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Research Report

Making sense of the contested Biden-Putin summit: Russia instrumentalises strategic stability risks to influence US behaviour

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SWP Comment

NO. 41 JULY 2021

Making Sense of the Contested Biden-Putin Summit

Russia Instrumentalises Strategic Stability Risks to Influence US Behaviour

Dumitru Minzarari

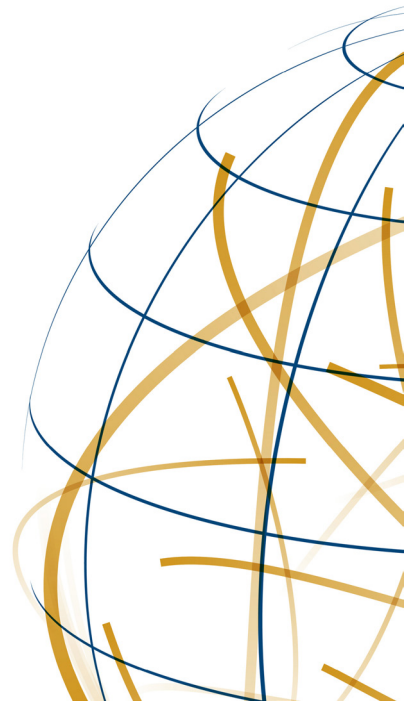
The Biden-Putin summit in June 2021 has brought more questions than answers. It was a highly debated move – particularly in the United States – ever since the possibility of the event was announced in April. The outcomes of the high-profile bilateral meeting are still elusive. Despite these, the summit offered a few valuable insights on United States-Russia bilateral relations as well as on how the two countries seem to perceive each other. Among them, Russia views strategic stability to be of key importance for its ability to influence world affairs. The biggest concerns of the United States include cybersecurity and reducing Russia's disruptive behaviour, which instrumentalises instability in conflicts around the world. The revelations following the summit serve as useful signals but offer few reasons for optimism with regard to the United States and Russia engaging on a solid common agenda, and more likely for them to continue pursuing opposing interests.

One of the revelations of the 16 June summit in Geneva was the emergence of a list of policy priorities in the two states' bilateral relations. For instance, during his interaction with the media following the meeting with his American counterpart, President Vladimir Putin listed the discussed topics as strategic stability, cybersecurity, regional conflicts, Arctic cooperation, and trade relations.

In addition to these, President Joe Biden mentioned in his separate press conference the topics of human rights – including Belarus and the issue of the Russian jailed opposition leader Alexei Navalny – imprisoned American citizens in Russia, and

a list of regional crises. He emphasised the interest in preventing Iran's nuclear weapons programme, the need to provide humanitarian assistance to Syria's people, the terrorist challenge in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of US troops, and the “unwavering” commitment of the United States to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine.

On that joint list, the issues of strategic stability and cybersecurity seemed to have topped the priorities of both presidents, even though Biden and Putin were driven by different incentives at the summit. Strategic stability was the only one to generate a written joint statement and an agreement



to create a bilateral working group. The cybersecurity issue appeared as a top priority for the American side, given the list of no-go sectors for cyberattacks that Biden handed to Putin. However, to better clarify these priorities, it may be useful to examine some of the incentives of both parties.

A Matter of Status

Russian sources, including media outlets directly controlled by the state, have repeatedly emphasised that the summit was held at the initiative of the United States. This is not an accidental choice of wording, as the emphasis that the other side proposed the interaction is a mandatory element in the Russian foreign ministry's public communiqués. This is designed to transmit power and influence, in line with the idea that the one being sought after is calling the shots. The logic is an intrinsic element of Russia's political culture and domestic politics. Even when Russia's leading state news agency, TASS, acknowledged that Biden's invitation for a meeting came after Putin made a similar general proposal earlier, it still stressed that "President Putin [...] will make the final decision on [...] the proposal to hold a summit." As another piece of evidence, a prominent Russian expert underlined that Putin did not rush to accept Biden's invitation for the meeting, but took time to consider it.

President Biden's actions also supported the status-driven character of the event. Although the White House largely ignored an earlier appeal from Putin in mid-March for a public face-to-face meeting with Biden, the American president extended the offer to meet — and at a summit level — during a phone call to Putin. The news about this move came at the peak of Russia's political escalation around Ukraine's Donbas, where more than 100,000 Russian troops with heavy equipment were amassing at its border with Ukraine at an unprecedented scale not seen since 2014. In an apparent attempt to indulge the Russian side, on 14 April the United States also recalled its

request to Turkey to allow two American warships to enter the Black Sea. The deployment of warships was meant as a sign of support for Ukraine — a task that was apparently transferred to Britain, which on 19 April voiced its decision to send two of its own warships to the Black Sea.

