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Trump and Putin meeting in Helsinki: questions for the world and Eastern Europe, recommendations for Belarus

Yauheni Preiherman

Summary

The Russian-American summit in Helsinki raised more questions than it gave answers. It will be possible to judge its real results and the prospects for the implementation of the agreements reached only after some time, especially after the mid-term elections in the United States. For security in Eastern Europe, the summit is still a missed opportunity. Belarus is the main Eastern European stakeholder of inclusive security and therefore is objectively interested in lowering the degree of tension between Russia and the United States. With any course of developments, Minsk should continue its own search for possible points of contact and formats for coordinating the interests of global and regional players. Emphasis should be placed on building active cooperation within a network of neutral European states and those aspiring to (situational) neutrality. It is also important to continue the formation of a system of bilateral agreements on cooperation in the military sphere, which contributes to increased transparency and trust.

Contents

1 Metting better than silent treatment?
2 Much ado about what?
3 What does this unique “two-level game” mean for the rest of the world?
4 What are the implications of the summit for Eastern Europe?
5 Recommendations for Belarus

“The most important international event of the summer” took place in the capital of Finland, as it was described by the Russian presidential aide Yury Ushakov. Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin held their first bilateral meeting in Helsinki. Prior to that, they met twice on the margins of international events and spoke over the phone eight times.

Judging by the presence of the topic of the summit in the world media, then it really was an extraordinary event. However, its results being difficult to analyze, they are ambiguous and somewhat unexpected. After the meeting, there were many more questions than before.

Metting better than silent treatment?

The very fact of the Russian-American summit meeting caused bewilderment and condemnation among many (especially in the USA and the EU). According to critics, both the timing and the format of the summit were inappropriate and sent a lot of wrong signals: both to Russia itself, and to the allies of the United States and the entire world community. Some commentators considered the meeting to be dangerous and spoke (not for the first time) about a possible "major deal" between Putin and Trump akin to the Yalta agreements of 1945.

At the same time, another opinion was widely presented in the diplomatic and expert circles: in the conditions of growing confrontation between Russia and the West and the growing likelihood of a direct military clash, political contacts between Moscow and Washington are important and very necessary. Moreover, not only for them, the two largest nuclear powers, but to the whole world. Especially considering the fact that the system of treaties, which for the past few decades has provided strategic stability and an acceptable level of security, is actually collapsing as we speak.

In particular, since 2002, such an important element of the previously existing system as the Treaty on the Limitation of Anti-Ballistic Missile Systems (ABM) has not worked. The Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) does not work either, and its adapted version has not entered into force. Moscow and Washington accuse each other of violations of the Treaty on the Elimination of Short- and Intermediate-Range Missiles (SIRM). One can hardly be considered the Vienna document on confidence- and security-building measures to be an operational instrument, and the attempts made so far to restart it through a structured dialogue within the OSCE have not yet yielded results. As a result, the prospect of an armed conflict as a result of unintentional incidents seems less and less unrealistic. And any military maneuvers on the European continent cause unprecedented speculation and increase tension.

The Treaty between the Russian Federation and the United States on measures to further reduce and limit strategic offensive arms (START-3), which entered into force in 2011, is still in force. However, it will expire in 2021. And only Russian-American dialogue can extend the agreement. Otherwise this cornerstone of strategic security will also go into oblivion.

All of this is aggravated by the numerous new-generation challenges, facing which requires harmonized action and additional agreements. So, for example, one of the issues in the dispute between Washington and Moscow on SIRM concerns the use of drones, which was not governed by the old agreements. A lot of questions are related to cyberspace and terrorism, including the increasingly real prospect of weapons of mass destruction falling into the hands of terrorist groups. Finally, the entire system of international relations is changing before our eyes, becoming less linear and more and more multidimensional. Which means - less understandable for politicians.

In such a situation, the worst that can be is the lack of direct contact and dialogue between the leading world powers. Therefore, it is not surprising that, despite concerns expressed, the idea of a bilateral summit meeting between Putin and Trump was publicly supported by many European leaders, such as Emmanuel Macron and Angela Merkel.

It cannot be said that any summit is better than no summit. Many recall the famous meeting of Kennedy and Khrushchev in Vienna in 1961, which seemed positive, but after a few years the Berlin and Caribbean crises brought the world to the brink of a new world war. However, this historical episode can hardly be an argument against holding Russian-American summits in our time. Rather, it is a reminder s that summits are only a small element of the necessary systematic work at all levels of diplomacy.

