

# Maintaining the spirit of dialogue

## Putin-Biden summit in Geneva

by Guy Mettan,\* independent journalist, Geneva



Photo: Andriko Vasiliev  
Guy Mettan (Picture pma)

36 years ago, on 19 November 1985, Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev met in Geneva for a summit that made Cold War history. I remember it like it

was yesterday: it was my 29th birthday and I have kept my badge as an accredited journalist to this day.

But it was not the first summit of its kind in Geneva. Thirty years earlier, in 1955, the “Big Four” [USA, GB, F, USSR] – Eisenhower, Anthony Eden, Edgar Faure on one side, Bulganin, Khrushchev, Molotov and Zhukov on the other – met in the Ariana Gardens to discuss peace and security after the first Soviet atomic bombs had been detonated. The meeting caused a great stir. I was not born, but the shadow of that summit hung over me during the 22 years I spent at the *Swiss Press Club* in the same room that then served as Bulganin's bedroom.

Both meetings took place in Geneva, thanks largely to the Russians, who have always preferred neutral Switzerland to New York or another NATO member state as a venue for international negotiations. The same applies to the Putin-Biden summit. We should remember this when we reproach Russia for everything possible and impossible.

International Geneva is thus the fruit of a long history that permeates its walls and buildings and continues to influence the decisions of the present. It is therefore important to keep this spirit of dialogue alive and to cultivate a multilateralism that is real and not just a façade. We cannot limit ourselves to hosting a summit for a

few days and then submissively bowing again to the dominant power at the time.

### Multilateralism is an active state of mind

Multilateralism is first and foremost an active mind set. This consists of empathy and an understanding that must be maintained and developed at all times towards all and especially towards the supposedly evil and weak in the international hierarchy: the Russians and the Chinese, of course, but also the North Koreans, the Iranians, the Syrians, the Venezuelans, the Cubans, the Africans and all those whom the West condemns.

This is far from being the case. When our air force trains with NATO in Norway and Portugal, when our intelligence services unabashedly adopt the reports of their British and American counterparts, are we sure that we respect the neutrality and multilateralism that have ensured our successes to this day? When our press condemns Belarus for diverting a plane to arrest a dissident without recalling that this act of qualified air piracy was preceded by similar crimes committed by the US and European countries (such as France in 1956 with the hijacking of *Ben Bella's* plane, followed by his assassination) without eliciting the slightest criticism, are we sure that we always do the right thing and embody the “spirit of Geneva”?

I mention this incident because it is topical and sums up our hypocrisies and double standards in international politics and our inability to think of truly inclusive multilateralism. For the last decade or so, and the capitulation to American pressure on banking secrecy, we have tended to swear our allegiance to the Western powers, the US and Europe, without understanding that the world has become truly multipolar and that a country that wants to pursue a policy of good offices should take this into account.

### Dual measures

Why is there outrage at *Lukashenko's* behaviour (rightly so, I would note) but no protest when in 2013 France, Spain and the UK, under pressure

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from the US, forced President *Evo Morales'* presidential plane to land in Vienna because they believed *Edward Snowden* was on board? This was an act of piracy directed not only against a civilian aircraft, but against an official aircraft that is considered as sacrosanct as an embassy under international law. Why was there no outrage when in 2016 a Belarusian plane was diverted from Ukraine and forced to land in Kiev because they wanted to arrest an anti-Maidan dissident?

Why did we not protest when a Syrian passenger plane was hijacked over Ankara in 2012? And finally, why are we still silent about the fact that *Alex Saab* – a Venezuelan diplomat traveling on a commercial plane – was arrested in Cape Verde in 2020 on the false pretext of money laundering, even though Switzerland confirmed on 25 March 2021 that it had nothing on him? His African lawyers are fighting for his release. A court has even ordered his release. But

nothing is being done. National and international law continues to be violated because of an act of air piracy. But not a word about it in our newspapers or from the mouths of European diplomats.

### **The true spirit of multilateralism**

The true spirit of multilateralism, both for the authorities and the media, is to be impartial and empathetic first and try to understand all parties before judging. It is also judged by the small acts of international life and not just by holding big summits.

May the meeting between Putin and Biden serve as a lever to rethink our relationship with the world and broaden our perspective. This is the price that must be paid if international Geneva is, once again, to become the great multilateral meeting place it was in the 20th century. (*Translation "Swiss Standpoint"*)