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How Biden Can (And Should) Cooperate With Putin

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Presidents Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin are planning to meet in Switzerland next month. It obviously is better to have the two talking rather than fighting.

However, no one is predicting a diplomatic lovefest. Reported Reuters: “The United States and Russia are lowering expectations for big breakthroughs at a superpower summit between U.S. President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin, with the adversaries in no mood to make concessions on their bitter disagreements.”

If so, it’s tempting to ask, why bother meeting? Regular and open communication is most important between well-armed and hostile antagonists. Relations between the world’s two greatest nuclear powers have descended to Cold War levels. Imagine if Moscow and Washington did not have both official and unofficial channels to work through the Cuban missile crisis. The result could have been catastrophe.

So, what should the two leaders discuss?

Last year candidate Biden promised: “I’ll defend our democratic values and stand up to autocrats like Putin.” Most presidents express similar sentiments, but such nationalistic blather offers little guidance for policy. Renewing dialogue with Moscow does not require harboring any illusions about the nature of the Russian regime. It is authoritarian and corrupt, but those characteristics have never deterred U.S. administrations from talking with and even cooperating with similar regimes elsewhere.

Consider decades of past and sometimes continuing U.S. support for similar or even worse systems in South Korea, Taiwan, United Arab Emirates, China, Saudi Arabia,

Egypt, Iran, and more. The outrage currently expressed in Washington over Moscow's conduct appears more staged than principled.

Putin and the state he created are neither uniquely evil nor threatening. Although Russia rebuilt its military after the Soviet collapse, it is a potent regional power rather than global superpower, and its geopolitical ambitions, analyzed without the hysteria that so often dominates Washington discourse today, appear modest. The U.S. has reached agreement with much worse, especially since there is no clash over interests of vital importance.

Indeed, Moscow is far less capable than seems commonly assumed, undercut by its often ostentatiously incompetent behavior. Russia's assassination missions abroad have had disastrous diplomatic consequences. The regime's attempt to kill opposition leader Alexei Navalny was a veritable comic opera, after which one of the participants confessed to the victim.

Putin, or at least his minions, often appear to be Moscow's own worst enemies. Democracy activist Vladimir Kara-Murza observed: "As history shows, most dictatorships fall not under the power of their opponents but under the weight of their own mistakes. It seems that Putin's will not be an exception."

The starting point for the forthcoming meeting should be assessing each government's priorities and objectives. What is the path forward to ensure a relationship that is at least civil? The Putin government has a record. In contrast, Biden, though he has said much about Russia over the last half century, only now is the U.S. government's ultimate authority. Reuters explained: "Russian officials see the summit as important to hear from Biden directly after what a source close to the Russian government said were mixed messages from the new U.S. administration."

Washington should indicate that contact is desirable and cooperation is possible. The two governments should start by agreeing to reverse the steady reduction in the number of diplomats in their respective missions. Almost every perceived Russian offense has triggered rounds of diplomatic expulsions, which were then matched by Moscow. Over time this process has hollowed out both sides' embassies and consulates. Such mutual punishment was emotionally satisfying but diplomatically foolish.

Officials should be on station to monitor events and politics, meet with counterparts, interact with residents, and present their respective governments' policies. The U.S. has essentially ceased issuing visas for Russians to visit America, yet private citizens of both countries should be meeting and talking. The return of diplomats would be no panacea, but more contact would be better.

Next up should be a discussion of extraterritoriality. There is the supercharged issue of election interference, which actually goes both ways, since Washington, despite its sanctimonious proclamations, routinely meddles in foreign contests, including in Russia. Cyber-operations are another divisive issue. Although intelligence-gathering is

inevitable, and that appears to have been the basis of Russia's SolarWinds intrusion, the two governments should try to set boundaries to such activities. Also toxic are ostentatious Russian attacks on dissenters, mostly in Europe, which have triggered several international rows and rounds of diplomatic sanctions and retaliation. The U.S. should indicate that limiting such intrusions would significantly improve the bilateral relationship.

Washington also should propose a human rights reset, establishing a balanced and realistic dialogue. That requires the Biden administration to ground its commitment to human rights in practicality rather than the hypocrisy and sanctimony so evident during the Trump years. It is well past obvious that Americans have only limited ability to influence internal Russian politics. The more that pompous presidential wannabes on Capitol Hill huff and puff, the less likely Moscow is to make concessions.

Vladimir Putin might be a killer, but so is Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who had a journalist critic sliced and diced at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, as well as Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, who ordered the mass shooting of protestors shortly after seizing power. Both the Saudi and Egyptian governments are far more brutal and undemocratic than the Russian regime. So is the Chinese Communist Party, which appears to be regressing to totalitarianism.

