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Cold Warriors Meet in Geneva

Vassily A. Klimentov *

Because of the often-heard catchphrase that 'U.S.-Russia relations are akin to a new Cold War', the anticipation before Russian President Vladimir Putin and U.S. President Joe Biden's summit on 16 June 2021 in Geneva was especially high. It was as if in the 1980s Soviet and American leaders were meeting to pull back, at the last minute, the world from the brink of war. It is actually how one Russian opposition journalist remarked in jest about the summit.¹ In this sense, the Putin-Biden summit recalled the summits between U.S. President Ronald Reagan and Soviet Communist Party General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev in the 1980s, including once Geneva in 1985. Such parallels were interestingly played up on the different sides. In Washington, there was hope that after the embarrassment of the Putin-Trump summit in Helsinki in 2018, Biden – the old cold warrior – would be able to be tough on the Russians. Unlike Trump, Biden was to make clear the American red lines and threaten Russia with swift retaliation if they were to be crossed. He was to walk in the steps of U.S. Cold War presidents. Similar hopes of a more assertive U.S. policy toward Russia existed in Ukraine and parts of the Russian opposition.² In Moscow, any meeting with the U.S. President is bound to be played up as a throwback to the Cold War because – more than anything else – it allows for the dramatization of Russia's great power status. The capacity to destroy the world with nuclear weapons is what in large part nowadays qualifies Russia as a great power. Every opportunity to showcase that capacity is welcomed.

There was at the same time apprehension before the Geneva summit on both sides. In the U.S., the first obligation was indeed to strike as clear a contrast as possible with the Putin-Trump summit. This included the choice of neutral Geneva – and certainly not of Helsinki again, the holding of separate press-conferences by Putin and Biden after the talks,³ the notable absence of a one-on-one conversation between Putin and Biden, and, overall, short talks that took some three hours to conclude. The latter was to indicate how it was yet too early for in-depth conversations. It moreover involved the Geneva summit's insertion into a diplomatic marathon that saw Biden tour his European allies and attend a NATO summit beforehand to showcase their – partly aspirational – unity. As pointed out by the Russian independent media *Novaya Gazeta*, Russia – with 62 mentions – was noted almost six times more often than China (10 mentions) as a potential threat in the NATO summit's final communiqué.⁴ The Biden Administration hence took great pains to not make it look like sanctions had not worked and Moscow was being rewarded for – in the West's view – having gone rogue in the international system.

In Russia, the side more concretely affected by the worsening of bilateral relations, including through economic and political sanctions, the lack of U.S. visas for Russians, the loss of its place in the G7/8, and concurrently degraded relations with the E.U., there was the need to start improving relations with the Americans without appearing to concede anything. Ironically, the Kremlin understands that this may be more easily achieved when dealing with Biden who – unlike Trump who had in fine proved counter-productive for Russia-U.S. relations – can take some of the American Russophobia out the equation to start normalising relations. A clearest example of both the U.S. necessity to compose



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with E.U. interests and Biden's capacity to make concessions on Russia had hence been the crucial lifting of U.S. opposition to the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline running from Russia to Germany just weeks before the Geneva Summit.⁵ No other project is as strategic for Moscow, and its further delay would have been a considerable blow for Putin. Luckily for Russia, that project is also strategic for Berlin, the U.S. key NATO ally.

Putin and Biden Got Along Quite Well

Biden's tenure was marked by his awkward and unprepared comment suggesting that he believed that Putin was a "killer". Answered jokingly by the Russian President who quoted a Russian school rhyme – meaning essentially "If you call someone names, that's really your name", the statement further complicated bilateral relations.⁶ In Russia, it led to Putin commenting on Biden's age and to Russian pro-regime media launching into a campaign that all but suggested that Biden was demented. Furthermore, this acrimonious exchange superposed on old enmities with no one having forgotten Biden's trip to Moscow in 2011 that many saw as American support to Dmitry Medvedev, the then Russian President, to run for re-election against Putin, his then Prime Minister. This would have challenged Putin's hold on power.⁷ Knowing this old and recent history, reinforced by other negative comments over the years, it is even more surprising that Putin and Biden seemed to have personally gone along well in Geneva.

