

The Biden-Putin summit: an exercise in strategic communication

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In Geneva on 16 June, the new US President Joe Biden and the Russian President Vladimir Putin met for the first time. The talks, in a narrow group and with an expanded delegation, lasted a total of two and a half hours. According to the reports from both sides, the discussion included strategic stability (nuclear and conventional arms control), international crises (Syria, Libya, Iran, Afghanistan), the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, the situation in Belarus, information security (i.e. Russian disinformation campaigns), cybercrime problems (i.e. Russian cyberattacks against targets in the US and other Western countries and structures); economic cooperation, diplomatic representation, the Arctic, and the fight against the coronavirus pandemic. The American side also raised the issues of human rights violations, the persecution of political opponents and limits on press freedom in Russia.

The only concrete result of the meeting to be announced were an agreement to continue the political and security dialogue, including arms control and cybersecurity, and to start the normalisation of diplomatic relations (Ambassadors Antonov and Sullivan will return to their posts).

As expected, the first Russian-American summit under the new Biden administration did not bring any breakthroughs, and did not overcome what has now become the deepest crisis in bilateral relations since the end of the Cold War. Both sides used the meeting primarily as an instrument of strategic communication (with each other, as well as their domestic audiences and external observers). President Biden was able to present a principled, critical attitude towards the Kremlin's foreign and domestic policy, while at the same time expressing goodwill regarding pragmatic dialogue with Moscow. The very fact that the meeting was held, in turn, will primarily benefit the Russian side, which was very keen on it as it allowed President Putin to be portrayed as the leader of a world power and an interlocutor on a par with the US president. Regardless of the critical rhetoric from the US, Moscow will interpret the positive elements of the meeting as a relative success for its aggressive policy. This will not motivate Russia to make concessions or engage in constructive cooperation; on the contrary, it will encourage it to try to compel the US to make certain concessions (in the sphere of arms control, regional problems, and the US's attitude towards the internal situation in Russia) in return for Moscow not stopping its hostile actions but merely not escalating them. Moscow also hopes that, even though there will be no repetition of the 2009-2011 US-Russian reset, an atmosphere of limited *détente* will arise after the summit, stimulating other Western states and structures (including the

EU) to try to normalise their relations with Russia.

The course and results of the meeting

After a 90-minute meeting in a narrow group (the presidents and their heads of diplomacy) and a break, talks between the expanded delegations took place lasting about an hour. A further planned session was cancelled, and the meeting ended earlier than planned. On the Russian side, the participants included: Yuri Ushakov, the president's assistant (advisor) for international affairs; Dmitri Kozak, the deputy head of the presidential administration and the president's special representative for Ukraine; Sergei Lavrov, the minister of foreign affairs; Sergei Ryabkov, his deputy for US and security policy; Anatoli Antonov, Russia's ambassador in Washington; Aleksandr Lavrentiev, the president's special representative for Syria; General Valeri Gerasimov, chief of the general staff of the Russian Armed Forces; and Dmitri Peskov, the president's press spokesman. On the American side: Anthony Blinken, Secretary of State; Victoria Nuland, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs; Jake Sullivan, the president's national security adviser; Eric Green, senior director for Russia at the National Security Council; Stergos Kaloudis, head of the Russia office at the NSC; and John Sullivan (no relation to Jake Sullivan), the US's ambassador to Moscow.

After the meeting, the parties issued a short joint statement in which they expressed their satisfaction with the extension of the START-3 nuclear arms reduction treaty, declared that nuclear war is unwinnable and must be avoided, and announced that further dialogue on strategic stability would be held. There was no joint press conference, such as usually follows such meetings (as the American side did not want to do this), but instead both sides held separate meetings with journalists.

