

PUTIN-BIDEN SUMMIT AND RUSSIA-U.S. RELATIONS

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- How are the bilateral relations since the new U.S. administration took office?
 - What are the potential topics to be discussed?
 - What can be expected from the summit?

As Russian President Vladimir Putin recently stated, the bilateral relations between Russia and the United States have “deteriorated to what is the lowest point in recent years.”¹ Taking a quick look at the last couple of years, seven months after former U.S. president Donald Trump’s inauguration, Washington enacted new sanctions against Russia, as well as Iran and North Korea.² It was followed by further sanctions in the same year.³ Furthermore, Russia was identified as an adversary in the National Security Strategy document released by the U.S. in December 2017.⁴ A few months later, Russia was labeled as a strategic competitor of the United States in its National Defense Strategy.⁵ Overall, during the period of the Trump administra-

tion, numerous sanctions were applied to Russia for a range of reasons such as human rights abuses, the Salisbury incident, the events in the Kerch Strait, election meddling, hacking, cyber-crimes, etc.⁶ Despite the quantity of the sanctions, it is sometimes argued that the Trump administration was not as tough as it could have been on Russia because of the delaying, lifting, and altering of the sanctions against Moscow - in short, because of their eroding.⁷ Besides, there was a leadership factor where the two leaders were praising each other and getting along well.⁸ Nevertheless, bilateral relations were seriously damaged. The obvious and fundamental conflicts between the two countries mostly obstructed the room for cooperation.

Following the inauguration of Joe Biden, the 46th U.S. president, bilateral relations between Russia and U.S. hit bottom. In fact, President Biden has agreed with his Russian counterpart that the bilateral

1 “Интервью американской телекомпании NBC”, *Официальные сетевые ресурсы Президента России*, 14 June 2021 (Interview was recorded on 11 June 2021), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/65861> (Access date: 14 June 2021).

2 Alina Polyakova and Filippos Letsas, “On the Record: The U.S. Administration’s Actions on Russia”, *Brookings*, 31 December 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/09/25/on-the-record-the-u-s-administrations-actions-on-russia/> (Access date:14 June 2021).

3 Polyakova and Letsas, “On the Record”.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Edward Fishman, James Lamond and Max Bergmann, “No, Trump Has Not Been ‘Tough’ on Russia”, *The Washington Post*, 13 October 2020.

8 “The many nice things Trump has said about Putin”, *CNN*, <https://edition.cnn.com/videos/politics/2019/01/17/trump-putin-praise-vstan-orig-me.cnn> (Access date:14 June 2021).

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relations are at their lowest point.⁹ The current U.S. administration has followed far stronger rhetoric compared to its predecessor. Biden's description of Vladimir Putin as a "killer"¹⁰ not only demonstrated Washington's perception of Russia but also provided hints regarding the stringency level of the policies that will be implemented on Moscow. The two countries' previous confrontations have diversified and become harsher under the Biden administration. The ongoing conflict in Donbas, the annexation of Crimea, and the mobilization of Russian troops on the Ukrainian border topped the list of the most conflictual topics in the last five months of the new administration's relations with Russia. In this period, the U.S. has imposed sanctions on Russia at first for "the poisoning and imprisonment of Aleksey Navalny"¹¹ and later, on a more comprehensive note, for "interfering in last year's U.S. election, cyber hacking, bullying Ukraine and other alleged malign actions."¹² To top this off, both countries reciprocally expelled diplomats.¹³ All these developments draw the picture of the bilateral relations and constitute the drivers of the Putin-Biden summit, to be held on June 16, 2021, in Geneva.¹⁴

THE AGENDA OF THE GENEVA SUMMIT

There is a wide array of topics that will be discussed during the first face-to-face meeting between the leaders of the two countries. The expectations surrounding this meeting are elaborated in the follow-

9 Alex Seitz-Wald, "Biden Agrees U.S.-Russian Relations Are at a 'Low Point' ahead of Meeting with Putin", *NBC News*, 13 June 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/white-house/ahead-meeting-putin-biden-agrees-u-s-russian-relations-are-n1270610> (Access date: 14 June 2021).

