

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

A Pointless U.S.-Russia Summit?

Ted Galen Carpenter

June 14, 2021

Given the ugly state of U.S.-Russian relations, expectations for meaningful, substantive results from President Biden's summit with Vladimir Putin are more modest than they usually are for such events. Even so, they still may still be too optimistic. Both leaders do have an incentive not to let the talks blow up entirely and end with mutual expressions of vitriol. However, the most likely outcome is a vapid communique referring to "constructive discussions" and "a candid but cordial exchange of views on a range of important issues."

Such diplomatic fluff will not, and cannot, conceal the deepening and dangerous deterioration in bilateral relations. Washington has an ever-expanding list of grievances against Moscow, with alleged interference in the internal political affairs of the United States and other democracies being at the top of the list, and accusations of cyber-attacks moving up fast. But U.S. leaders remain blind to their own provocations. The typical U.S. negotiating strategy in dealing with adversaries is to present a laundry list of grievances and demand concessions that amount to outright surrender regarding every point. Conversely, any U.S. concessions offered range from meager to nonexistent. It is the essence of capitulation diplomacy, and it captures accurately Washington's dealings with Russia throughout the post-Cold War era.

If Biden truly wants to salvage the summit and produce worthwhile results, a totally different approach is essential. An important initial step would be to acknowledge that some actions that Washington and its NATO allies have taken were tone-deaf and gratuitously provocative with respect to Russia's core interests. The decision to expand NATO, the most powerful military alliance in history, to Russia's western border by incorporating the three Baltic republics fits that description. Stationing U.S. forces in some of NATO's new East European members constitutes an additional provocation, and conducting an incessant series of NATO military exercises (i.e., war games) on Russia's doorstep, both in the Baltics and the Black Sea, reflects both arrogance and recklessness. U.S. withdrawal from the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty and the Open Skies agreement certainly did not ease tensions with Russia.

The list of provocations goes on. Even as U.S. leaders complain about the Kremlin's meddling in the politics of democratic nations, they refuse to admit that Washington meddled

shamelessly in late 2013 and early 2014 to help demonstrators unseat Ukraine's elected, pro-Russian government. Currently, Washington openly sides with Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny in his political struggles against Putin and with protestors seeking to oust Kremlin ally Alexander Lukashenko in Belarus.

Unfortunately, the United States and NATO appear poised to adopt an even more confrontational posture. The communiqué from the just-completed NATO summit bluntly refers to Russia as a "threat"—in marked contrast to the references to China as merely posing "challenges." Western Russophobia remains intense and unyielding.

Being realistic about U.S. demands and showing a willingness to make meaningful concessions would create a pathway for a successful summit and perhaps even a breakthrough in Washington's relations with Russia. Pressing Putin to take action against cyber-hacking gangs based in Russia is entirely reasonable and achievable. Insisting that Russia return Crimea to Ukraine is an obvious nonstarter. U.S. leaders may have reason to be annoyed about Russian interference in America's political affairs, but they must be much more specific about what constitutes unacceptable "interference." Most serious nations (including the United States and its closest allies) engage in robust public relations and propaganda campaigns, so singling out Russia for outrage and retribution because of such activities is both hypocritical and pointless. Imposing economic sanctions in response, as the United States continues to do, is even worse.

Greater realism about making demands is crucial, but so is creating a list of appealing concessions. It would be nearly impossible for the United States to undo the initial folly of expanding NATO's membership instead of giving that Cold War institutional dinosaur a well-earned retirement when the Soviet Union dissolved. But Biden could take the position that NATO's doors are now closed and that the United States will veto any effort to bring either Ukraine or Georgia into the Alliance. The prospect of Ukraine's membership in NATO and Western forces stationed on Ukrainian soil is especially likely to cross a bright red line as far as Russia is concerned. Moscow's reaction likely would be similar to the U.S. response if another great power, say China, wanted to include Canada or Mexico in a military alliance that it dominated.

Other proffered concessions could include reopening negotiations for a U.S. return to both the INF treaty and the Open Skies agreement. Such moves would benefit America's best interests in any case, as well as reduce troubling military tensions in Europe, so Washington would be especially wise to propose that step. Another key concession would be to end U.S. deployments of military forces in Eastern Europe and to dramatically reduce the scope, proximity, and frequency of NATO military exercises near Russia's borders. It then would be reasonable to press Putin to withdraw some of his own forces that are currently stationed near the borders of Alliance members.

Unfortunately, it is unlikely that Biden will take any of these steps, much less all of them. Instead, we will probably witness a vacuous, somewhat chilly summit and count ourselves lucky if the meeting doesn't produce an even deeper freeze in bilateral relations. Without substantial, beneficial changes, though, the United States and Russia will continue to drift toward a dangerous, potentially catastrophic, confrontation.

Ted Galen Carpenter, a senior fellow in security studies at the Cato Institute and a contributing editor at the National Interest, is the author of 12 books and more than 900 articles on international affairs. His latest book is NATO: The Dangerous Dinosaur (2019).