During the conference, both presidents assessed the meeting in generally positive terms as having been open and to the point. President Putin confirmed that it had been agreed that Ambassadors Antonov and Sullivan would return to their posts after an absence of almost two months, forced by a Russian decision. The two sides' foreign ministries will continue talks on the conditions (and the restrictions imposed) on their diplomatic representations. As regards arms control, Putin announced the start of consultations along a special diplomatic pathway, under the auspices of their foreign ministries. On the issue of cybersecurity, a separate dialogue on this subject was announced; Putin rejected the accusations that Russia had conducted cyberattacks on the US and other countries. With regard to Ukraine, Putin said that both sides confirmed that the resolution of the crisis must be based on the Minsk agreements. In his opinion, the topic of Ukraine's membership in NATO was discussed only briefly because "there was nothing to talk about". In response to allegations of human rights violations in Russia, he accused the US of supporting opposition structures (including financially) as an element of the policy of containing Russia, as well as violating human rights itself (for example, by operating special prisons for terrorists and killing them with drones) and restricting freedom of the media (by restricting the activities of the RT Russian propaganda outlet in the US). On the Arctic, Putin stressed the need for cooperation, including in the economic and shipping spheres, on the basis of existing international agreements, declaring that Russia respects all such agreements. Putin also admitted that it could be possible to achieve a "compromise solution" (possibly a swap) regarding two Americans imprisoned in Russia and a number of Russian citizens imprisoned in the US.

President Biden reiterated the principles of US policy towards Russia, stressing that it was not directed against Russia *per se* (including the defence of human and civil rights). He drew attention to the parties' potential convergence of interests in the matter of maintaining the humanitarian corridor to Syria, counteracting Iran's possible acquisition of nuclear weapons, cooperation in the Arctic, and counteracting the resurgence of terrorism in Afghanistan (Biden stated that Putin had expressed the hope that the US presence in that country would be maintained, and declared Russia's readiness to offer "assistance"). Biden also pledged full support for the territorial integrity of Ukraine. Regarding cyberattacks, he announced that he had provided Putin with a list of 16 critical US infrastructure facilities that should remain off-limits. He added that Russia knows that if it repeats the attacks on the US, it will meet with a cybernetic response. On the other hand, Biden declared that both sides will identify areas of possible cooperation in various fields.

Summing up the meeting: benefits for the USA...

In a situation where Russian-American relations are in their deepest crisis since the end of the Cold War more than 30 years ago, the meeting attracted a great deal of attention from the media and international observers. Both sides treated the occasion not as an opportunity to initiate a breakthrough, which did not happen, but rather as a way to send messages to each other, their elites and societies, and to other countries.

The US's success is mainly down to the fact that it did not allow a repeat of the spectacular failure for America which was the press conference after the Helsinki summit between Presidents Trump and Putin in July 2018. President Biden strengthened the strategic communication of the two-track policy towards Russia, combining dialogue with deterrence. On the one hand, he wanted to demonstrate that with the departure of Donald Trump, the period of deep crisis in transatlantic relations has ended, and that the US – with the support of its global and regional allies – is ready to oppose Russia's aggressive policy and weaken its effectiveness. On the other hand, the United States is offering Russia a chance to de-escalate tensions and hold a pragmatic dialogue on selected important issues, including those areas in which Washington perceives the possibility of convergence, or at least an absence of conflict, between the two sides.

With Washington apparently not ready to increase pressure on Moscow (responding in a relatively mild fashion to Russia's aggressive actions), the potential for further gains in real political terms appears small. Moscow may (although this is not certain) simply refrain from further escalating actions hostile to the US, but it will not back down from those it has already undertaken. Russia is also unable to offer the US any major benefits because it does not want – or cannot – constructively influence the situation in key countries and regions. In this context, the list of potential spheres of convergent interests which Biden presented may suggest that he does not have an entirely accurate understanding of the goals and motivations of Russian policy.