It is unclear how acute the Biden administration's concerns were back then about potential armed aggression against Ukraine, and thus the actions it took to pre-empt it. It is known that the US military elevated its crisis response level, and that senior Western officials warned the Russian side against an armed invasion of Ukraine. However, a more likely explanation is that a series of recent attacks by Russia against US interests across multiple operational domains of war — cyber, informational, physical — have prompted the Biden administration to search for quick fixes. The escalation of tensions around Ukraine was apparently a final straw for the United States, which would prefer to free its hands and undistractedly focus its efforts on China.

US policy circles tend to perceive Russia as a "well-armed rogue state that seeks to subvert the international order", whereas they view China as a peer-competitor. The threat perception of Russia in the United States has been low. Russia has been derided and believed to represent "a gas station with nuclear weapons" — or, in the words of former President Barack Obama, it amounted to a "regional power showing weakness over Ukraine".

This has significantly irritated Russia's ruling elites, who went to great lengths to elevate Russia's international status through increased defence spending and an aggressive foreign policy. Confirming this priority, a former Russian foreign minister wrote ahead of the summit that "Moscow and Washington continue to play a special role in international relations, deciding to a large extent the angles of development of world affairs."

President Biden appears to understand well Russia's strong desire for status. He played on these feelings successfully by stating that "President Putin and I share

a unique responsibility to manage the relationship between two powerful and proud countries”, and that the two countries should cooperate for the benefit and security of the world. Putin echoed the idea, highlighting that the United States and Russia had the special responsibility to maintain strategic stability in the world, as “the two largest nuclear great powers”.

The desire for status as a great power transformed into a policy obsession and became the religion of Russia’s foreign policy. One could even argue that Putin’s major goal in this summit was the summit itself. Or, in the words of a Russian analyst — it was to end the blockade of his “peripherality” and to stop being *nerukopozhatnyi* (a person that nobody shakes hands with). Although this interpretation is brutal to the extreme, it clearly reflects the critical role and significance of status and image in Russian political culture.

Strategic Stability in Russia’s Designs

Based on the related rhetoric and actions, it seems that Russia’s goal has been to instrumentalise the threat and risk of nuclear confrontation in order to improve its stance in world affairs and its ability to influence international events and processes. Therefore, it was extremely disappointing for the Russian military and policymakers when the United States had refused in the past to engage in strategic stability talks. It made it impossible for the Russian leadership to capitalise on its renewed nuclear capabilities and extract the desired political dividends from the excessive investments it has been making since 2000. Russia’s investment in its nuclear weapons has been a priority, as evidenced by President Putin announcing that Russia managed to increase the rate of new weapons and military hardware in its nuclear forces in 2020 to 86 per cent — the highest among its military services.

To address the “strategic disregard” of the United States, Russia responded

by engaging in a confrontation with the United States. Due to the significant asymmetry concerning other parameters of national power, Russia came to rely on its nuclear arsenal as one of its essential arguments — a logic that influential Russian experts also acknowledge. This rationale is easy to test by asking a simple question. Is there any other global issue in which Russia can convincingly play the role of a leading actor? Deprived of other leverage, Russia’s main strategic currency is insecurity, which it skilfully generates to increase its ability to influence world affairs.

Despite its relative economic weakness, over the last several years Russia has become “tremendously disruptive in international politics”. Moreover, although it is not a great power, it emerged as a “good enough power” to be able to significantly alter the global order. A frequent idea advanced in Russia’s domestic and foreign policy discussions — even during Boris Yeltsin’s presidency — is that “it is impossible to productively solve acute international problems without Russia”. As a result, an essential goal of Russia’s foreign policy has been to make Russia indispensable in various salient issues of international politics by engaging as a spoiler. As part of this process, Russian government-affiliated experts, along with various policymakers, have routinely emphasised strategic stability, stating frequently over the last several years that the danger of a military confrontation between the United States and Russia is real, in particular due to accident or miscalculation.

