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Pompeo in Russia: good atmosphere, but no visible results

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Mike Pompeo paid his first visit as Secretary of State to Russia on 14 May. He had a three-hour conversation in Sochi with the Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov; he met Yuri Ushakov, the Russian president's assistant for international affairs; and Sergei Naryshkin, the head of the Foreign Intelligence Service. He also talked with President Vladimir Putin for one and a half hours. The talks concerned the conflicts in Syria, Libya, Venezuela, Afghanistan and Ukraine, the problems of North Korea and Iran, the fight against terrorism, nuclear non-proliferation & arms control, and bilateral relations issues. No agreements were announced after the meeting. The US has not yet confirmed that the American and Russian presidents will meet at the G20 summit in Osaka in June this year, which Russia is striving to bring about.

Pompeo's visit to Russia is part of the intensification in Russian-American dialogue which has become noticeable in recent weeks. On 17 April in Moscow, the National Security Council's Senior Director for Russia and Eurasia, Fiona Hill, met the Russian president's assistant Yuri Ushakov, representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Security Council of the Russian Federation. On 3 May Presidents Trump and Putin spoke on the phone for over an hour on matters concerning Venezuela, North Korea and Ukraine, nuclear arms control and trade. On 6 May, Pompeo met his Russian counterpart during the Arctic Council summit in Rovaniemi, Finland.

Commentary

- The US and Russia's leaders and diplomats have highlighted the good, sincere atmosphere of the talks, and declared their willingness to continue dialogue and seek more areas for cooperation. Pompeo mentioned this himself after the meetings in Rovaniemi and Sochi. President Trump, after his telephone conversation with Putin (which he described as "very good"), tweeted that there was "enormous potential for good/excellent relations with Russia". Among the potential areas of cooperation between the US and Russia, Pompeo mentioned the fight against terrorism and nuclear non-proliferation. On 13 May Trump announced that he will meet Putin during the G20 summit in Osaka (28-29 June); and the next day, Putin stated that he sees Trump as being sincere in his willingness to repair relations with Russia.
- Nevertheless, the US and Russia have not held back in levelling criticism and negative gestures towards each other, especially as the political conflict in Venezuela worsens. On 30 April Juan Guaido, whom the West considers the legitimate president and is backed

by the United States, attempted to assume real power in the country. On that day Pompeo publicly blamed Russia for the Venezuelan dictator Nicolás Maduro (whom Moscow supports) not leaving the country. On 1 May, Pompeo and Lavrov exchanged accusations by phone (that Russia was destabilising Venezuela by its actions, and that the US was violating international law). Lavrov also warned against US military intervention in Venezuela. That same day, the US President's national security advisor John Bolton repeated the accusations against Russia, and threatened that they would negatively affect bilateral relations. During all its meetings and contacts with Moscow, the US also raised the allegations that Russia had attempted to interfere in US elections, which the Russian side rejected. Before meeting Lavrov in Rovaniemi, Pompeo declared that the US was planning to counteract the aggressive policies of Russia and China in the Arctic, and accused Moscow of rearmament in the region. Pompeo shortened his visit to Russia (he cancelled his visit to Moscow on 13 May because of emergency consultations in Brussels on the issue of Iran), which could be interpreted as a negative gesture towards Moscow. In turn, Putin arrived for his meeting with Pompeo in Sochi three hours late because he was visiting a military compound.

- Nothing which Pompeo and Lavrov stated publicly after the talks in Sochi proves that there has been any breakthrough, or even any reconciliation in the positions of the US and Russia on key issues. In particular, the parties reiterated their principled positions on the issues of Venezuela, Syria, Iran, Ukraine and arms control. Among other matters, Lavrov urged the US to discuss the extension of the 2010 treaty on reducing strategic nuclear arms (New START) and to take Russian demands regarding the measures of its verification into account. Pompeo hinted that such a move should be part of a broader range of agreements, including with Chinese participation. Lavrov spoke about the need to implement the Minsk agreements with the new Ukrainian government; Pompeo called on Russia to release the Ukrainian sailors arrested during the incident in the Kerch Strait. Other critical topics have emerged; Lavrov accused the US of trying to interfere in Russia's internal affairs (mentioning as an example the authorisation for the State Department to spend US$20 million to support the development of democracy and civil society in Russia), whereas Pompeo warned Russia against trying to interfere in the US presidential elections in 2020, threatening a serious deterioration in mutual relations if that happens.
- It is clear that Russia is placing its hopes in another face-to-face meeting between Presidents Putin and Trump (which could occur during the G20 summit in Osaka in late June), which it is working hard to bring about. This is primarily associated with the Russian assessment of Trump as a politician who is susceptible to persuasion, prone to taking non-standard actions, and who has a transactional approach to politics. Secondly, the Kremlin hopes, after the publication in mid-April of special prosecutor Mueller's report (which cleared Trump and his associates of accusations of collusion with Russia before the US presidential election in 2016), that a politically strengthened US president will have more room for manoeuvre with regard to Moscow, and may now be inclined to initiate a process of bilateral normalisation. It seems that some in the Russian establishment may be hoping that after Moscow's demonstration of its negative potential (especially recently in Venezuela), it will be possible to enter into a kind of bargaining with

Washington (for example, Moscow might withdraw its support for Maduro's regime in exchange for concessions to Russia over Ukraine).

- Both past experience (the only agreement from the Putin-Trump summit in Helsinki in July 2018 which has come to fruition is the launch in December 2018 of a Russian-US dialogue on the fight against terrorism), as well as the current dynamics of the situation (in particular the escalation of tensions between the US and Iran, and the Maduro regime in Venezuela, both of which are supported by Russia) indicate that significant improvement in Russian-US relations in the foreseeable future is unlikely. However, Russia may skilfully fuel the impression that a new 'reset' is possible, which may contribute to the deepening distrust of Trump's administration from the political elites in both the US and Europe, most of whom have been critical of him.