

Takeaways from Biden-Putin summit

by M. K. Bhadrakumar*



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(Picture pma)

On the diplomatic stage, there is nothing to beat Russian-American summits in sheer theatrics. When the leaders of the two most powerful nuclear powers on earth sit face to face, anything can happen.

What happened in 1985 is a classic example. In the shadows of *Ronald Reagan's* famous characterisation of the USSR as "Evil Empire", his summit in Geneva with Soviet leader *Mikhail Gorbachev* opened the door toward the pathway that ended the Cold War.

The Geneva summit on 16 June lived up to that tradition. Both presidents *Joe Biden* and *Vladimir Putin* agreed that it was a productive event – although relatively brief.

Putin was typically forthright at the hour-long press conference after the summit, looking quite relaxed, smiling. He took a lot of questions from American and Russian journalists. He said there was no hostility at the talks, which were in a constructive spirit.

But, Putin categorically rebuffed the US allegations on cyber attacks and human rights. On Ukraine and Belarus, the two presidents agreed to disagree. The summit's main outcome was to restart strategic dialogue and to address cyber issues.

Conceivably, Putin got enough to claim political victory back home. Moscow analysts will project that Washington has realised that it is impossible to isolate Russia, that Russia is important and in certain ways even indispensable and, therefore, the US is getting back on track on strategic stability and probably even in terms of cyber security.

Biden's 30-minute press conference (which, inexplicably, was restricted to American journalists) later confirmed that it was a positive and

constructive meeting. Biden estimated, "And now we've established a clear basis on how we intend to deal with Russia and the U.S.-Russia relationship."

But the questions and answers highlighted that Biden has a serious problem back home. The American journalists took a dismal view of Biden's newfound pragmatism regarding Russia and Putin.

Biden came under pressure to defend his overture to Putin for the summit. He has outstripped the American mainstream opinion. The press conference ended with an altercation when a journalist took a shot at Biden: "Why are you so confident he'll (Putin) change his behaviour, Mr. President?" Biden got furious: "I'm not confident he'll change his behaviour. Where the hell – what do you do all the time? When did I say I was confident?... I'm not confident of anything ..."

Does Biden have the political capital to press ahead with a project to create "stability and predictability" in US-Russia relations? Clearly, it is too early to say this summit was a success for Biden or not. Weeks and months may be needed to see how the US-Russia relationship develops. One summit in Geneva cannot transform the relationship.

The summit probably fulfilled the expectations on both sides, but the bar of expectations was intentionally kept low. The joint statement on strategic stability came as a surprise. But then it is an articulation of first principles – that a nuclear war cannot be won and therefore should never be fought.

An endpoint in strategic dialogue may not be possible even in 3-6 months, as the conversation devolves upon the core aspect of the relationship, and in the 21st century context it also involves cyber, space, conventional security issues, diplomatic infrastructure, etc.

Put simply, while Putin is in a position to signal to his government that productive work can begin, is Biden equally well placed to do so?

Make no mistake: cyber security is a very complicated topic where a thin line separates crime from terrorism. Putin will never admit any wrongdoing by the Russian state nor will he give any unilateral commitments, since Russia itself is vulnerable to cyber attack. And cyber happens to

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be a national security issue too.¹ Thus, even to get started, trust is needed — and trust is what is lacking. A bumpy road lies ahead.

Biden's motivations remain ambivalent. Three things emerge out of his press conference. First, Biden sought "to identify areas of practical work" with Russia on a broad front — apart from strategic dialogue and cyber security, Biden mentioned "humanitarian corridors" in Syria; Iran and Afghanistan where he needs Putin's "help"; cooperation in the Arctic, etc. In sum, he sought a constructive engagement.

Second, Biden hopes to strike a personal equation with Putin. In his words, "I mean, I — look, guys, I know we make foreign policy out to be this great, great skill that somehow is, sort of, like a secret code. Pract ... — all foreign policy is, is a logical extension of personal relationships. It's the way human nature functions."

Third, Biden believes he has a workable carrot-and-stick approach to Putin. In Biden's estimation, Putin is under immense pressure. Biden said: "I think that the last thing he (Putin) wants now is a Cold War. You got a multi-thousand-mile border with China. China is moving ahead, hell-bent on election, as they say, seeking to be the most powerful economy in the world and the largest and the most powerful military in the world."

"You're (Putin) in a situation where your economy is struggling, you need to move it in a more aggressive way, in terms of growing it. And you — I don't think he's looking for a Cold War with the United States ..."

"But that does not mean he's (Putin) ready to, quote, figuratively speaking, 'lay down his arms', and say, 'Come on'. He still, I believe, is concerned about being 'encircled'. He still is concerned that we (US), in fact, are looking to take him down, et cetera. He still has those concerns, but I don't think they are the driving force as to the kind of relationship he's looking for with the United States."

These stunning remarks underscore that the Biden administration's understanding of Putin's Russia is full of naïveté and is deeply flawed. Moscow and Beijing must be sensing it. Putin's extraordinary remarks about Russia-China ties during his NBC News interview on 14 June testify to it.

Putin said, "Can I be completely honest? We can see attempts at destroying the relationship between Russia and China. We can see that those attempts are being made in practical



At the end of the 19th century, Geneva became the first centre of multilateral diplomacy. Today, it is still its most active location. (Picture keystone)

policies. And your questions, too, have to do with it."

This is, perhaps, the salience of the Geneva summit. It appears that there is a serious misconception among America's foreign-policy elite as regards the resilience of the Russia-China strategic partnership.

Russia and China have congruent interest in lending support to each other to create space for the other party to push back at the US. The partnership is accommodative toward each other's core concerns and specific interests, mutually beneficial, rewarding in content.

Fundamentally, Biden inherits the legacy of the anti-*Trump* campaign of the Democratic Party (and Obama presidency), which created a contrived narrative of "Russia collusion" in 2016 to malign the former US president as a Manchurian candidate,² and thereafter undermine his presidency.

Biden is today stuck with that false narrative. He has no use for it as a roadmap to navigate the Russia policies but he can't disown it, either. This contradiction can be resolved only if the US' relations with Russia is treated as a foreign policy issue and not as a template of domestic politics. But Biden is too weak a president to charter such a profound course correction, his impeccable hawkish credentials notwithstanding.

Source: <https://www.indianpunchline.com/takeaways-from-biden-putin-summit/> 17 June 2021

¹ Editor's note: In the press conference, Vladimir Putin pointed out that Russia had received about 10 requests from the US government regarding cyber attacks from Russia. These had all been answered in full. Conversely, Russia had made 40 requests to the US and not a single one had been answered...

² Editor's note: "The Manchurian Candidate" is the title of a 1962 political thriller (remade in 2004) about a double agent and the planned elimination of an American president.