...and for Russia

The mere fact that the meeting took place was a success for Moscow, taking place as it did just a month after another series of dangerous cyberattacks by Russian hackers (most likely commissioned by Russian secret services) on critical elements of the US network: an important pipeline (the Colonial Pipeline) and a major meat producer (JBS). Both the composition of the delegation and the wide range of topics discussed during the meeting

boosted the international standing of the Russian side. The meeting with Biden raised Putin's prestige and underlined his importance on the international stage, as a leader with whom the American president deals on an equal footing. It also served to legitimise his power in the eyes of Russia's society and elite.

Above all, however, the positive message from the meeting (both sides demonstrated their readiness to continue and deepen their dialogue, which over time may lead to selective cooperation), may significantly influence the atmosphere of both their own relationship and the relations of other countries (especially Western countries) with Russia. Not only is Moscow much less afraid of the US expanding sanctions (which was seen as quite a real threat after last year's US elections, and just after Joe Biden took office in January this year), but it also sees that – without having to make any concessions – it can count on other Western states (including EU member states) stepping up their efforts to normalise relations with Russia in the wake of the US.

Moreover, Moscow will most likely interpret this attitude of the Biden administration as a sign of relative weakness and a desire to avoid conflict, which will only confirm its conviction that the aggressive policy it has been conducting to date is justified and effective. In particular, Moscow may interpret the list of targets in the US that hackers should not attack as a specific appeal to de-escalate from the Biden administration to Moscow. Thus, the Kremlin may continue to pursue a policy in which its opponent (and at the same time the victim) is forced to pay a 'ransom' to avoid even more serious damage. If Moscow gets the impression that Washington is ready to tolerate such a situation, this would have a very negative impact on Russian policy, paradoxically encouraging it to repeat its aggressive actions on individual targets.

What does Moscow want?

The minimum goal of the Kremlin's policy towards the US is to reduce the costs of confrontation with the United States without having to abandon the anti-American course in its foreign policy. This is primarily to be achieved by involving Washington in the process of negotiations on arms control - the only area in which one can speak of relative parity between the potentials of the US and Russia. From the Kremlin's point of view, such negotiations are primarily intended to encourage Washington to limit, or at least not increase, its military spending, and thus prevent an arms race that Russia (like the Soviet Union) would end up losing due to its relative economic weakness. The Kremlin also hopes that, thanks to such negotiations, it will be able to maintain or even extend its advantage in such areas as tactical nuclear weapons or the hypersonic missiles and medium-range missiles recently introduced by the Russian army. Finally, Moscow will make further attempts to include its demands on precision missile weapons (the American concept of Prompt Global Strike), military activity in space and, in particular, the anti-missile defence system in Europe and Asia, including the possibility of freezing the (protracted) construction of the anti-missile base (Aegis Ashore) in Redzikowo, Poland.

Moscow's minimum goals probably also include restoring the conditions and possibilities for the operation of the Russian diplomatic representation in the United States to the state that existed before the restrictions which the Obama administration imposed in autumn 2016 (in retaliation for electoral interference); this would naturally also be linked to the potential reconstruction of the Russian intelligence network in the US, weakened by

expulsions.

Moscow probably also hopes that, in line with the US's electoral promises (ending the 'eternal wars'), Washington will continue the process of withdrawing from the broader Middle East (including Afghanistan and Syria), increasing Russia's room for political manoeuvre and influence in the region; and that the US will seek a constructive stance from Moscow on Iran or North Korea, and the related proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

Moscow's maximum goal seems to be to convince the Biden administration that in the name of stabilising mutual relations and 'not pushing Russia into Beijing's arms', it should meet some of the Kremlin's demands. These include refraining from engaging in the promotion of democratic standards and support for civil society in Russia; refraining from closer cooperation with Ukraine, and possibly trying to persuade Kyiv to implement the Minsk agreements (in their Russian interpretation); and above all, gradually reducing its military presence in Central and Eastern Europe, ideally to the pre-2014 level.

It does not seem that Moscow's maximum goals can be achieved. The reasons for this include Moscow's lack of any offer that would be attractive to Washington, and the resistance from the US Congress to making any serious concessions to Russia. However, merely discussing the matter may weaken US pressure on Russia.