



US-RUSSIA SUMMIT 2021: REVIVING THE ENTENTE

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



Russian President Vladimir Putin and US President Joe Biden met for a bilateral summit in Geneva on June 16, 2021.¹ The high stake summit came at a time when relations between the Cold War rivals are at an all-time low. Expectations of a heated discussion by many experts notwithstanding, the atmosphere of the meeting between the two heads of state remained positive. The selected venue for the first meeting between the two presidents too was symbolic - the 18th century Swiss villa in Geneva that had been the venue of the Cold War summit in 1985 between US President Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev.

The mood of the meeting offered measured assessments with lesser rhetoric on issues that have been a bone of contention between Russia and the US like the latter's accusations of cyber hacks, annexation of Crimea, and human rights violations. While no breakthrough came out of the summit, the meeting ended with good atmospherics with an agreement to reinstate Russian and American ambassadors to each other capital who were called back amid rising tensions between the two

¹ Holly Ellyatt, "Biden and Putin conclude high-stakes diplomacy at Geneva Summit", *CNBC*, published on June 16, 2021. <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/06/16/putin-biden-summit-in-geneva-2021.html>

countries earlier this year.² The US agenda of the meeting was dominated by three priority areas that will work as a framework for Russia-US relations and its future:³

- Identify areas of practical work to advance mutual interests,
- US direct response to actions that hamper its vital interest and of its allies, and
- To identify its priorities and values

Key Takeaways:

The positivity was also evident in the statement issued by the White House stating that even in periods of tension, US and Russia have been able to make progress on shared goals of ensuring predictability in the strategic sphere, reducing the risk of armed conflicts and the threat of nuclear war. Leaders of the two countries met with their top diplomats at their sides including Anthony Blinken, US Secretary of State and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, and senior officials from both the capitals. Following the talks, both the leaders decided to hold separate press conferences. During his press conference, President Biden assured that the US agenda is not against Russia or anyone else and accentuated on issues of cooperation on areas of interest including setting up mechanisms:⁴

- To discuss and raise the issue of strategic stability.
- Arms control measures.
- To reduce the risk of unintended conflict.
- To control new, dangerous and sophisticated weapons.
- Preventive mechanisms against the resurgence of terrorism in Afghanistan.
- Launch a bilateral strategic stability dialogue.
- Work on areas dealing with cyber-security and critical infrastructure.
- Preserve and reopen the humanitarian corridors in Syria.

² Gaouette, et. al., "Russia sanctions eight US officials and expels diplomats in retaliation for Biden's actions", *CNN*, published on April 16, 2021. <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/04/16/politics/russia-retaliate-us-diplomats/index.html>

³ Remarks by President Biden in Press Conference, White House, June 16, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/06/16/remarks-by-president-biden-in-press-conference-4/>

⁴ Remarks by President Biden in Press Conference, White House, June 16, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/06/16/remarks-by-president-biden-in-press-conference-4/>

- Assurances regarding Iran's nuclear program.
- Designating the Arctic as a free zone.

Normalization of relations between the US and Russia have been a high priority agenda of the Biden administration as both have embarked upon pursuing an integrated bilateral Strategic Stability Dialogue shortly to lay the groundwork for future arms control and risk reduction measures collectively. Earlier in May, the US National Security Advisor (NSA) Jake Sullivan and the Secretary of the Russian Security Council Nikolay Patrushev held consultations on issues of mutual interest with a specific focus on the issue of strategic stability.⁵

The Geneva summit that lasted roughly three hours was publicized as constructive as neither of the two sides made negative remarks. Successive US presidents have struggled to formulate a workable policy of relations with Moscow. Russia, which was earlier considered as a regional power by the Obama administration is now seen at an equal footing and considered a top threat as well as a revisionist power according to latest US National Security documents.⁶

Moscow on the other hand reciprocated the same kind of attitude and careful optimism regarding the Geneva summit. Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Segey Ryabkov called the summit, "a new start, a new beginning"⁷, but on the question regarding whether there'll be any upward movement, Ryabkov stated, "the question remains open".

Statements by the Russian leadership and officials emanate a sense of positivity regarding the Geneva summit but they don't seem to be overly enthusiastic. The Russians are taking their approach vis-a-vis the US slow, as they are expecting "emergence of constructiveness"⁸ in US-Russia bilateral relations in the coming months after prolonged neglect.