Indeed, both Putin and Biden appeared satisfied with personal interactions. On one hand, Biden noted, that "the tone of the entire meeting was good, positive." He afterward abstained from making negative comments about Putin. To him, the summit was "somewhat colloquial" while he and Putin understood each other well.⁸ On the other, Putin almost showered Biden with praise during the press-conference and afterward in Russia, although at times in a condescending manner. Firstly, he disclosed that Biden had apparently called him on the phone following his 'killer comment' to do damage control. While it is unclear if there was an apology, according to Putin, "we explained ourselves, and I was satisfied with these explanations". Furthermore, Putin suggested that that is when Biden proposed to him the Geneva Summit – the fact that this was Biden's initiative was emphasised by the Russian President. To him, it appeared as a U.S. mark of respect for Russia. Putin similarly discarded other negative comments made by Biden over the years. Secondly, after the summit, Putin complimented Biden in Russia in a signal for the pro-regime media to stop their denigration of the U.S. President. Biden was a "constructive", "balanced", "experienced" "partner and interlocutor".⁹ Meeting with students from the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration, Putin even explained that "the image of President Biden drawn by the [Russian] and American press, has nothing to do with reality! He indeed looked spry" in Geneva. Biden is a "professional" with whom it is "necessary to work very attentively to not miss something ... he does not, I assure you, miss anything himself".¹⁰

There are probably two reasons why the meeting went well. Firstly, the two men being of almost the same generation – an aspect noted by Biden – helped. Biden, 78 years old, and Putin, 68 years old, are the last of the Mohicans among international leaders: They know the Cold War from first-hand experience. In 1988, Biden, the then-Chair of the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, had travelled to Moscow to meet Soviet leaders.¹¹ Putin was a KGB operative in East Germany in the 1980s. Such shared references are more an advantage, than an issue to normalise U.S.-Russia relations. Unlike the political maverick George W. Bush, the 'radical' Barack Obama, or the erratic Donald J. Trump, Biden, well-aware of Russia's red lines, is a familiar and understandable interlocutor for Putin. Likewise, Biden, based on his history with Putin and his recent comments, had little hopes regarding Russia, allowing him to keep the conversation pragmatic. Otherwise said, both leaders had low expectations about the meeting and both were fine with that. They settled in the comfortable discussion of topics where their interests realistically converge,



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stating areas of strong disagreement only for domestic consumption. In one word, far from Obama's great ambitions of a 'reset' with Russia that had been initially met by Putin's acrimonious 45-min long monologue listing Russia's grudges toward the U.S.¹², the quick Putin-Biden meeting prepared the ground rules for establishing a 'cold peace' while focusing on a few strategic issues. At another level, and as astutely noted by a Russian journalist, Biden already made the Russians quite satisfied by openly saying that he saw the summit as a "discussion" between "two great powers".¹³ This confirmed Russia's status and was appreciated in Moscow as a mark of respect that the U.S. had been too often trying to deny it. Likewise, Biden's general demeanour of not trying to put all the blame on Russia for the bad relations was probably also appreciated.

Secondly, unlike in Obama's time when Putin was younger and more combative, and Russia was coming out from a decade of high economic growth, Moscow now needs improved relations more than the U.S. Putin was hence glad to see Biden not put more pressure on Russia after the multiple rounds of sanctions already imposed since 2014, including earlier this year. By offering Putin a strategic dialogue without pre-conditions and abstaining from more threats and retaliations, the U.S. hinted at the possibility of a partial normalisation with Moscow. Biden even went quite far in his own press-conference by suggesting that there was now a "genuine prospect to significantly improve relations between our two countries without [the U.S.] giving up a single, solitary thing based on principle and/or values".¹⁴ The second part of the sentence was obviously a necessary caveat but, even with that, it seemed quite a lot in the current situation. As noted above, the U.S. greenlight for Nord Stream 2 was already a major win for Putin. Biden's comment on Russian opposition leader Aleksey Navalny may have also been seen as a positive sign. Amidst notes that he raised the issue of "fundamental human rights" with Putin and his vague threat that "consequences of [Navalny dying in prison] would be devastating for Russia",¹⁵ Biden did not over-emphasise Russia's domestic issues. Indeed, one could have imagined a significantly stronger ultimatum on Navalny, with at least a clear U.S. demand for his release. Yet, instead the meeting focused on other issues, leaving largely aside many points of contention.