It is necessary to stress that the idea of “strategic stability” — a Cold War term reflecting the efforts to avoid a nuclear war between the two superpowers, including one triggered by conventional war — has evolved in Russian thinking and acquired a conceptually broader meaning and a higher degree of subtlety. Even before the 2008 war with Georgia, the Russian president, Dmitry Medvedev, proposed his European Security Treaty idea in Berlin. It linked the issue of strategic stability with Russia’s ability to veto European countries’ domestic

and foreign policies, weaken NATO, and consequently diminish the role of the United States in Europe. The former Russian Chief of the General Staff, General Yuri Baluyevsky, similarly connected the idea of strategic stability to Russia's ability of "developing relations with the Commonwealth of Independent States countries as a most important foreign policy priority of Russia".

Therefore, for Russia today, strategic stability is nothing more than a code term for discussing and agreeing on the rules of the game in international affairs, which grants Russia its spheres of influence. The nuclear arms component represents the strategic leverage that Russia believes it has — a subtle, strategic source of blackmail — as it can employ its conventional forces under the umbrella of deterrence, maintained by its nuclear arsenal. Consider Russia's new National Security Strategy, which is to be published this year and includes (conventional) "coercive methods" as a response aimed to "prevent and deter unfriendly actions, threatening Russia's sovereignty". Putin explained the way he interprets "sovereignty" in his 2014 annual address to the Federal Assembly, where he suggested that Russia's sovereignty was put under pressure when the European Union failed to discuss with Russia the signing of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement.

Strategic Stability in US Thinking

In his press conference, Biden described strategic stability by referring to efforts being made towards reducing the risk of unintended conflict, including arms control measures. He addressed in particular the risks of "new and dangerous sophisticated weapons" currently being developed that are able to "reduce the time of response", and thus "raise the prospects of accidental war". These efforts are to be channelled via a bilateral Strategic Stability Dialogue, which Biden said was launched during his talks with Putin. The United States-Russia Presidential Joint Statement on Strategic Stability — the most palpable result of the

summit — was published consequently by the White House and referred to "ensuring predictability in the strategic sphere, reducing the risk of armed conflicts and the threat of nuclear war".

However, a strong argument can be made that the United States has long been unconcerned about strategic stability-related risks originating from Russia. A solid indicator is the fact that, following the collapse of the USSR, the Russian language was excluded from the funding that the US government offers to universities for advancing critical language study programmes. Even though it was later brought back on that list, another indicator of Russia's reduced significance in US strategic planning was the removal of Russian from the Immediate Investment Languages list of the US Department of the Army in 2019.

The United States also withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in 2002, and from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty in 2019. Similarly, in 2020 the United States pulled out of another strategic stability-related agreement: the Open Skies Treaty. Even though there may be a temptation to accuse Republican presidents for these withdrawals due to their disdain for international treaties, there is also a strong pragmatic rationale behind these decisions.

The risk of nuclear conflict during the Cold War period — either by accident or via escalation from a conventional war — was driven by acute insecurity between the United States and the Soviet Union, and the belief that an attack by the other side was very likely. Both sides viewed each other as having an aggressive intent, and their actions were driven by the logic of total war and a genuine fear of mutual destruction. That strategic logic is not justified any longer, meaning that today neither the United States nor Russia perceives the other to be an existential threat.

Moreover, the assumptions that fed the logic of a risk of nuclear war are either erroneous or do not seem to hold any longer. The current state-of-the-art research that examines the behaviour of nuclear states

during conflicts suggests that the use of nuclear weapons is often non-credible in conventional contingencies short of total war, emphasising the importance of relative cost calculations and limited wars. This signifies that a nuclear conflict between two nuclear powers is very unlikely if it involves limited goals. Given the observed conflicts between nuclear belligerents as well as scenarios in which only one belligerent has nuclear weapons, the risk of escalation from a conventional war into nuclear conflict is very questionable. The only credible exceptions would include the contexts of retaliation against a nuclear attack, total war, the fear of complete conquest, or regime change.

Besides, in order to better contain the strategic instability caused by nuclear weapons, the non-proliferation regime needs to be consolidated instead, and the Cold War nuclear arms control treaties need to be rewritten to include other nuclear powers. Given the conflict dynamics in various geographic regions, the risk of nuclear escalation between the United States and Russia is the lowest among all other possible conflicting dyads of nuclear countries.