In this sense, the meeting in Helsinki also looked somewhat non-conventional. Typically, summits of heads of state become the final stage, turning expert developments into political agreements at the highest level. A summit without proper elaboration is an unorthodox phenomenon, although not something unique. But the situation in relations between Moscow and Washington today is also not exactly typical. Not even in the sense that, as Trump tweeted, “the relationship has NEVER been so bad.” But in terms of them being as unsettled and uncertain as they have not been for a very long time.

Much ado about what?

On the eve of the summit, there was no shortage of speculation about everything related to it in one way or another. Starting from the venue - initially there was information that the meeting would be hosted by Vienna - and ending with the agenda and prospects for reaching agreements.

However, on the eve of the meeting, Moscow and Washington stated that there would be no detailed agenda and that the presidents would discuss the whole range of issues of concern to them. That is, there were no high expectations about the possibility of a breakthrough during the negotiations. Trump confirmed as much in an interview on the eve of a trip to Helsinki. Moreover, even before the start of the summit, it was reported that the parties would not make a single statement following the talks. Although Russia, during the preparatory visit of the American delegation to Moscow led by Trump's national security adviser John Bolton, handed over a draft joint communiqué.

That is, both sides approached the meeting not being overly ambitious. They saw it as an opportunity to start a difficult dialogue and thereby stop the uncontrolled escalation of relations against the background of many common problems.

The main component of the summit is one-on-one talks with only interpretes attending. Instead of the planned one and a half hours, they lasted 2 hours and 10 minutes. At the same time, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo spoke separately. After that negotiations in an expanded format were held for another for 1 hour and 40 minutes.

What was discussed during the various components of the meeting is known only approximately: the presidents outlined some topics before the start of negotiations and then specified them a little further during the final press conference. Some additional details started emerging after the return of delegations to their capital cities. At the same time, the parties expressed satisfaction with the meeting. And Sergey Lavrov even stated, that it was "better than super."

There were probably no major agreements reached in Helsinki. In a situation where the summit is designed to stop the spiral of escalation and launch communication channels, this is quite expected. Even if meaningful (and not just formal) arrangements were made, in any case they will require additional analysis. The formal agreements include the following:

1. the creation of a high-level group with the participation of "business captains" to work out economic problems;
2. forming a council from among former high-ranking diplomats and military officers, as well as prominent political scientists to find points of contact on a wide range of issues;
3. launch of consultation mechanism between Security Councils of both countries.

The Russian side, according to Putin, handed over a note with proposals on issues of strategic stability, arms control, including ways to prevent an arms race in space. They also spoke about the problems of non-proliferation of nuclear weapons (including in the context of North Korean problems), terrorism, and cyber security. The American side also declared a discussion of Chinese topics ("let's talk about our mutual friend President Xi").

Even before the summit, there were two special themes:

*Syria:*here Moscow and Washington have potentially the most of overlapping interests, which is why, according to Putin, Syria could be the first example of successful cooperation. The one specifics result was the parties' agreement to focus on the 1974 agreement on the troops in the Golan Heights. This, however, does not fully satisfy Israel, whose leadership has shown increased diplomatic activity before and after the Helsinki summit. And it is unlikely that such a discussion can satisfy Iran.

*Ukraine:*Before the summit, some commentators already habitually expressed concerns about a possible deal on Ukraine, as a result of which Trump would recognize the actual zone of influence of Russia in Eastern Europe. According to Bloomberg, Putin eventually conveyed to his American counterpart proposals for holding a referendum in Donbass to resolve the crisis that lasted four years. The White House has already announced, that it does not accept these offers. Also, the Russian president told reporters that the problems of transit of Russian gas through the pipeline system of Ukraine were discussed. Moscow declares its readiness to continue this transit after the expiration of the contract in 2019, if the dispute between Gazprom and the Ukrainian Naftogaz is settled in the Stockholm Arbitration Court.

This is what is known today about the content of the Helsinki negotiations. When summarizing them, the parties looked consonant on a few more general points:

- Russian-American relations have never been worse, but the summit allowed reversing the negative trend;
- Helsinki was only the beginning of the process of normalizing relations;
- Summits should continue (information has already appeared in the media that Trump invited Putin to visit Washington this fall).