Thin but Satisfying Results for Both Sides

The concrete results from the Geneva Summit were modest. The principal practical advance has been an agreement on the return of Russian and U.S. ambassadors back to respectively Washington and Moscow. Another outcome was the signing of the joint declaration on strategic stability discussed below. Ultimately, the two sides have moreover announced their openness to exchanging several Americans and Russians jailed respectively in Russia and the U.S. Aside from that, the press-conferences only gave a general idea of the topics discussed in Geneva. Interestingly though, as both sides are managing expectations and their domestic audiences, it is possible that more has been achieved in terms of progress but for now this has not yet been announced. It may hence be for future historians to assess this summit's importance. Still, what is clear is that for now the summit's impact was more in re-establishing channels of communication between Russia and the U.S. and repeating some obvious truths. As to the issues at the centre of Russia-U.S. "asymmetric rivalry" as it is called by political scientist Andrei P. Tsygankov, these are well-known and include European security, the Middle East, relations with Asia and China, values and information, nuclear and cyber security, and energy and sanctions.¹⁶ To this list, one could add minor issues on the bilateral agenda such as climate change, the Arctic, and the coronavirus. No doubt all of these were to some extent touched upon at the summit, although a few got special attention.

The main outcome has indeed been the joint declaration on strategic stability. The latter celebrated the extension in January 2021 of the New START (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty), a nuclear arms reductions agreement, for five



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years. It also noted that Russia and the U.S. “reaffirm the principle that a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought”. Moscow and Washington then announced their readiness to conduct a bilateral dialogue on strategic stability that should lead to more arms control mechanisms. On the Russian side, this minimal declaration that seemed to come straight out of the Cold War-era was celebrated as an achievement. The Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs noted the Russian delegation’s “feeling of strong interior confidence” when they arrived to that declaration. It is a “point of reference” for the future and an “important outcome of the summit”.¹⁷ There is no doubt that any discussion on arms limitation is bound to be welcomed in Moscow. Firstly, it upholds Russia’s great power status as nuclear arms is the only area where it is on par with the U.S. Talking global stability also allows Putin to stand on the same level as Biden. Secondly, it is a genuine area of interest in Russia as it, now even less than during the Cold War, can sustain an arms race with Washington and because there are genuine concerns about the previous U.S. administration’s attempts to undo international arms regulation mechanisms.

On the U.S. side, Biden’s focus on the strategic dialogue with Moscow is also reasonable given that this is the area where the West has the most interest in keeping Russia engaged. In this regard, Biden reaching out to Russia is important and timely. Whatever assessment of Putin may exist in the West, the reality is that a resentful and isolated Russia represents an obvious threat to global stability. Having Russia at the table is a necessity. It remains to be seen though if arms control will be indeed at the heart of the “strategic doctrine” toward Russia at which Biden hinted following the NATO summit,¹⁸ and then made clearer at his press-conference. In Biden’s words, raising that topic was in any case “what [he] [was] intending to do all along” at the summit.¹⁹

A second set of issues was also broached quite extensively in Geneva, including several which were not among the most contentious. This set nevertheless also included the highly politically charged issue of Russia’s alleged cyber-meddling in U.S. elections and affairs. Prior to the summit, experts hoped that some “rough rules of the road for curbing cyberwarfare and the ransomware attacks” may be established.²⁰ A few years ago, Russia was actually open to such negotiations.²¹ This time, the establishment of cyberwarfare red lines was apparently agreed upon in Geneva. Biden hence argued that there was a need to know what would and would not be acceptable for both sides, sharing a list of 16 U.S. critical facilities that would be “off limits” for any cyberattack coming from Russian territory.²² The U.S. President claimed that he furthermore warned Putin that the U.S. had “significant cyber-capabilities” for potential retaliation if need be, and assured American journalists that Russia “knew” about them. To Biden’s mind, it seems that he and Putin got an understanding on cybersecurity because neither of them wanted “a new Cold War”.