To sum up, one of the key factors triggering the security dilemma between the United States and Russia — the perceived threatening intent — has been of significantly lesser concern. It was driven by the general logic that one cannot stop a bullet that has already been shot, which reflected the risk of nuclear war by accident or misperception, triggered by fear. Mutually assured destruction and the related second-strike capability were to address this fear by removing the reason for launching a nuclear strike in the first place. Given that the United States does not consider itself to be threatened existentially by Russia — nor does it intend to threaten Russia's survival — it perceives the risk of a nuclear confrontation to be very low. Therefore, there is virtually no risk of an accidental nuclear war due to insecurity between the two. An argument could be made that judging by the threat perception, the United

States should presently view China as a greater nuclear threat than Russia. This is why technical specialists in various US administrations viewed armed treaties with Russia as obsolete and as artefacts of the Cold War.

However, publicly acknowledging this is politically costly for Democrat presidents, given the significant value that arms control and reductions have for the liberal ideal of world peace, shared by a significant segment of their electorate. In fact, former President Obama called in 2009 to build the “peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons”. Therefore, President Biden is unable to pursue the pragmatic political-military approaches to strategic stability advanced by former Republican presidents. However, he gave the issue a different spin and focus by speaking about “new and dangerous sophisticated weapons” when referring to strategic stability. This new definition aligns well with emerging concerns in current discussions on strategic stability involving multiple countries, triggered by developments in modern technology such as hypersonic weapons, unmanned systems, and the weaponisation of artificial intelligence.

Considering these arguments, the strategic stability item on the agenda was technically Biden's gift to Putin. Biden's extensive reference in his press briefing to Russia's supposed “self-interest” would instead suggest that he expected a response gesture — a serious discussion on the cybersecurity issue.

Addressing Cybersecurity

Ironically, it was the United States that had long refused to discuss cybersecurity. However, the United States has changed its approach following a series of cyberattacks by Russia-based groups, thus accepting to have a US-Russian conversation about cybersecurity that Putin has sought for years. In particular, the latest ransomware attacks were “extremely convenient” for the Russian authorities, as the United States

faced pressure to seek Moscow's assistance in tracing the hackers.

The discussion with Russia on cybersecurity is indeed very difficult. First of all, Russia is a security state. This means that security in Russia is state-centric, not oriented towards the citizen. In a conflict between the citizen and the state, the former will always lose, unless the citizen is a member of the ruling elite. This also signifies that Russian security services and law enforcement have very tight control over Russian society, including over illegal activities. In fact, the most lucrative illicit businesses cannot survive in Russia without there being a connection to the authorities. The state—criminal world nexus in Russia, including in the cyber domain, has been well-documented by researchers. The likelihood that any hacker group could independently conduct an attack from Russian soil — on the scale of the one that targeted the Colonial Pipeline — is close to nil. Even if the attack were to be organised as a purely criminal enterprise initially, the Russian authorities would have quickly identified it after it became public knowledge. However, no one would risk such an operation without some powerful backing in the Russian state power apparatus. The most likely scenario is that the Russian government uses both state cyber units and cyber groups that are not conspicuously affiliated with the government. It does this for plausible deniability purposes, similar to how Russian military intelligence employs the “private” Wagner Group entity — a de facto proxy of the Russian state.

Given that the United States is the most vulnerable to cyberattacks, they represent Moscow's logical operation of choice against Washington. In fact, several weeks before the summit, an influential Russian expert with strong connections to governmental circles suggested in an online event — bound by Chatham House rules — that the cyberattacks were Russia's response to Western sanctions. The implicit idea is that they will continue as long as sanctions are in place.

This is why Biden's strategy in the negotiations with Putin on cybersecurity was a

very sound one. It was conducted in the best traditions of practical deterrence and arms control. Biden reportedly offered Putin a list of 16 sectors specifying various infrastructure — including the military — that are to be off-limits during peacetime. This step ensured the credibility of the United States' ability to monitor potential violations of agreements by Russia.

Another challenge to a workable agreement on cybersecurity with Russia is the ability of the United States to credibly commit to sanctioning the violations. In addition, the sanctions have to generate costs that Russia views to be greater than the perceived benefits from hacking. In his Geneva press conference, Biden disclosed that he warned his Russian counterparts in the large meeting format that the United States would retaliate and target the “economic lifeline of Russia — its oil sector — which could be devastating”. He claimed that he sensed a strong reaction from his interlocutors. Finally, in his interaction with the media, Biden made a reference that Russia would be attacked by “someone in Florida”. Coincidentally, the United States has a number of cyber institutions in Florida, both governmental and non-governmental, and they are operating in partnership with federal agencies, which should be known to the Russian side. This has further contributed to the credibility of his warning, which Biden specifically framed as “[the] US has significant cyber capabilities that we would use”.