Perhaps, this could have put an end to it had it not been for the joint press conference of Putin and Trump after the talks. As a result, it became not so much a channel for receiving information on the content of the negotiations, but rather an event of its own.

The Presidents 'answers to journalists' questions carry minimal information about the content of the talks, but very clearly reveal the current specifics of Russian-American relations.

Moreover, it was the last 30 minutes of the press conference, when journalists got the opportunity to ask questions, and made almost all the headlines for the world and especially the American media. Rather, the US president made them with his answers that yielded a backlash even from many loyal representatives of the Republican Party. According to some experts, these 30 minutes tarnished an otherwise important and timely summit.

What does this unique “two-level game” mean for the rest of the world?

Thus, in Helsinki, an attempt was made to stop the escalation in Russian-American relations and to restore official dialogue. But whether this initiative will receive a full continuation is a big question. And not so much because of the poor state of bilateral relations and the complexity of the issues on the agenda, but because of another dimension of relations between Washington and Moscow.

The influence of the internal political dimension on foreign policy has long been well described in the theory of international relations. The "Two-level game" inevitably in one way or another affects the content and form of any interstate negotiations. However, what we see today in Russian-American relations is still somewhat unusual.

The topic of the alleged Russian intervention in the US presidential election in 2016 was the key to the bitter domestic political struggle in Washington. Suspicions about the Trump team colluding with Russia during the election campaign do not allow the current US administration to carry out full-fledged diplomatic work along the Russian avenue. All its actions and words are scrutinized by the media and representatives of the Democratic Party.

As expected, the same alleged intervention became theme for the joint press conference in Helsinki. On the eve of the summit, Special Prosecutor Robert Muller filed charges against 12 employees of the Russian GRU, who, he claims, are directly responsible for the intervention. Journalists were especially interested in whether this topic was discussed and in what tone, whether Russia has compromising materials on Trump, whether the Kremlin is going to continue to interfere in the internal political processes in the United States.

As a result, the presidents were forced to make more excuses than to talk about possible solutions to numerous bilateral and multilateral problems. Their statements gave Trump's political opponents new grounds for accusations. Especially vague answer of the US President to the question of who he believes more: his own special services or the Russian president. In Helsinki, Trump said that "he sees no reason why Russia would interfere." But when he returned to Washington, he stated that it was a slip of the tongue and he actually «he sees no reason why Russia would not interfere».

As a result, as noted by some analysts, another conflict wave on the subject of Russia's alleged interference in the course of the presidential elections in the United States further complicated the situation for both the White House and the Kremlin. And this means — for the prospects for a bilateral dialogue on topics important for the entire international community.

However, one probably shouldn't dramatize. Although, the criticism of Trump's actions in Helsinki, even from many Republican party members who are usually loyal to the president, as well as Trump's “rewinding” statements for several days after the summit are not the best indicators for the prospects for normalizing US-Russian relations. In the Congress, Trump's Helsinki statements can only stimulate the desire to further limit the president’s ability to maneuver in relations with Russia (Senator Marco Rubio has already put forward such an initiative). As it happened last summer, when the Act on Counteracting America’s Adversaries through Sanctions was adopted. As a result, the White House today, even if it so desires, cannot independently decide on the lifting of sanctions, which severely narrows the diplomatic capabilities of the executive power.

If events develop according to this scenario, then not only Trump will lose, but also Russia. Moscow needs not just symbolic victories in the form of a past summit, which formally brought it out of international isolation. It needs real interaction with the United States on a variety of issues. But even such seemingly “easy” arrangements, such as the creation of a high-level group on economic relations or an expert council, can be fully implemented only if businessmen, experts and even former officials are not be afraid to put their careers, reputation and business interests in dependence on the internal political struggle.

In many ways, the midterm elections will determine the prospects for improving Russian-American relations, as well as the implementation of the agreements reached in Helsinki. They will be held in the US in November and will show how popular Republicans are under President Trump. Since the Russian theme is at the center of the political struggle, the election results will also be an indirect indicator of the voters acceptance of the White House’s policy on improving relations with Moscow. And the

remaining months will show whether there will be an American double foreign policy even in the ranks of the Republican Party. Although some experts believe, that such duality already exists in practice and is clearly manifested in Helsinki.

What are the implications of the summit for Eastern Europe?

