

COMMENTARY

Biden and Putin on a tightrope, Europe on the sidelines



RUSSIA ([HTTPS://WWW.EPC.EU/EN/SEARCH?TAG=574](https://www.epc.eu/en/search?tag=574)) / COMMENTARY

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By meeting Putin, Biden chose pragmatic engagement over isolation to prevent a further escalation of US-Russia ties. But only time will tell if the Geneva summit succeeded in planting the seeds for real progress. The EU should take full advantage of this moment by strengthening its transatlantic cooperation regarding Russia - although the last fractious European Council meeting shows that there is still a long way to go.

As expected, the meeting between the US and Russian presidents on 16 June delivered no major breakthroughs. Still, the leaders identified a handful of key areas where there may be some potential for progress, including the reopening of negotiations in areas of mutual interest such as global climate, such as arms control, giving consent to cookies being used.

Biden's goal is to effectively manage the Kremlin's disruptive behaviour so that

Washington can concentrate on what it views as its top threat – China. Yet the proof of the pudding is in the eating (<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/jun/17/first-thing-proof-of-putin-pudding-is-in-the-eating-says-biden-after-summit>). Putin thrives on unpredictability, and it remains to be seen whether he will genuinely engage in the process or whether relations will quickly return to animosity.

Modest expectations

The summit took place at a time when bilateral relations between the US and Russia are at their lowest point since the end of the Cold War. The two leaders engaged in a series of vitriol statements about each other, setting the bar very low. But despite these provocations, both described the get-together as substantive, efficient and without animosity.

Biden's experience and age give him perspective. He understands that the negative spiral in US–Russian relations must diminish if he is to focus on more pressing issues at home and abroad. Since taking office, Biden is clear that while he will hold Russia accountable for 'unacceptable' behaviour (e.g. election interference, cyberattacks, disinformation activities), he is also ready to cooperate on mutual interests.

This pragmatic approach was visible in Geneva. His mission was not to lecture Putin or tell him off for 'misbehaving'. Instead, he intended to lay ground rules and create "guardrails" (<https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/06/16/world/biden-putin>) for a more stable and predictable relationship to avoid dangerous escalations. Biden also wisely turned down Putin's request for a joint press conference, avoiding a potential public spat between both leaders.

Biden's priority is to remove Russia from being a venomous domestic issue. As such, he must make progress on issues of strategic importance for Washington, such as arms control. This happened to a certain extent in Geneva: both leaders agreed to begin strategic stability talks to prevent the dangers of military escalation.

In their Joint Statement (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/06/16/u-s-russia-presidential-joint-statement-on-strategic-stability/>), the US and Russia agree to launch "an integrated bilateral Strategic Stability Dialogue [...] to lay the groundwork for future arms control and risk reduction measures." This is crucial as there is only one arms control agreement between both countries, namely the New START Treaty.



Their discussion on cybersecurity was also important, but reaching a long-term agreement will be challenging as there is no pre-existing model. Finally, they agreed to return ambassadors to their respective duties and workplaces. This is vital to making progress in other areas that require negotiations.

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Red lines

Both presidents also affirmed what their main national interests and red lines are. Biden provided a list of 16 critical infrastructure sectors in the US, from energy to water, that should not be victims of malicious cyberactivity. While Putin accepted no responsibility for recent cyberattacks on the US (e.g. the SolarWinds hack, which the US attributes to Russian intelligence), Biden made it clear that future attacks by Russia will be met with a strong response (<https://www.reuters.com/world/wide-disagreements-low-expectations-biden-putin-meet-2021-06-15/>).

Despite progress in key areas, the US and Russia seemed ready to live with minimal changes, if not the status quo, on several other issues. This includes Russia's support for Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, the imprisonment of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny, and the conflict in Ukraine's Donbas.

Only in the event of Navalny's death or renewed Russian aggression in Donbas would Moscow face stiff consequences from the US. Washington would also respond to any threats to its critical infrastructure sectors with force.

From words to deeds

It is too early to assess whether the summit was the first step towards more regular dialogues between the US and Russia. It may take several months to put meat on the bones of what was agreed. The first challenge will be working out the mandate for specific negotiations. Resolving different priorities may be difficult. On more immediate issues like cybersecurity, time will tell if the Kremlin got the message. An article by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov (<https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/the-law-the-rights-and-the-rules/>), published a few days after the summit and accusing the West of hypocrisy and of trying to subjugate Moscow and Beijing, does not bode well.

Russia's September legislative election could also throw a spanner in the works. The crackdown on Putin's opposition, as well as the likely election protests that will ensue, could complicate relations further: Washington will not stay silent, and the Kremlin will resent any 'meddling'. Moreover, confrontation can occur anytime in theatres where both Russia and the US are involved (e.g. the Arctic, Black Sea (<https://www.epc.eu/en/publications/Kremlins-quest-for-mare-nostrum-Enhancing-Black-Sea-security-to-stop~3fcff0>), Syria).



A further question is whether Russia truly wants a more predictable relationship with the US, given that Putin thrives on unpredictability. A key test will be whether the number and ransomware attacks on the US diminish over the next months, as well as any escalating moves along the EU's borders.

