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Chasing Muons in Geneva

Commentators are struggling to describe what happened behind closed doors at the Putin-Biden summit.

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Commenting on the meeting of two presidents, especially when one of them is an autocrat with everything concerning him classified, is like trying to find a neutrino. A neutrino doesn't have an electrical charge or mass, so physicists detect it by locating the presence of other particles — muons.

So it is with the summit between Vladimir Putin and Joe Biden in Geneva: the most important things happened behind closed doors during the 90-minute meeting between just the two men and their interpreters. At best, we'll learn about the conversation only when President Biden's archives are declassified many years after he leaves the White House, as we found out about discussions between Clinton and Yeltsin.

But it is this “unknown” that is being discussed by both Russian and American commentators (with the exception of propagandists, who just write what their bosses think).

I’ve now read dozens of columns in both languages. The vast majority of them evaluate the summit either from the point of view of morality — “Biden shook the hand of the dictator he recently called a murderer” or “Biden brought Putin back to the world stage” — or from the point of view of what didn’t happen — “the triumph in Geneva was that it didn’t repeat [the nightmare] of Helsinki” where Putin met with Donald Trump, or “Biden didn’t demand that Navalny be released from prison,” or based on speculation that no one but the closest associates of the two men could know, “Biden let Putin roll back the last 10 years” or the completely amazing “Biden gave up Russia” — to whom? Who knows?

Instead of speculating about what we don’t know, it’s more interesting to look for muons, which are at least more informative.

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Before Geneva, Biden was briefed not only by the top specialists on Russian in the U.S., but also by people who had observed Putin in person during summit meetings (including Michael McFaul and Fiona Hill, who headed the Russian section of the national security council under Obama and Trump respectively). This plus Biden’s own 30 years of experience specifically in foreign policy seems to have given him a very qualified analysis of the current leadership in Russia.

That analysis is this: it’s time to abandon the romantic illusions held by the previous administrations that thought it would be possible to come to amicable agreements with Putin and his chekists (national security officials).

Here the Russian autocrat has a total advantage over his American and European presidents and premiers. They can’t lie outright. The media will catch them out and they won’t be reelected (as happened with Trump). None of that is a risk for Putin, and so he’s free to do what he wishes: all of his promises, agreements, and signatures are worth as much as he decides they are worth, right down to zero or even less.

The only thing that Putin and his chekist-oligarch-billionaires understand right away and very well is pure pragmatism that can be measured in dollars, euros, or pounds sterling. Of course, these might have different names: sanctions; large-diameter pipes; a house outside Atlanta, Georgia; software for drilling on the sea shelf; frozen accounts in a Swiss bank; a trip to see a favorite dog in Finland; reconstruction of a house on the rue de l'Université in Paris, and so on.

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I think this is what Biden meant when he waved away a journalist asking about the confidence he had in Putin. “This is not about trust,” Biden said. “This is about self-interest, and verification of self-interest.”

The second important pillar in Biden's analysis is: "Putin doesn't want a Cold War."

Putin doesn't want isolation for himself and his entourage. He doesn't want their children and grandchildren to sit in a golden cage, and he doesn't want to spend more than he is on the arms race — like during the Soviet period when 100% of non-ferrous metals went into the military-industrial complex.

The Kremlin and his billionaires really don't need a new Stalin or a new Brezhnev.

They need a front-man who will arrange it so they, their children and grandchildren can spend what they've earned — or stolen — anywhere in the world and who will ensure conditions that let them pass it on through inheritance (over many years to come!) everywhere, including — if not especially — in Europe and America.

If that was the case, and if those were basically the conceptual categories that Putin explained to Biden while letting him know that he was ready to deal, then this result of the summit isn't bad at all.

No one will deal with a Russia at war with Ukraine or with a Russia of concentrations camps and mass repressions. And so, Americans and Europeans have a price list and, correspondingly, their demands, from a halt to the security services meddling in foreign elections to the release of political prisoners.

Concerning Alexei Navalny as a potential trade: Judging by the Russian autocrat's press conference, the discussion about the opposition leader was not just a warning that Putin and his close associates will have big problems if Navalny dies in prison.

Putin spent a long time describing in great detail what Navalny was guilty of and why he simply had to be sent to prison.

Putin was annoyed and wound himself up as he spoke, as if he were continuing his reply to Biden, whom he'd just left. In other words, Putin understand very clearly that all the files given to him by chekists controlling the flow of information to him were wrong. For the foreseeable future Navalny is going to be a thorn in his side that the Americans and Europeans are going to constantly push on. And this won't stop until he's released.

Putin didn't know or didn't believe that Navalny, who has been imprisoned for five months, is a newsmaker not only in the uncensored part of the Russian press but in the international media and television. Navalny has become a factor in relations between Russia and the West. Putin must take this into consideration to satisfy his own interests and the priorities of his close associates.

Biden gave Putin three to six months to demonstrate real progress — enough time to let us read those muons correctly.

In the meantime, when Putin returned to Moscow, it became even more obvious how much of an impression Biden on him.

Literally the second day after his return at a virtual meeting with graduates of the Higher School of Governance, the Russian leader suddenly launched into a long discourse about the

American president, criticizing in the process his sources of information in the security services and journalists for presenting a faulty portrait of Joe Biden.

“You know, I have to say that the image of President Biden that is painted by our press and even the American media has nothing in common with reality. He was on a long trip, he flew over the ocean — difference in time zone, jetlag. Even when I fly it throws me off. But no, despite all that he seemed filled with vigor. We talked eye-to-eye for about two hours or more. He was completely informed. He occasionally glanced down at his notes, but we all do that. That image that’s painted is somewhat off-putting, but there’s nothing to it. Biden is a professional, and you have to be careful when you work with him so that you don’t miss anything. He doesn’t miss a thing, let me tell you. That was completely clear to me.”

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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