The summit in Helsinki was of particular importance for security in Eastern Europe. It is here, in a geographically relatively small region, that almost the entire tangle of contradictions between Russia and the West is concentrated. The region is located at the junction of military-political blocs and, in the language of Samuel Huntington, civilizations. Therefore, as tensions in Moscow and Washington grow, the situation in Eastern Europe will inevitably escalate.

The general security formula in Eastern Europe today can be formulated something like this: the more constructive Russia's relations with the West (US) are, the calmer and more predictable is the situation in Eastern Europe.

This formula applies to all small states in the region. However, each of them sees different ways to strengthen their own security. This is connected not only with assessments and value systems of specific politicians, but also with objective factors: history, demographic and social characteristics, institutional affiliation, etc. Therefore, with the deterioration of the regional situation, these states begin to actively take often multidirectional actions.

So, the Baltic countries, Poland and Ukraine are trying to “go bull” in order to raise political attention and the level of support from the Western allies. And, for example, Belarus, on the contrary, seeks to contribute to the de-escalation of the confrontation between Russia and the West, so as not to be directly involved in it. Accordingly, the expectations from the summit in Helsinki were different for different Eastern European states.

If we proceed from the proposed general security formula in Eastern Europe, the positive result of the summit for the region would be to reach an agreement on halting the spiral of escalation, developing confidence-building measures and transparency in the military sphere, as well as launching permanent communication channels and dialogue on strategic stability. At the same time it was important that no decisions were taken behind the backs and without taking into account the basic interests of the small countries of the region.

It is difficult to say whether the meeting in Helsinki will ultimately satisfy these security needs of Eastern Europe. Firstly, we do not know exactly what exactly was discussed at the Putin-Trump meeting in a one-to-one format. Secondly, as already noted, it will become clear only in a few months if Moscow and Washington will be able to implement even the publicly announced "light" agreements.

So far, in terms of security in Eastern Europe, the Helsinki Summit looks more like a missed opportunity. By the way, this is how Henry Kissinger put it. The main problem is that, following the results of the Helsinki meeting, there is no clear understanding in which direction the relations between Russia and the USA will develop. And what framework of possible this relationship will set for the region of Eastern Europe. On the contrary, because of the next wave of domestic political struggle around the "Russian dossier" in the United States, relations are becoming even less predictable. This automatically stimulates the bullish Eastern European and other countries to try to expand their own field of action. There is a growing temptation for all sorts of trial balloons and loud political statements that undermine the idea of regional confidence-building measures.

Recommendations for Belarus

Belarus is objectively interested in reducing the degree of tension between Russia and the United States and in establishing a constructive dialogue about the future of the European security system. One could even say that Belarus ***is the main Eastern European stakeholder in inclusive security***. Therefore, the following recommendations could help Minsk promote its interests:

1. No matter how relations between Moscow and Washington develop after the Helsinki meeting, ***Belarus should continue its own search for possible points of contact and formats for coordinating the interests of global and regional players***.
2. ***Priority attention should be paid to the practical development of topics identified at the Helsinki summit,*** including: ensuring cybersecurity, countering terrorism, arms control, reanimation of confidence and security measures (especially in the regional context).
3. Belarus will not be able to do it by itself - therefore, it needs to look for ways to strengthen its position and capabilities through cooperation with other states. Due to the difference in security approaches with the majority of Eastern European countries, any regional/subregional grouping of like-minded states is not possible. ***Therefore, the focus should be on building active cooperation within a network of neutral European states and those aspiring to (situational) neutrality***.

As a result, each of them may occupy its own regional/subregional niche, while mutually reinforcing a common position. For Minsk, ***a natural niche would be the function of a neutral platform for the Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus***. Belarus is the only state in this area that does not have territorial conflicts and maintains an acceptable level of relations with all regional and non-regional actors.

4. This function of Belarus should include ***not only the provision of "good offices"***(that is, the role of the negotiation platform) to resolve regional conflicts, but also proactive diplomatic work aimed at a) reducing friction in bilateral relations with neighbors and key extra-regional actors and b) enhancing military-political transparency and confidence-building measures in the region. One of the tools to achieve both objectives is bilateral agreements on cooperation in the military sphere. Minsk already has such agreements with many states - gradually they could be substantiated with deeper cooperation.

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Yauheni Preiherman
Head, Minsk Dialogue Track-II Initiative