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Biden Summit Offer Hailed in Moscow as Win for Putin

By Michael Mainville for AFP

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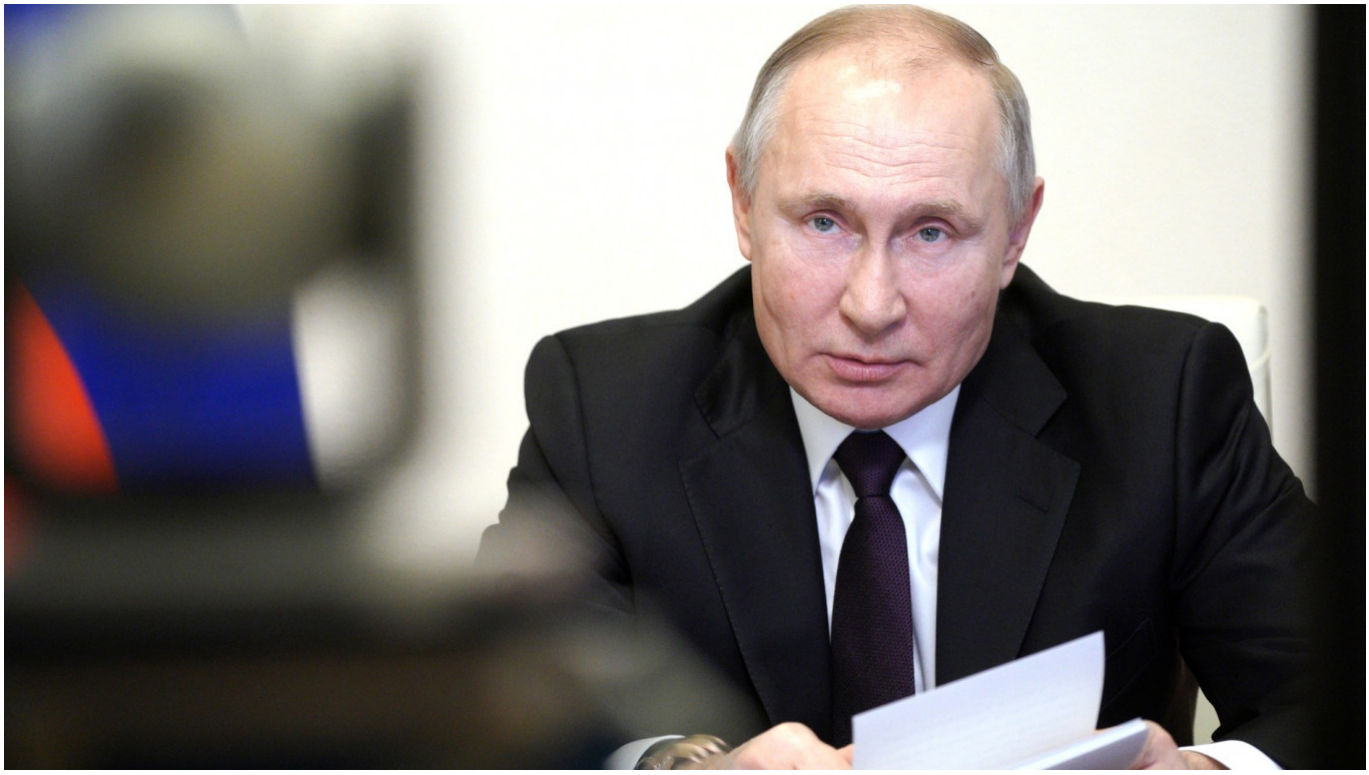

Russia has recalled its U.S. ambassador to Moscow last month following Biden's televised remarks calling his Russian counterpart a "killer." **Kremlin.ru**

US President Joe Biden's invitation to Vladimir Putin to hold a summit was being hailed in Moscow Wednesday as a sign that Washington had blinked first in the showdown with Russia over Ukraine.

With indications that work is already under way for a potential meeting in Finland, Russian officials were crowing that Moscow is finally being treated with the respect it deserves.

"It was a very important step forward... news on a global scale," said Konstantin Kosachev, chairman of the foreign affairs committee of the Russian parliament's upper house.

Biden offered to hold the summit on neutral ground, during a call with Putin on Tuesday, as tensions between Russia and the West spike over Ukraine.

A Russian troop build-up on the border with Ukraine — where Kiev's forces have been battling pro-Russian separatists since 2014 — has sparked widespread alarm and warnings from NATO.

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Biden and German Chancellor Angela Merkel agreed in a phone call Wednesday to call on Russia to reduce the number of troops on the border, saying it would help bring a "de-escalation" of the tensions.

Speaking to Putin a day earlier, Biden reiterated U.S. support for Kiev's pro-Western government but also offered to hold his first face-to-face talks with Putin on "the full range of issues facing the United States and Russia."

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Wednesday that the offer would be "studied," but Putin spoke quickly on Tuesday night with Finland's President Sauli Niinisto, who said in a statement that the two had discussed the call with Biden and "the planned meeting of the two presidents."

Finland hosted the last summit between Russian and U.S. leaders in 2018, when Putin met with then-president Donald Trump.

Former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev set the tone in his reaction to news of the talks, comparing the summit to his meetings with Ronald Reagan in Geneva and Reykjavik in the 1980s.

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Others were also keen to frame it as a return to Cold War-era meetings of superpowers.

"The good news is... that the leaders of the two largest nuclear powers have confirmed their readiness to cooperate," Leonid Slutsky, the foreign affairs chief in Russia's lower house, told reporters.

'Just what Putin craves'

Many emphasized that the call had been a US initiative and noted that the White House readout did not include criticism of Russia's rights record or the jailing of Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny.

"It was Biden who asked for yesterday's phone call, Biden called and Biden wanted to talk about a summit," pro-Kremlin talk show host Vladimir Solovyov said on his morning radio program.

Referring to the U.S. readout, he said: "200 words! But where are those on human rights? Not a word on gays in Chechnya, not a word on LGBT+ and especially not a single word on Navalny."

Even Kremlin opponents said the summit announcement was a win for Putin.

"A summit? What does the U.S. need to talk about with Putin? It's just what Putin craves, a legitimizing 1 on 1 with the U.S.," Garry Kasparov, the Russian chess legend and outspoken Putin critic, wrote on Twitter.

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Observers had said part of the reason for the rising tensions over Ukraine was that the Kremlin was testing Biden, who raised hackles in Russia last month by agreeing with a description of Putin as a "killer."

Putin hit back at the insult, saying "it takes one to know one," then invited Biden to hold an online discussion within days. Biden replied that the two would speak "at some point."

Fyodor Lukyanov, editor-in-chief of the journal Russia in Global Affairs, said the Kremlin would see Biden's invitation now as an about-face.

"In Russia, the prospect of a meeting will be presented as a major achievement, and in a sense it is, because not long ago Biden said offensive things about Putin and, when asked to talk, said there was no time," he said.

Just hours after the call, Russian state news agency TASS was reporting that U.S. ambassador to Moscow John Sullivan had been invited to the Kremlin for talks.

"The level of tension that has emerged over the past two weeks has already eased after Biden's call," Lukyanov said.

"The muscle-flexing around Ukraine will probably stop, because in any case no one needs military clashes there."

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