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THE CURRENT: What did the Biden-Putin summit do for US-Russian relations?

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PITA: You're listening to The Current, part of the Brookings Podcast Network. I'm your host, Adrianna Pita.

With US-Russian relations at post-Cold War low point, President Biden and President Putin met Wednesday in Geneva to potentially lay some groundwork for the shape of those relations under the Biden administration.

With us to assess how this first summit went is Angela Stent, director of the Center for Eurasian, Russian, and East European Studies at Georgetown, and a nonresident senior fellow here at Brookings. Angela, thanks so much for talking to us again.

STENT: Glad to be back on your show.

PITA: So, previous new U.S. administrations have often come in with high hopes for resetting U.S.-Russian relations, either achieving some breakthrough or turnaround in previous trajectories. The Biden White House seemed to come forward with more modest expectations for this first meeting. What were their goals for how this would go, and what's your assessment on how it played out overall?

STENT: So, when they came in, they said that they were not trying to reset relations with Russia, but what they wanted to do was to establish a stable and predictable relationship with Russia. And the specific goal for this summit that as they themselves put it was to establish guardrails so that there would be enough agreement with Russia that the U.S. wouldn't have to spend so much time responding to escalatory moves from Russia, to putting fires out that emanated from Russia, and essentially that the administration could focus on its main foreign policy challenge, which, of course, is China. And, judging from what we've heard from both press conferences today, I think they achieved that.

Even though both presidents were critical of each other, they also stressed that they had come to some basic agreements: that we're going to exchange ambassadors again – both ambassadors were recalled to their respective countries and so that the business of diplomacy can begin again because we've had a skeleton staff at the U.S. embassy in Moscow – and then they agreed that they were going to start strategic stability talks. And that means getting in process a system whereby different officials will talk about arms control, the next arms control agreement – the New START that was just renewed expires in 2026, but about more than that – about other classes of weapons, possibly about cyber in there, about some regional conflicts. In other words, can we come to some basic understanding whereby we don't have to fear escalation all the time and have a more predictable relationship?

Now, as both Biden and Putin said, and Biden emphasized, of course, we'll only know whether this is successful in three or six months. I mean it takes time to begin to implement these agreements, but I think they did come to the basic agreement. They were cordial to each other. President Biden, of course,

wanted to make sure that Russia no longer is a toxic domestic issue as it was under President Trump, so no one's going to accuse him of kind of sidling up to Putin and saying how great Putin is. I think they established, I think, a basic minimum for going forward.

PITA: And what's the significance of this meeting, the fact that it comes on the heels of both the G-7 and NATO summits and, more broadly, the Biden administration's renewal of U.S.-European cooperation from a closer perspective?

STENT: I think this was a very important background to the meeting, coming after four years of a president who wanted the United States to leave NATO, who denigrated the European Union and who also denigrated in many ways the G-7. It was very important to show not only is America back, but America really values its allies. And so, I think you have a productive G-7 meeting; the NATO meeting produced a communiqué where obviously discussing the challenges from Russia was part of it. European Union the same way. In other words, it's not just the show, it's the reality of greater solidarity among the allies. So, I think that sent a very important message to President Putin as Biden came there that the West is united on some of these issues, and, in fact, the United States and the European Union have now committed to beginning a dialogue on dealing with Russia.

PITA: You mentioned about the renewal of some of the strategic arms control dialogues between the US and Russia, arms control long being an area of mutual interest, where they're usually able to keep moving forward, regardless of other friction areas. What are some of the priorities and future moves there, and what are some of the other areas where some cooperation might also be viable?

STENT: So, in the arms control area, you know, the New START was renewed, but this is an agreement from 2011. Clearly, since then we have all new classes of weapons. We have of course cyber, we have the issue of space weapons. So, if you're thinking about what comes after this treaty in 2026, and hopefully there will be one. Again, between the two countries we have 90% of the world's nuclear weapons, and this is the one thing that really unites both countries: we have a great responsibility. And as you said, even during the Cold War, even at the worst of times, after 1972 we did have arms control agreements. So, one of the questions is, what systems do you include on this? Do you also talk about non-strategic nuclear weapons, shorter range nuclear weapons? Because there's no intermediate range nuclear forces treaty anymore, both sides withdrew from it. Are there going to be new deployments either from a Russian or US side, either in Europe or in Asia? And so, there's that whole complex of issues for strategic stability talks. And then, is it possible maybe to de-escalate regional crises, to have a mechanism to do that, so that we can avoid for the clashes?

