



Pursuing Realistic US Goals at the Helsinki Summit

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The summit meeting between Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin in Helsinki on July 16 offers an important opportunity to repair the badly damaged relationship between Russia and the United States. A successful outcome would be beneficial to European nations as well, since it could substantially reduce overall East-West tensions. Success, however, depends on President Trump having realistic expectations and not making demands that have no chance of being fulfilled.

Unfortunately, sentiment in the United States in the lead up to the summit is not encouraging. Trump's partisan opponents, as well as the usual flock of congenial hawks, are already pressuring him not to show any inclination to compromise with Russia. Indeed, some critics act as though his mere willingness to meet with Putin shows poor judgment and an appeasement mentality. That attitude surfaced as well when President Trump held a face-to-face meeting with North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un.

It is an unhealthy, unrealistic view of foreign affairs. A willingness to meet and negotiate in good faith with foreign adversaries is a crucial aspect of successful diplomacy, and Washington has achieved important successes by doing so. Without such policy flexibility, the United States would never have concluded important arms control agreements with the Soviet Union or normalized relations with the People's Republic of China – breakthroughs that benefited both U.S. interests and the welfare of humanity.

The rising tensions between Washington and Moscow have reached alarming levels that some experts believe amount to a second Cold war. The summit can begin to ease those tensions and resolve some of the underlying disputes. Trump and his advisers, though, need to focus on attainable objectives and not waste their efforts on unattainable ones.

Demanding that Russia return Crimea to Ukraine is at the top of the unattainable category. The Kremlin's annexation was at least partly a reaction to the clumsy and provocative actions that the United States and key European Union powers took in 2014 to support demonstrators who unseated Ukraine's elected, pro-Russian president, Viktor Yanukovich, before the expiration of his term. Moscow was furious about that Western power play, and Putin's seizure of Crimea was the response. Issues of national pride and security calculations were involved. The West's

meddling in Ukraine was merely the latest encroachment in Russia's geopolitical neighborhood, and this one would not go unchallenged. Russians were especially sensitive regarding the Crimea issue, because the peninsula had been part of Russia from 1783 until 1954, when Soviet dictator Nikita Khrushchev arbitrarily transferred it to Ukraine. In addition, Crimea is home to Russia's main naval base at Sevastopol, and Russian leaders were not about to see such a crucial military asset be at the mercy of a manifestly hostile Ukrainian regime.

Given the stakes involved, Russia is no more likely to withdraw from Crimea than Israel is likely to return the Golan Heights to Syria or Turkey return occupied northern Cyprus to the Republic of Cyprus. Persisting in an utterly unattainable demand regarding Crimea before U.S. and EU sanctions against Russia will be lifted is pointless.

Pursuing another, more limited, goal regarding Ukraine may be achievable, however. At the summit, Trump should focus on inducing the Kremlin to reduce and phase-out its support for separatist rebels in eastern Ukraine. Despite the hysterical allegations that appear periodically in the Western press about an impending Russian invasion and takeover of Ukraine, Russia's backing of the insurgents has remained fairly limited. Putin shows little stomach for making Ukraine an arena for a full-fledged military confrontation with the West.

In exchange for terminating Russia's support of Ukrainian secessionists and confirming Moscow's acceptance of the anti-Russian regime in Kiev, Trump should propose an agreement pledging that the United States will not consider NATO membership for Ukraine or Georgia. NATO's previous waves of enlargement right up to Russia's border were a key factor in the deterioration of the West's relations with Moscow. It is important to end that provocation.

An agreement also is needed regarding the conduct of NATO and Russian military forces. There have been a number of ugly incidents in recent years, where rival units have operated in dangerously close proximity to one another and seemingly played air and naval versions of "chicken." Better guidelines can and should be adopted, bringing such harassment to an end. President Trump also should pledge that NATO military exercises (war games) in Eastern Europe and the Black Sea will come to an end. In exchange, the United States ought to insist that the Russian military end its provocative deployments in Kaliningrad and along Russia's frontier with NATO members.

Compromises can be sought on other key issues. Washington needs to drop its insistence that the Kremlin end its support for Syrian dictator Bashar-al Assad. Given the factor of geographic proximity alone, Russia has more substantial interests in Syria than does the United States. As bad as he is, Russia believes that Assad is preferable to his Sunni jihadist opponents, and that is not an unreasonable position. The Trump administration should accept Russia's preeminence in Syria and work instead to gain a commitment from Putin to limit Moscow's cooperation with Iran. Such a policy shift might pave the way for the withdrawal of U.S. forces from their utterly unrewarding mission in Syria.

The North Korea issue also should be a topic for negotiation and compromise. Putin's stance regarding Washington's North Korea policy has been roughly midpoint between grudgingly

cooperative and outright obstructionist. Resolving some of the other points of contention between Moscow and Washington creates the potential for greater bilateral cooperation on the difficult and complex North Korea nuclear issue. As one of the few nations with economic ties and some influence with Kim's regime, Russia is in a position to be far more helpful than it has been to this point. Greater cooperation would be extremely beneficial in addressing the dangerous North Korea problem.

President Trump has indicated that he does not want other U.S. officials in the room when he meets with Putin. His stance suggests that he wants to focus on changing the broad dynamics in the relationship between the two countries rather than becoming bogged down in diplomatic minutia. It seems similar to the goal of his summit with Kim. That is a useful objective, and building a more cordial overall relationship is an important prerequisite for more detailed, productive negotiations. However, it also is important that the president offer some specific concessions to Putin and indicate clearly what reasonable concessions Washington expects in return. That process would be the foundation of a lasting "reset" in bilateral relations and make Europe and the rest of the world a safer place.

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