10 Mark Galeotti, "Emotions Central to the Putin-Biden Summit", *The Moscow Times*, 14 June 2021.

11 "Imposing Sanctions on Russia for the Poisoning and Imprisonment of Aleksey Navalny", *U.S. Department of State*, 2 March 2021, <https://www.state.gov/imposing-sanctions-on-russia-for-the-poisoning-and-imprisonment-of-aleksey-navalny/> (Access date: 14 June 2021).

12 Trevor Hunnicutt, Arshad Mohammed and Andrew Osborn, "U.S. Imposes Wide Array of Sanctions on Russia for 'Malign' Actions", *Reuters*, 15 April 2021.

13 Andrew Roth, "Russia Expels 10 US Diplomats as Part of Retaliation for Sanctions", *The Guardian*, 16 April 2021.

14 Igor Ivanov, "Geneva Meeting: A World in Waiting", *The Moscow Times*, 9 June 2021,

ing part. However, it is possible to summarize the agenda as aiming to achieve a "stable and predictable relationship."¹⁵ Looking back at Biden's legacy during the Obama administration, one may recall the "reset" policy.¹⁶ However, there is consensus among the bureaucrats, politicians, and researchers that the Geneva Summit does not intimate any kind of "reset" or related policies;¹⁷ instead, it aims to improve the bilateral dialogue. In this regard, it is possible to categorize the potential topics to be discussed during the summit, as the following:

- strategic stability and arms control¹⁸
- cyberattacks
- Russian military mobilization alongside the Ukrainian border and the increase of U.S./NATO attention to countries in Russia's "Near Abroad"¹⁹
- the imprisonment of Aleksey Navalny
- the Syrian War
- the latest conflict in Israel

15 Joe Biden, "My Trip to Europe Is about America Rallying the World's Democracies", *The Washington Post*, 5 June 2021.

16 Mike Eckel, "Biden, Putin to Meet Face-to-Face in Geneva. Few Expect Breakthroughs", *RFE/RL*, 12 June 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/putin-biden-summit-analysis-geneva/31303699.html> (Access date: 14 June 2021).

17 Matthew Rojansky, "The Biden-Putin Summit: Nothing to Reset But Expectations", *War On The Rocks*, 10 June 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/06/the-biden-putin-summit-nothing-to-reset-but-expectations/> (Access date: 14 June 2021); Michael Kimmage, "When Biden Meets Putin", *Foreign Policy*, 9 June 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2021-06-09/when-biden-meets-putin> (Access date: 14 June 2021); "Кремль не ожидает «перезагрузки» отношений с США после встречи президентов", *Коммерсантъ*, 26 May, 2021, <https://www.kommersant.ru/amp/4827822> (Access date: 14 June 2021).

18 Rose Gottemoeller, "A Former Nuclear Negotiator's Advice for Biden and Putin", *Politico*, 14 June 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/06/14/biden-putin-summit-nuclear-treaty-start-494313> (Access date: 14 June 2021).

19 For the importance and the meaning of "Near Abroad," see: Angela Stent, *Putin's World: Russia against the West and with the Rest*, (New York: Twelve Hachette Book Group, 2019), pp. 250-309; Tudor Onea, *The Grand Strategies of Great Powers*, (Oxon: Routledge, 2021), pp. 210-215; Mehmet Çağatay Güler, *Donbas Crisis: Geopolitical Importance, The Diplomatic Process and Recent Developments*, (Ankara, SETA Publications, 2021), p. 10.

- sanctions
- North Korea
- Libya
- the nuclear disarmament and Iran's nuclear program
- the ongoing crisis in Belarus since August 2020
- possible U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan
- the working conditions of diplomats.

