



Four Priorities For The Biden-Putin Summit

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Next week, President Joe Biden will meet with Vladimir Putin in Geneva for his first head-of-state summit with the Russian leader. The June 16th meeting promises to be a high-stakes affair. Despite his earlier rhetoric, President Biden has signaled that he is eager to use the occasion to improve the U.S.-Russia relationship, which has become increasingly adversarial in recent years.

But precisely how he might do that remains to be seen. The administration has already sent some rather pointed signals to the Kremlin regarding its political flexibility. It carefully calibrated its response to last year's massive SolarWinds hack in order to ensure a "proportionate" response, but has so far failed to respond meaningfully to last month's disruption of the Colonial pipeline. And, despite congressional protests, the White House rolled back sanctions on the controversial Nord Stream 2 natural gas pipeline as a confidence-building measure. In the process, it fanned fears that the mid-June meeting might result in a further diminution of America's global position, without receiving much from Moscow in return.

Whether that happens, however, will largely depend on the stance Biden takes on four key issues.

The first is disinformation. A great deal has been made in recent years of Russia's systematic efforts to interfere in U.S. politics. Yet little of substance has been done in response, despite a growing mountain of evidence that Russia is determined to undermine democratic institutions and processes in the West. While private companies (like social media giant Facebook) have taken it upon themselves to eliminate Russian-generated "fake news" and political agitation, in the absence of a serious official strategy to counter Russia in the information domain, these efforts remain imperfect and reactive. The Switzerland summit, then, is a good occasion to put Putin on notice that America is committed to developing a serious response—and that it is willing to impose concrete costs (in the form of additional sanctions, removal of Russia from the SWIFT banking network or the blacklisting of Russian media outlets) if the Kremlin continues its subversive activities.

Second, and related, is the question of media freedom. In recent weeks, the Kremlin has intensified pressure on a key U.S. news broadcaster as part of its attempts to stifle Russia's already ailing domestic media sphere. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, which played a critical role in bringing information to populations behind the Iron Curtain during the Soviet era, is being sued by the Russian government for some \$2.4 million for allegedly failing to register as a "foreign agent."

The confrontation carries high stakes. In the best-case scenario, a "foreign agent" label would reduce RFE/RL's appeal and credibility, and make it beholden to the Russian state for its continued functioning. In the worst case, its physical presence will be ousted from Russia altogether, and a credible, objective source of information will be stifled. To prevent that from happening, Biden needs to make media freedom a major issue in his dialogue with Putin. He can do so by signaling that his administration is prepared to invest significant money and technology to ensure that RFE/RL and other independent outlets can continue reporting on issues that Russian state media simply won't, from aggression against Ukraine to rampant official corruption.

Third, America desperately needs a cogent response to Russian cyberwarfare. While destabilizing behavior in cyberspace by Russian-origin actors is hardly new, recent months have seen a marked uptick in its scope and frequency, with devastating consequences. Tepid U.S. reactions, however, have given the Kremlin the impression that it can continue to carry out (or indirectly encourage) such attacks without incurring a serious response. It is therefore imperative for the administration to convince Moscow that future cyberattacks will result in meaningful retaliatory measures, from additional economic sanctions to direct "hackback" campaigns, the costs of which will far outweigh any possible benefits of abetting cyber mischief against the U.S.

Finally, the United States maintains a clear interest in the state of human rights and political freedoms in Russia. This arena is under growing threat, as the Kremlin clamps down ever more forcefully on social discontent caused by economic stagnation and a more generalized failure to thrive. More and more Russians are becoming aware that their country is underperforming—and that the long-serving Russian leader's persistent foreign adventurism and aggressive international behavior have turned Moscow into an international pariah.

All of this matters as Russia heads into legislative elections this fall, which helps explain the Kremlin's urgent efforts to intimidate its domestic opponents and stack the political deck in its favor. The U.S. and its Western allies, for their part, have a vested interest in preserving free political space within Russia. Biden needs to communicate clearly that, just like during the Cold War, America is committed to preserving political freedom and the potential for change inside the country, both by engaging activists and dissidents and by penalizing Moscow's attempts to silence them.

Underlying all of these problems is a larger one—Russia and the United States are drifting further and further apart. In the not-too-distant past, despite major disagreements on a range of strategic issues, the two countries could still find issues on which they could cooperate, at least tactically. Over time, however, these areas of convergence (including space launches and counterterrorism) have dried up. What remains is an overwhelmingly negative foreign policy agenda. The United States today knows what it doesn't like about Russia, but doesn't have a clear idea of how to nudge Moscow's behavior in a more constructive direction.

Reversing that trend begins by telling Putin precisely what issues the United States sees as critical to its core national interests—and then making it clear that we are both willing and able to fight for them. Whether Biden does so will go a long way toward determining whether the Geneva meeting can be classified as a success.