Conversely, Putin, while as usual brushing aside any Russian cyber-interference in the U.S., noted that indeed, it was time to start “consultations” on cyber-security. In Moscow, he was blunter, commenting in his typical plain-spoken way that, using the Russian expression, “instead of arguing like dogs”, Moscow and Washington could “unite their efforts in the fight with cyber-criminality”.²³ While this was not the contrition the U.S. hoped for, it marked Russian openness to find an understanding on the topic. Nevertheless, it remains to be seen if Russia expects other trade-offs, such as a curtailing of U.S. support to opposition civil society organisations in Russia of which Putin also spoke during his press-conference, as part of a deal on cyber-security. In any case, it is possible to expect that there will now be considerably less mutual accusations of cyber-meddling between Washington and Moscow.

Beyond this, according to Putin, he and Biden discussed regional conflicts, commercial relations, and the Arctic. Biden highlighted the same series of issues. Hence, Afghanistan got attention in Geneva. It is no surprise as it is an area where U.S.-Russia convergences on anti-terrorism and regional stability have been strong in the last twenty years to the extent that joint anti-drug operations were conducted in the early 2010s.²⁴ Today, while U.S. forces are leaving and the country appears more than ever in disarray, there is a natural interest to foster stabilisation for all regional powers,



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including Russia. According to Biden, Putin was the one to raise this issue. Commenting the next day, Putin confirmed that because Afghanistan was “very close to [Russia]... [it] had a [military] base there in [nearby] Tajikistan”, the issue of “how [Russia is] going to provide stability in the region” was a “very important practical question”.²⁵ The U.S. in turn could benefit from all the help it can get in stabilising Afghanistan, including from Moscow that has been hosting intra-Afghan talks and has good relations with Kabul and the Taliban.

Middle-eastern issues were also raised during the talks according to Biden with Russia offering to “help” the U.S. on Iran and Afghanistan, while Washington seemed ready to look at what it can do on Syria and Libya. Interestingly, the U.S. President almost made it sound like there was here a trade-off to be made in stabilising regional conflicts.²⁶ While the details of the discussions are unknown, it will be indeed interesting to see if Biden managed to secure a pledge from Putin to re-authorise the Bab al-Hawa border crossing, on the Turkish-Syrian border. The latter is currently the only UN-authorised access point for cross-border humanitarian help to Syrian non-governmental areas. Russia has always by contrast insisted on humanitarian aid going exclusively cross-line through the Syrian government. The authorisation for Bab al-Hawa expires in July and the U.S. will need Russia’s abstention at the UN Security Council to have it prolonged. On Russia’s side, there is clearly an interest for an (at least partial) lifting of sanction on Syria that would greatly boost its reconstruction and help stabilise Bashar al-Assad’s regime. Meanwhile, the Syrian question is likewise of primary concern for Turkey, a key U.S. regional ally who has recently been cosyng up to Russia. The fact that Biden spoke extensively with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan at the recent NATO summit further suggests that Syria had to also be discussed with Putin.²⁷

As expected, time was spent in Geneva on the question of the Arctic Ocean where the opening of a year-long naval route from Asia to Europe is of tremendous interest for Russia. Amidst the tensions over the control and militarisation of the region, the issue is one where Russia may ripe some clear economic and strategic benefits. On the U.S. side, there was also special interest for this question with Biden commenting on it in his own press-conference. The Arctic issue also has some important environmental implications.

Commercial relations were more on Russia’s mind than on the U.S. as Moscow is strongly interested in foreign investments and technology transfers. In this context, although it did not show at the press-conferences, it is possible that Putin hinted at other related issues, including the questions of U.S. sanctions and of visas for Russians willing to travel to the U.S. These issues may be more under the radar at present but it will be interesting to monitor to which extent a normalisation between Russia and the U.S. may also help in making a lifting of Western sanctions on Russia more realistic. Here, the E.U. has obviously a major role to play as sanctions are primarily linked to Ukraine, an issue that Washington sees as partly an E.U. responsibility.

