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Biden, Putin and the Return of Realpolitik

This week's summit showed Washington and Moscow have accepted that neither is going to change the other's behavior.

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When your expectations are rock bottom, only good things can happen. **Saul Loeb / POOL / AFP**

At the very end of U.S. President Joe Biden's press conference in Geneva, a heated exchange with an American journalist encapsulated the real takeaway of a summit that wasn't supposed to have any breakthroughs — when your expectations are rock bottom, only good things can happen.

Just as Biden was leaving the stage, CNN's Kaitlan Collins asked, "What makes you so confident that Putin will change his behavior?"

Biden, who had been hectored through the entire presser by a U.S. press corps bent on ensuring the encounter with Putin could be marketed to their audiences as a high-octane action drama, snapped.

“What the hell? When did I say I was confident? What I said was, what will change is when the rest of the world reacts to them and it diminishes their standing in the world. I’m not confident of anything. I’m just stating the facts.”

“How does that lead to a constructive meeting?” Collins pressed on.

“If you don’t understand that, you’re in the wrong business.”

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Biden later apologized for being “such a wise guy,” but his summary demonstrated that perhaps for the first time since the end of the Cold War, both administrations had as realistic a picture of their mutual and respective capabilities and interests as two adversaries could possibly have.

Based on both Putin’s and Biden’s remarks, it sounded like whatever their differences, for the first time in decades the leaders of two of the most powerful countries in the world had managed to have an honest conversation. That was, quite undoubtedly, a good thing.

Both Biden and Putin struck the usual poses expected of them — Biden reiterating the U.S. commitment to supporting human rights and not standing for the Kremlin crackdown on dissent, and Putin responding with the usual whataboutism he has perfected over two decades of similar lecturing from five U.S. presidents.

But what set this meeting apart from both previous administrations — the circus of Trump’s awkward attempts at ingratiation and the Obama administration’s naive hopes about some kind of “re-set” that was garbled right from its unfortunate translation into Russian — was the acceptance by both sides that neither was going to succeed in changing the other’s behavior.

All they had left in the absence was the potential for dialogue and cooperation where their interests aligned. Both seemed to understand that their chief goal was to avoid conflict, and cooperation on issues where they had common interests — from cybersecurity to counter-terrorism — seemed the best way to do that.

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For the Russians, this resignation to “bad” U.S.-Russia relations being a normality came much earlier, toward the end of the Trump administration, when officials were telling me that they weren’t hoping for improved relations, just for a stable and reliable American administration.

In the past, starting from his first days in office, Vladimir Putin had counted on being able to achieve a certain parity with the United States. When a cumulation of the U.S. withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, through NATO expansion and finally U.S. support for color revolutions in the former Soviet Union dashed those hopes, the Kremlin took its perceived

"betrayal" to mean that the only way to stand up to such a "treacherous" partner was to act exactly in the way it believed Washington was acting: Like a bully on the world stage, to get the other side to recognize that Russia had, if not parity in capabilities, then certainly parity in will, and treat it accordingly.

The mounting sanctions following Russia's annexation of Crimea, the growing isolation, and, finally, the chaos of the Trump presidency, further convinced the Kremlin, rightly or wrongly, that there was nothing it could do to improve the relationship. Parity was key to that improvement, but over the last four years the Kremlin seems to have resigned itself to the idea that there was nothing it could do to change the American perception of itself. Its adversary wasn't interested — according to this view — in norms. It was interested in domination.

There is, certainly, something deeply paranoid about this view. But that is why, perhaps, arguing and trying to counter it by insisting on Russian disruptive behavior has only made the Kremlin more entrenched in its beliefs.

Human rights

More unexpected was Biden's attitude. There has been a long, impenetrable consensus in Washington that America's foreign policy destiny is precisely to compel human rights violators like Putin to stop violating human rights, and that it is, essentially, the chief global power capable of achieving this.

The Trump presidency certainly put a dent in this thinking, but there was an eagerness ahead of the G7 summit to show the world that America was "back," to show that, unlike Trump, America was back to its job of being tough.

Rhetorically, Biden certainly went to great pains to convey that message ahead of the summit. But his press conference seemed to demonstrate the disconnect between real diplomacy and influence as Biden sees it, grounded in a real assessment of one's capabilities, and the media circus of "have you been tough enough on Putin," reflecting purely the domestic political bickering of the day but having little to do with actual diplomacy.

At the end of the day, the point of summits like this is the beginning of dialogue and understanding, not striking deals or bending your opponent to your will — that is the art of war — which the purpose of these summits is precisely to avoid. Ultimately, that's long, arduous and boring work, which probably isn't as fun to watch as Putin running circles around Trump in Helsinki.

This may be why many in Russia viewed the summit as a success, however moderate. It's quite possible that honest, professional negotiations may have given Putin far more incentive to cooperate than a whole slew of sanctions.

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