To combine the conditions for effective international cooperation, Biden was to credibly signal the ability of the United States to monitor violations, identify what is a prohibitive cost in reducing the risk of violations by Russia, and show his capability and resolve to sanction the violations. This is why domestic criticism against Biden — that “he gave a green light to attack sectors outside the list” — is simply unsustainable and fails to grasp the logic of an effective deterrence or response against a cyberattack. In a certain sense, Biden has laid out a cyber-defence strategy showing some logical similarity to the nuclear sce-

nario of mutually assured destruction. To the United States, the attacks against the listed infrastructure sectors carry destructive consequences due to the impacts on the population and the popularity of the government. To the Russian government, attacks against its oil sector could generate prohibitive financial losses, threatening the survival of the regime.

Some Lessons of the Summit

The meeting between Biden and Putin provides certain valuable takeaways, in particular against the backdrop of the consequent Franco-German initiative to invite President Putin to a summit with EU leaders. These takeaways could be relevant for developing an effective framework to engage Russia. They could help discourage – or at least increase the costs for – behaviour by the Kremlin that the EU would like to put an end to. Putin did not indicate anything that was different from his previous well-known and frequently voiced positions. Even though the two presidents looked for positive words to describe each other after their Geneva meeting, their consequent interactions with the media were revelations of disagreements on the whole range of discussed topics. The level of Biden's distrust towards Putin was so high that he even avoided the usual joint press conference. Except for the issue of strategic stability, Putin forcefully rebuffed all questions criticising Russia's behaviour on the summit issues, engaging in what the media called "a master class in what-aboutism".

When facing foreign disagreement, the United States or any other Western countries' immediate reaction is to apply domestic democratic practices, implying that legitimacy in politics is achieved via consensus-seeking behaviour. The major problem is that Russia relies on a different foreign policy matrix. It is determined by its own domestic political system, governed not by the rule of law but by the liberty of its ruling elites to impose their will via

coercion. To Russia, the most natural reaction and optimal strategy is not to search for common ground. It is to resist and use coercion, either directly or indirectly, by creating new facts on the ground.

As a result, Russia sees calls for dialogue with itself – in particular when it holds its ground – as weakness and readiness for concession. A potential drawback of the summit is that Biden unwillingly sent the wrong message to Putin, implying that if Moscow wants concessions, it has to stir up more troubles and tensions in the regional conflicts where it is involved. Vladimir Putin understood that his strategy of exploiting tensions and instrumentalising insecurity is paying off. The likely consequence is that we will continue to observe this strategy in action. In some ways, Putin forced Biden to talk with him. If this summit proved anything, it is that Putin's Russia remains intransigent on many issues of concern to the West. Putin confirmed this in his recent op-ed, symbolically written for *Die Zeit* on 22 June, in which he uses historical distortions about the Second World War, glorifying the Soviet occupation of Europe, and blaming the United States and the EU for Russia's occupation of Ukraine's Crimea and Donbas.

This dynamic means that dialogue for the sake of dialogue is not the best option because it is encouraging unwanted behaviour by Russia. At least in the case of Putin's Russia, there is no middle ground. One option is that the United States and the EU accept Russia's demands, which have not changed a bit since Putin came to power. It would imply giving Russia either explicit or tacit approval for its declared spheres of influence. The consequences though, are that these demands are not static, and they will evolve and expand. Accepting these demands will also discredit the West as the pioneer of democratic values and strip it of its political legitimacy. Another option is to engage in dialogue, but *only after* building strong leverage over Russia and generating very drastic and non-gradual costs for the Kremlin's breaches of international law. In some sense, this is

what Biden started to do by handing over the list of off-limit infrastructure for cyber-attacks.

Although generating the respective leverages may be easier for the United States, it is rather problematic for the EU. The 24 June European Council meeting of EU leaders — in which the Franco-German proposal for a summit with Putin was rejected — is a vivid illustration of this challenge. There is deep frustration and rising distrust among many EU member states with the recursive push by Paris and Berlin to engage Russia in an unprepared manner. With the echoes of Josep Borrell's February meeting with Sergey Lavrov in Moscow still present, the response could not have been different. The gist of the problem is that some EU members, including the Baltic states and Poland, among others, perceive these efforts as an attempt by France and Germany to make economic gains at the expense of the security interests of the former. To be able to engage Russia both successfully and effectively, Paris and Berlin need to first assure allies and partners that their interests are also being accounted for. These assurances will also greatly reduce the internal pressures that the EU and its institutions have been under lately.

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