Sanctions will not cause an already weakened Putin government to empower the opposition. Every regime's number one priority is staying in power. That is why U.S. sanctions have had no evident impact on political practices in China, Syria, Iran, Cuba, or Venezuela. Most U.S. sanctions are virtue signaling, deployed by politicians hoping to flaunt their humanitarian bona fides to voters.

However, discussions over more limited issues—why, for instance, is Moscow brutally persecuting Jehovah's Witnesses, with whom America is very familiar—might prove fruitful. The cases of Americans seemingly facing retaliatory charges, such as Paul Whelan, convicted on dubious charges of espionage, could be discussed in a less hostile environment. Rather than making demands for Navalny's release, which will not be honored, pressure for better prison conditions and health care might be more effective.

Biden and Putin should consider issues of common geopolitical interest where cooperation might prove fruitful. Washington and Moscow both have suffered terrorist attacks. The Putin government was supportive of the U.S. after 9/11. Yet in Syria Washington inexplicably aided the local affiliate of Al Qaeda, which currently dominates the opposition-controlled area around Idlib.

Despite being on opposite sides of the Assad government in Syria, both America and Russia would like to see relative stability—and a lesser Iranian presence. A reduction in the illegal U.S. occupation of Syrian lands and oil fields might be paired with Russian pressure on Syria to reduce its reliance on Tehran. With Washington's attempt to oust President Bashar al-Assad by starving his people through the "Caesar"

sanctions a moral atrocity and practical bust, the two governments should discuss possible cooperation to aid the Syrian people in rebuilding their nation and push the Damascus government to expand political space for the opposition.

Both governments also would like to see stability in Afghanistan. Before relations cratered Moscow provided logistical assistance for American military operations. With Washington's imminent withdrawal, conflict there will again become Russia's problem; intelligence sharing and counter-terrorism cooperation might be possible.

Finally, the two governments should seek a *modus vivendi* over security in Eastern Europe. The process should be free of the usual sanctimonious American cant against spheres of interest, which is precisely what the U.S. has demanded in the Western Hemisphere in the name of the Monroe Doctrine. The discussion should avoid another round of recriminations over recent history. Moscow has done bad to Ukraine, in particular, but the U.S. acted against Russia and Russian interests in ways that no American government would have accepted in return.

The starting point should be a discussion of a freeze on NATO expansion that could be made permanent. In return Moscow would end support for Ukrainian separatists and accept Kiev's expanded economic and political ties with the West. Ukraine also would have duties, most notably living up to the Minsk agreement by providing increased autonomy for the rebellious Donbas region. With the current conflict in its seventh year, all parties should stop letting the perfect prevent attainment of the good.

Crimea could be left in the agree-to-disagree category. The likelihood that Moscow will return the territory to Ukraine absent defeat in war is minuscule. Holding relations hostage until that unlikely day would be irresponsible. The U.S. and Europe could refuse to accept the annexation and maintain sanctions on activities there, while normalizing the overall relationship. Washington also could offer to settle Crimea's status with an internationally monitored referendum—even though the shift to Russia was illegal, the current 2.4 million residents are not property to be traded without their consent, at least if the Biden administration really believes in the democratic principles that it so ostentatiously preaches.

Obviously, the U.S.-Russia relationship is not going to be sorted out in one meeting between Biden and Putin. However, the two leaders should agree to a broad agenda for improving ties and ending what increasingly looks like a mini-Cold War.

The alternatives are bleak. The status quo looks good only in comparison to escalating hostilities. Diplomatic relations could not get much worse. Proposals to further intensify economic sanctions against Moscow are unlikely to force a Russian surrender; such a campaign more likely would result in a relationship that is genuinely dangerous as well as hostile.

Moving toward military confrontation—by including Georgia and Ukraine in NATO, for instance—is more likely to result in Russian intervention than surrender. The

former French ambassador to America, Gerard Araud, observed: “No German or American soldier will die for Kiev, but Russian soldiers would.” Direct NATO involvement would mean the possibility of war with a nuclear power, with America the only alliance member capable of responding if the worst case occurred. Such a policy would be frankly mad, since the U.S. has no substantial interests at stake in these nations worth war, especially that kind of war.

Unfortunately, Moscow faltered in its attempt to leap from totalitarian communism to democratic capitalism three decades ago. However, Washington and its allies contributed to Russia’s problems and took advantage of the Russian people as their country lay prostrate. Now America and Europe are paying the price of their arrogance and neglect.

There is hope, however. The recent meeting between Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov was positive. “There are many areas where our interests intersect and overlap, and we believe that we can work together and indeed build on those interests,” said the former.

The upcoming Biden-Putin summit could become another step back toward a more positive relationship. Getting Russia right should be a priority for the administration.

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