisting of organizations and people, emotionally charged "information" campaigns and many other reciprocal reprisals that will erode the very basis of the bilateral relationship for the years to come. **The Trump-Putin summit may and should halt the further development of these negative trends in their tracks.**

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