



Agenda for the Trump-Putin Summit

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President Donald Trump will meet Russia's Vladimir Putin next month in Helsinki, Finland. President Trump long sought this summit, and talking is better than silence. Yet, without a change in U.S. policy, it isn't clear what positives will result.

Much of Washington has fixated on the Russian president. Democrats treat the White House as Russian-occupied territory. Republicans see Putin as a leader of the global resistance to American dominance.

The president should approach the summit with a realistic assessment of Moscow's capabilities and intentions. Putin is no friend of Western-style liberalism, but then again, many U.S. allies are no less authoritarian.

There is no evidence that he bears any ideological animus toward America or Europe. Although Putin regrets the geopolitical wreckage left by the U.S.S.R.'s collapse, he has done little to recreate the Evil Empire. Retaking Crimea and gaining influence in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and the Donbass don't count for much.

A globe-spanning empire is unrealistic and unnecessary. Instead, he insists on respect for his nation's interests, expects secure borders, seeks to deter potential military threats, and desires to sit in global councils of power.

Nothing suggests plans for aggression against Europe (or America!). But the Europeans don't believe this either: even the countries squealing for U.S. troops spend barely 2 percent of GDP on their militaries, ludicrous levels if they really fear attack.

Moscow is no longer is a superpower, but it remains capable of asserting itself, as evidenced by its confrontational policy toward Georgia and Ukraine.

Yet even there the Putin government's ambitions were limited: seize control of select territories and freeze conflicts to prevent the two nations' admission to NATO. In this Putin's behavior has been ugly but effective, and no worse than that of such U.S. allies as Saudi Arabia, which is waging a brutal war against Yemen.

While many in the West deride Moscow's security fears, that perspective is easier to maintain with America's than Russia's history. Add to that Washington's widespread attempts at regime change, support for "color revolutions," and calculated mendacity concerning NATO expansion: Russian skepticism of Western intentions is understandable.

Relations, though bad, have not yet turned into another Cold War. To improve bilateral ties the two leaders should start by comparing national objectives. There are no essential conflicts. Even where the two governments appear at odds, such as over Syria and North Korea, the differences are manageable.

Indeed, Syria demonstrates how U.S. policymakers meddle around the world even when doing so is not in America's interest. A continuing Russian beachhead there does little to diminish Washington's influence: after all, the U.S. is allied with Israel, the Gulf States, Jordan, Egypt, Turkey, and just about everyone else in the region.

Presidents Trump and Putin also should explore potential areas of cooperation. Terrorism is one area. President Trump reportedly is interested in using the upcoming summit to make a deal on Syria that would allow a U.S. exit, a worthy objective.

Even more important would be working together to constrain China. The U.S. has needlessly pushed Moscow toward Beijing, reversing President Richard Nixon's geopolitical strategy. Moscow might prefer to look Westward, where its economic and territorial interests are less likely to be overwhelmed.

Washington and Moscow need to work through the issues which most sharply divide them. Since Putin is unlikely to admit to interfering with America's election, the two presidents should agree to stay out of each other's internal affairs. In fact, the U.S. is a more active meddler than Russia — Washington has intervened in at least 81 elections worldwide, including the 1996 Russian contest.

Any agreement should include a plan to fully staff the respective embassies. Even more necessary is resolving the stand-off over Ukraine. Russia won't yield Crimea, so on this issue the two governments should agree to disagree. The U.S. and Europe could formally refuse to recognize the annexation while effectively dropping the issue.

As for Ukraine and Georgia, the Western allies should trade a commitment not to enlarge NATO with an end to Russian subversion of Ukraine. Georgia and Ukraine should remain militarily neutral while left free to go either way economically. Everyone would benefit from a *modus vivendi* that ended the shooting.

The president's willingness to meet with nations at odds with America deserves praise. He need not befriend foreign leaders. However, he should communicate with them. If nothing else, the president needs to ensure that both Americans and Russians better understand each other and the issues which unite as well as divide us.

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