Now, beyond the sort of strictly arms control, we know that they discussed Iran. Russia and the U.S. are working together as the Biden administration' tries to rejoin the JCPOA, which is the Iran nuclear agreement. And they're making progress, but this will still take time.

Afghanistan is another area where the Russians are concerned about the impact of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, the impact on their own neighborhood, and the rise of the Taliban.

Interestingly enough, the Russians had their special envoy for Syria in the second of the discussions today, the one with the larger group. And so, there're clearly areas that have to do with Syria, with maintaining corridors for humanitarian relief, possibly for the future of Syria, but at least beginning that kind of dialogue, which probably does have to go on.

And then there are other issues like climate change. Vladimir Putin has belatedly acknowledged that this is a problem, and so that might be an area where they can work together, including these issues

as they manifest themselves in the Arctic. That was another subject, at least, that was on the agenda for today.

So there are a number of areas where they could work together going forward. And I think they've set up again just the sort of basis for moving forward, that what they need to do is to restore more of these channels of communication between different levels of people in the U.S. and Russian government., and that has been really missing for the past four years.

PITA: So, then what are some of the areas that are going to be most fraught for potential conflict, and what are some of the guardrails that the Biden administration is going to seek to place around those issues?

STENT: So, I think the number one is cyber issues. You heard Putin in his press conference today saying, you know, there's no proof that any of these things emanated from Russia. From the U.S. point of view, it's not only government-sponsored cyber intrusions like the Solar Winds hacking, but it's also all the ransomware. You know, people on the East Coast couldn't get gasoline because of the Colonial pipeline hack and ransom. The meat processing plant. And more and more, this kind of cyber intrusion for ransom was becoming a national security threat to the U.S.

Now, the U.S. has identified cyber criminals whom Russia is quite happy to harbor – they live in Russia – as long as they don't attack the Russian systems. And this is something where it's going to be very difficult to come to some agreement, but if there isn't an agreement here, then you know the U.S. might retaliate more. So, I think they both agreed, both presidents, that they'll sit down and have further discussions about regulating cyber, but we'll have to see how that goes.

And then I think another major issue is human rights and democracy. As President Biden said in his press conference, we wouldn't be the United States if we didn't talk about these issues. And you heard Putin pushing back, and saying that the United States violates human rights, by giving many examples, including the prosecutions against the January 6 rioters at the Capitol. So that that's very difficult. Alexei Navalny's fate -- Putin went out of his way to talk about all the ways in which he'd broken the law. So, I think on all of those issues they're very difficult.

I think it's very difficult to get agreement, and Ukraine is another one. Putin reiterated that the problem in Ukraine is the failure of the Ukrainians to comply with commitments they've made; that's obviously not the U.S. view and so, again, it will be very difficult to come to any meeting of the minds on that.

PITA: Beyond all these specific policy areas that you've detailed for us. what's going to be most important in your view, in terms of the shape of the Biden administration's approach toward Russia writ large? What what's going to be really important in terms of their thinking, regardless of issue area?

STENT: I mean, I do think for them, you know, focusing on this kind of nuclear strategic dimension is very important, because if you don't have greater agreement on that and the possibility of working together, then really the dangers of escalation and unforeseen events are very high. So, I think for them that's going to be sort of the cornerstone of all of this. I think that, you know, they will hope to. Maybe, achieve agreement on some regional issues. Maybe, you know, beyond climate, maybe something like global health or something cooperating with the Russians, although that's problematic too.

But I really think that we get back to the guardrails; if they feel that they've established enough of a dialogue with Russia, so that they don't have to constantly deal with unforeseen events and

provocations, I think that would already be a major plus, given what's happened in the last four years. It's a low bar, but it's not insignificant.

PITA: All right, Angela thanks very much for talking to us today and explaining this.

STENT: Thank you.