According to Anatoly Antonov, the Russian ambassador to the US, the Geneva summit will lead to the stabilization of bilateral ties between Moscow and Washington.⁹ Furthermore, as a follow-up to the summit, Russia has sent some proposals to the US regarding the agreements and understandings

⁵ "Joint Statement on National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan's Meeting with Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolay Patrushev," White House, May 24, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/05/24/joint-statement-on-national-security-advisor-jake-sullivans-meeting-with-russian-security-council-secretary-nikolay-patrushev/>

⁶ "National Security Strategy," December 2017, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>

⁷ "Desire to look for ways out of deadlocks prevailed at summit in Geneva - top diplomat", TASS, published on June 18, 2021. <https://tass.com/politics/1304265>

⁸ "Too early to speak about a thaw in Russia-US relations, says Kremlin spokesman", TASS, published on June 30, 2021. <https://tass.com/politics/1308485>

⁹ "Russia sends to US proposals as a follow-up to agreements at Geneva summit – envoy", TASS, published on June 22, 2021. <https://tass.com/politics/1305545>

reached by the heads of states. Ambassador Anatoly also notified that several US organizations have also been approached in order to arrange meetings and consultations to work matters out at the expert level between the two countries.

In congruity to its general approach to bilateral relations, Russia has devised a systematic and categorical approach to resolving bilateral issues with the US. As stated by President of Russia Vladimir Putin during his post-summit press conference, both states need to and could agree on 'rules of behavior' in important fields such as strategic stability, cyber-security and regional conflicts.

Given the current condition of bilateral relations, unlike the recent past, Russia and US policy seem to be grounded in pragmatism and caution towards each other. Both sides are exercising extreme prudence in words as well as actions. They don't want to come off as too eager and risk losing their positions. The US has stated that it is ready to cooperate with Russia on matters of mutual concern but will respond in kind to any and all "aggressive actions" by the Kremlin.¹⁰

Moscow on the other hand has also made it clear that currently, it has no reason to remove the US from the list of unfriendly countries¹¹ and that it is waiting on Washington to respond to Russian overtures (post-summit) as many a times understandings reached at the highest level between Russia and the US often remain unfulfilled due to inaction.

Interdepartmental consultations' dates for the dialogue on strategic stability and arms control are still unknown, while the Russian side is still waiting on the US side to confirm.¹²

Although President Putin did support President Biden's offer to resolve existing issues on a 'mutually acceptable basis', Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on the other hand stated that the US will have to address Russia's concerns and demands as his country will not permit the US "one-way street" approach¹³ in its relations with the latter.

Currently, both the countries are following a gradual approach, progress of which will depend upon the development and implementation on issues of mutual concern identified by President Biden.

Overall, the Geneva summit can be termed as a success because it achieved its main objective, i.e. "restoration of communication channels" between Moscow and Washington that were almost

¹⁰ Jason Lemon, "U.S. 'Will Respond Forcefully' if Russia Continues 'Reckless and Aggressive Actions': Antony Blinken", *Newsweek*, published on June 13, 2021. <https://www.newsweek.com/us-will-respond-forcefully-if-russia-continues-reckless-aggressive-actions-antony-blinken-1600157>

¹¹ "Russia so far has no reason to take US off its 'unfriendly' country list – Kremlin", *TASS*, published on June 21, 2021. <https://tass.com/politics/1305251>

¹² "Dates of Russia-US consultations on strategic stability are still unknown – Kremlin", *TASS*, published on June 18, 2021. <https://tass.com/politics/1304487>

¹³ "Russian-US relations 'not a one-way street,' says Lavrov", *TASS*, published on June 18, 2021. <https://tass.com/politics/1304581>

destroyed in the recent past. The return of ambassadors to capitals, communication between foreign policy agencies, Presidential aides and ultimately the heads of states are positive and encouraging signs.

It is extremely necessary that a system of dialogue between the two biggest nuclear and military powers in the world be maintained and further built upon in the coming days with the genuine political will to work together on both sides. Concrete steps and meaningful consultations and dialogues must continue between Russia and the US as a stable and predictable relationship between the two countries will be highly beneficial not only for the two states but for the security and stability of the entire world.

Implications:

The Biden-Putin summit has strengthened the atmosphere of predictability throughout the globe. The summit has signaled the readiness of the two global powers to work on several issues that have larger implications on all the continents around the globe. While the future course of interactions and follow-up discussions remain unclear, the agreed number of mechanisms as reiterated above does present a light of hope and predictability.

The same wave of predictability was echoed in South Asia as it has reduced the risk of instability as the US actively withdraws from Afghanistan. While the summit did not promise any magic reset button in US-Russia relations, the ice-breaking did encourage an atmosphere of strategic stability. Both the leaders agreed to develop mechanisms to address issues affecting the world including a mechanism to address the resurgence of Taliban in Afghanistan; a pivotal instrument of concern for Pakistan. Pakistan has been at the forefront of peace negotiations between the US and Taliban and reassurance of workable relations between two Cold War rivals who have locked horns previously in Afghanistan comes as a sigh of relief. Furthermore, the summit also bears a lesson for Pakistan and India to initiate a mechanism where despite several points of friction and tension, both countries can emphasize the necessity to move ahead on positive terms.