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Implications for the EU

Regardless of whether the summit brings about changes in Russian behaviour, US–Russia relations will remain extremely fraught. The same can be said for [EU–Russia relations](https://www.epc.eu/en/publications/EURussia-relations-Adding-insult-to-injury~3cfb54) (https://www.epc.eu/en/publications/EURussia-relations-Adding-insult-to-injury~3cfb54). The Geneva summit – which came on the heels of the G7, EU and NATO summits – was also meant to signal to Putin that the West is united when dealing with Russia.

While Biden and Putin were in Geneva, Josep Borrell, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, presented the [Joint Communication on EU–Russia relations](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/100169/russia-remarks-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-press-conference-presenting_en) (https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/100169/russia-remarks-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-press-conference-presenting_en). Its core message is that the EU “needs to be realistic and prepare for a further downturn of our relations with Russia”, which “is the most likely outlook for the time being.” The document further validates the [five guiding principles](https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/fac/2016/03/14/) (https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/fac/2016/03/14/) of the EU’s policy towards Russia by highlighting the need “to push back, to constrain and to engage” Moscow.

A window of opportunity?

A potentially more productive – even if minimal – dialogue between Biden and Putin and a new US administration that openly manifests its willingness to work with allies along the line of ‘America is back’ create a new window of opportunity for the EU that should not go to waste.

Yet the road ahead is not straightforward. Biden wants to send a clear message to Russia that [the West is a united and democratic bloc](https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/summit-choreography-biden-to-meet-putin-with-the-wind-at-his-back/) (https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/summit-choreography-biden-to-meet-putin-with-the-wind-at-his-back/). A lack of unity within the EU undermines this goal.

The recent Franco-German initiative calling for a summit with Putin proved highly divisive. The intense discussion at the June European Council summit showed that several member states, including the Baltics, Poland and the Netherlands, strongly opposed the proposal, which was [made without consulting other member states](https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-unity-on-russia-collapses-after-german-french-proposal-for-outreach-to-vladimir-putin/) (https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-unity-on-russia-collapses-after-german-french-proposal-for-outreach-to-vladimir-putin/). ~~X~~ Considered an ill-prepared and -timed initiative, Berlin and Paris could not convince the other member states. This left them with little choice but to face the harsh reality of EU’s foreign policy that was undermined. The Council conclusions make no mention of the initiative. Instead, it sets clear prerequisites for new diplomatic engagement with the Kremlin. **accept & close**

The Union struggles to find a homogeneous approach vis-à-vis Russia. An exception was the jointly imposed EU sanctions following the annexation of Crimea and the Donbas War in 2014. Despite some member states' complaints, unity regarding the sanctions has been maintained, and over the years, the sanctioned areas have expanded.

At the June EU-US summit, the leaders agreed to establish a [high-level dialogue on Russia to coordinate policy and actions](https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-summit/2021/06/15/) (<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-summit/2021/06/15/>). But if the EU is not able to reach any consensus within its institutional frameworks, this transatlantic dialogue risks being an additional yet ineffective forum where talks are not supported by immediate actions.

NATO remains the EU's main guarantor of territorial defence against a Russian military threat. Improving transatlantic coordination on those issues which NATO does not deal with directly (e.g. money laundering, people-to-people dialogue) would be essential to boosting the EU's capacity to act vis-à-vis Russia.

So far, [the EU's attempts to deal with Russia](https://epc.eu/en/Publications/EURussia-relations-Adding-insult-to-injury~3cfb54) (<https://epc.eu/en/Publications/EURussia-relations-Adding-insult-to-injury~3cfb54>) – most notably Borrell's disastrous trip to Moscow in February 2021 – have not paid off. With the US increasingly focused on China and the shifting priorities in the [Indo-Pacific](https://www.epc.eu/en/publications/EUSouth-Asia-relations-in-the-21st-century-Rethink-reimagine-resha~3f27f8) (<https://www.epc.eu/en/publications/EUSouth-Asia-relations-in-the-21st-century-Rethink-reimagine-resha~3f27f8>), Washington is becoming easily frustrated over EU disunity regarding Russia.

Brussels, which considers Russia to be a greater security concern than China, should prepare for a situation where the US does not want to waste any further energy on time-consuming issues affecting the EU's neighbourhood.

Although sanctions have been an example of European unity against Russia, the EU's red lines have not been very strong and have occasionally resulted in complete inaction, accommodation or late and ineffective moves. In Geneva, Biden made clear to Putin that the US will respond firmly to any actions from Russia. The EU should do the same.

Against this backdrop and the [new communication on EU-Russia relations](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/100169/russia-remarks-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-press-conference-presenting_en) (https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/100169/russia-remarks-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-press-conference-presenting_en), the EU should establish a clear and more operational toolbox of counteractions to take forward against Russian threats. The EU's response, which needs to be firm, immediate and balanced, must go beyond the more traditional set of restrictive measures.

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The future of US-Russia relations will not be decided by a single summit, but rather

several top, mid-level closed-door meetings held over the next months or years.

US–Russia relations are one of the core foundations of global security. The already fragile relationship must be prevented from deteriorating further. While the baby steps taken by Moscow and Washington were very tentative, they should be viewed positively for Europe and the world.

Confrontation and competition between the two powers will certainly continue. Cooperation is the great unknown. The opportunity to discuss and solve disputes through well-defined rules of engagement and new mechanisms would guarantee more stable and predictable relations for not only the US and Russia but also between the EU and Russia. The EU should seriously reflect on the recent Council disaster and get its act together.

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