At the same time, it is as crucial to note what topics did not get much attention in Geneva. The two leaders touched upon the coronavirus and climate change, although it is unclear if it was more than in passing. According to Putin, the environment was at least quite high on the agenda.²⁸ Among political issues, Ukraine apparently received little attention. It got only one sentence in Biden’s entire press-conference.²⁹ It was similarly discarded by Putin. Likewise, the two leaders seemed to have more registered their divergences than actually discussed opposition and media freedom in Russia, Belarus, or prior grievances, such as Russia’s alleged chemical weapons use for an attempted assassination in Great Britain. In fact, although Biden had in February 2021 argued that the world was at an “inflection point,” with, as paraphrased by a New York Times’ journalist, “an existential battle underway between democracy and autocracy”, it is unclear how this was reflected in the summit beyond the U.S. traditionally listing its grievances on human rights. Conversely, Biden’s accusations were met with Putin as usual pointing the U.S. to its own domestic problems of violence,



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as exemplified by the 2021 Capitol Attack pointedly referenced by Russia's President, systemic racism, and Guantanamo.³⁰ In one word, this was not a summit about human rights.

This was a Cold War-like summit. Biden has re-engaged Russia on arms control, the area that had been the most dynamic one in Soviet-American relations. This is in itself a good sign. The reality is that there is no world in which Russia, the largest country in the world and one of two able to destroy it, can be pushed aside or isolated. It must be part of conversations on global stability and environmental issues, whatever the nature of its regime. Beyond this, it is worth noting that – while many may aspire for a more democratic Russia – there is an argument to be made that another revolutionary upheaval in Moscow may lead to dire consequences globally. There is no guarantee that a new event such as the Soviet collapse would not lead to anarchy and the loss of control over Russia's nuclear capabilities. These are things the West must consider as it pressures the Putin regime at home and/ or tries to undermine Russia's influence along its periphery. In fine, and as prior experience has shown, raising contentious issues such as the human rights situation in Russia is also always more effective after relations have at least slightly improved and there is goodwill on both sides.

Finally, Biden believes as he explained between the lines at his press-conference that his re-engagement of Russia makes sense because a militaristic China may be the bigger long-term threat for both countries. Apparently, he and Putin found common ground on this point. This was perhaps again not surprising since playing on the U.S.-Russia-China triangle is obviously an old Cold War idea familiar to both. Indeed, if Russia, which has an over 4,000-kilometre border with China, believes that Beijing is a threat, it is in Moscow's best interest to avoid a new Cold War with the West. While this argument is not new and had been defused by the growing co-operation between Moscow and Beijing since the 2000s, the growing discrepancy in economic power and the closing of the gap in military power between Russia and China is bound to eventually become an issue. It may be now another strong incentive for Moscow to look again to the West.

Dr Vassily A. Klimentov

* European University Institute, Florence



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- ⁹ Andrei Kolesnikov, '[Bogatyri Zhenevy](#)', Kommersant.ru, 17 June 2021; '[Press-konferentsiya po itogam rossiisko-amerikanskikh peregovorov](#)', Kremlin.ru, 16 June 2021.
- ¹⁰ Andrei Kolesnikov, '[Kto zhe ne znaet starika Baidena](#)', Kommersant.ru, 18 June 2021.
- ¹¹ See the interview of the Soviet translator who translated for Biden in 1988 and the much-circulated photograph of Biden and Andrey Gromyko: '["I was there", Meet the interpreter who translated for Joe Biden during his 1988 meeting with the Soviet leadership](#)', Meduza.io, 11 November 2020.
- ¹² Barack Obama, A Promised Land (New York: Crown, 2020), Chapter 19.
- ¹³ Kolesnikov, 'Bogatyri'.
- ¹⁴ 'Remarks by President Biden'.
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ Andrei P. Tsygankov, Russia and America. The Asymmetric Rivalry (Cambridge & Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2019); and the book's review: Vassily A. Klimentov, 'Review, Russia and America. The Asymmetric Rivalry', Europe-Asia Studies 72 (10) (2020): 1769-70.
- ¹⁷ Elena Chernenko, '["Tol'ko tak mogut sebya vesti v sovremennom mire otvetsvennye yadernye derzhavy"](#)', Kommersant.ru, 16 June 2021.
- ¹⁸ Michael Hirsh, '[Putin and Biden Curb Their Enthusiasm](#)', Foreign Affairs, 14 June 2021.
- ¹⁹ 'Remarks by President Biden'.
- ²⁰ Hirsh, 'Putin and Biden'.
- ²¹ Tsygankov, Asymmetric Rivalry, 162-65.
- ²² 'Remarks by President Biden'.
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- ²⁵ Kolesnikov, 'Kto zhe ne znaet'; Kolesnikov, 'Bogatyri'.
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