OUTCOME EXPECTATIONS

In a nutshell, aligning oneself with Michael Kimmage description of the Putin-Biden summit: the stakes are high, yet the expectations are low.²⁰ Similarly, former U.S. ambassador to Russia, Michael McFaul, underlines the low expectations and thus, the projection of a modest outcome.²¹ The agenda of the summit is very intense and full of disagreement. Having a comprehensive agenda and a wide array of significant issues on the table shows how many topics are at stake.²² At the same time, expectations are very low because neither of the leaders is willing to make concessions on their countries' national interests in any of the topics, e.g. Syria, Belarus, Ukraine, etc. To begin with, the policies of the U.S. and NATO targeting Ukraine or any "Near Abroad" countries, are regarded as issues of direct security by Russia. Crimea and Donbas are very sensitive issues that contain within them other motivations, such as past legacies and identity, that push Russia to pursue aggressive policies. Hence, handling

20 Eckel, "Biden, Putin to Meet Face-to-Face in Geneva. Few Expect Breakthroughs".

21 Kimmage, "When Biden Meets Putin".

22 For contrary arguments, see: Jim Goldgeier (@JimGoldgeier), "I don't understand why journalists are writing that the Biden-Putin meeting is "high-stakes." Kennedy and Khrushchev in 1961 in Vienna was high-stakes. Not this meeting.", Twitter, 15 January 2021; Sergey Radchenko (@DrRadchenko), "As good of an argument in favour of the Russian-US summit as I have seen: <https://warontherocks.com/2021/06/the-biden-putin-summit-nothing-to-reset-but-expectations/>. My point of disagreement with Matthew is that most (all?) of the issues he talks about here do not actually require a summit, assuming Moscow's willingness to improve relations.", Twitter, 12 June 2021.

the crisis in Ukraine is very difficult – as is the crisis in Belarus since it is also placed under Russia's privileged sphere of influence. Furthermore, Moscow will not accept any accusations or suggestions regarding the Navalny issue. However, Putin declares the cyber-attacks issue to be on the table.²³ Yet, it can only be discussed under mutual understanding and reciprocity - it would be unfruitful to wrangle. Especially concerning domestic issues and with the upcoming Duma elections, Russia will be anything but a pushover for the Biden administration. Even if the talks and suggestions were reasonable, Russia would not allow the U.S. to cross its red lines.

On the other side, the United States will not want to give up the imposed sanctions, its pressures over Navalny - regarded as a domestic issue by Russia -, its cyber-crime accusations against Russia, its endeavors to cut Russian help to North Korea, its stance against Belarussian leader Lukashenko, and so forth. This leaves us with only a few topics that can be resolved or positively discussed. In this regard, as has been vocalized by the Russian media and experts, there is a good chance that they may decide to create working groups and mechanisms in order to achieve strategic stability.²⁴ These mechanisms may form the first steps of new arms control treaties. In addition, a decision will most likely be taken on the working conditions of the diplomats. Given that both countries have expelled several diplomats and recalled their ambassadors, this issue is unavoidable. What is more, the two countries may find common ground on Afghanistan, Israel, and Iran's nuclear program.

Overall, among the promising subjects that Biden and Putin may agree upon are the possible U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, the working conditions of the two countries' diplomats, strategic stability and arms control, nuclear disarmament, and Iran's nuclear

23 "Putin Says Russia Would Accept Conditional Handover of Cyber Criminals to U.S.", Reuters, 13 June 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/putin-says-russia-would-accept-conditional-handover-cyber-criminals-us-2021-06-13/> (Access date: 14 June 2021).

24 "Кремль не ожидает «перезагрузки» отношений с США после встречи президентов", *Коммерсантъ*.

program. In this context, potential working groups and mechanisms may be created following the summit. Neither Putin nor Biden will accept making concessions or altering their foreign policy directions, and therefore, most of the crucial and conflictual issues will remain unsolved. Previous declarations of the Russian president proved that Moscow will emphasize its “red lines.” Though the U.S. does not seek conflict, it will not be willing to accept a step back on issues like Ukraine,

sanctions, or cybersecurity. Hence, Biden will be willing to reapply the suspended sanctions on Nord Stream 2 if he is not satisfied with the summit’s outcomes. These are the reasons why expectations are very low. However, regardless of low expectations, the bilateral dialogue between the two countries is expected to be improved. And, even though this summit will unlikely reset or bring sudden normalization, it may be the first step towards a stable and more predictable relationship.



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