

# Meanwhile, About Those Other Issues at the Summit

They actually held a Russian-American summit in Helsinki on Monday to talk about life and death issues, though you wouldn't know it from the corporate media. Alexander Mercouris explores some of those other issues.

**By Alexander Mercouris**



The summit meeting between Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin has finally taken place in Helsinki to thunderous condemnation on the part of many in the West.

Some talk luridly of the beginning of the end of the West. Others talk hysterically of treason.

Others see the summit as a damp squib, which will change nothing and which will leave the relationship between the U.S. and Russia and between Russia and the West essentially unchanged, with the current state of hostility continuing indefinitely unabated.

In my opinion both views are wrong (the first obviously so) and both misunderstand, and in the case of the first wilfully misrepresent, what actually happened in Helsinki.

I discussed the background to the summit in an article I wrote a month ago for *The Duran* at a time when first reports that the summit was in the offing were beginning to circulate.

In that article I said that there was no possibility that Putin would make unilateral concessions to Trump over the status of Crimea or over the conflict in Ukraine and that the idea that he would agree to the U.S. and Ukrainian proposal for a peacekeeping force to be deployed to the Donbass was certainly wrong and that that idea had already been categorically ruled out by the Russians.

I was also skeptical that there would be any sort of 'grand bargain' between the U.S. and the Russians over Syria.

On the subject of Syria, in the weeks leading up to the summit there were some media reports suggesting that Donald Trump was coming under pressure from Israel, the Saudis and the United Arab Emirates to agree a deal at the summit with Putin whereby Russia would be granted sanctions relief and possibly even

recognition of Crimea, US troops in Syria would be withdrawn, and in return the Russians would agree that Iranian forces would be expelled from Syria.

The Russians were clearly worried by these reports. Not only did they go out of their way to deny them, but Putin and Lavrov held talks in Moscow on 12th July 2018 with Ali Akbar Velayati, Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei's Special Adviser on International Relations, in order to reassure the Iranians that they were not true.

### **'Grand Bargain' Unlikely**

As I explained in my lengthy discussion of Benjamin Netanyahu's recent visit to Moscow on Victory Day, it would in fact be wholly contrary to established principles of Russian foreign policy for the Russians to agree to a 'grand bargain' like this.

From the Russian point of view relations between Iran and Syria are relations between two sovereign nations and are none of Russia's business.

Not only is it not Russia's business to interfere in whatever relations Iran and Syria have with each other, but Russia lacks the means to do so anyway, with any request from Moscow to Tehran and Damascus to sever or downgrade their relations certain to be refused, and with Russia having no means to force either country to comply with such a request save through steps which would put at risk its relations with both of these countries.

All Russia would achieve were it ever to make such a request would be to damage its relations with Iran and Syria and lose face, bringing down upon itself accusations of bad faith from the US, Saudi Arabia and Israel when it inevitably failed to follow through.

Here is what I said about how Putin would respond to a demand from Netanyahu to rein in the Iranians in Syria if it were made to him during Netanyahu's Victory Day visit, and nothing which has happened since would have caused Putin to change his position.

Contrary to what some people are saying, I think it is most unlikely that Putin would have given Netanyahu any assurances that Russia would act to rein in Iranian activities in Syria. If Netanyahu asked Putin for such assurances (which I also think unlikely) Putin would almost certainly have told him what the Russians always say when faced with requests for such assurances: Iran and Syria are sovereign states and Russia cannot interfere in arrangements two sovereign states make with each other.

I suspect that the source of some of the stories about a 'grand bargain' between

Putin and Trump involving the role of the Iranians in Syria is the regular discussions the Russians have with the Israelis, the Iranians and the Syrians whereby the Russians routinely pass on to the Iranians and the Syrians Israeli concerns about the presence of Iranian forces in Syria in particular locations as well as Israeli concerns about specific actions which the Iranians take.

A good example of these sort of discussions was an exchange between Putin and Netanyahu during Netanyahu's most recent trip to Moscow on 11th July 2018. The [Kremlin's website](#) reports Netanyahu and Putin saying the following to each other:

**Benjamin Netanyahu:** .....Of course, our focus is on developments in Syria, the presence of Iran. This is not new to you. Several hours ago, an unmanned aerial vehicle entered the territory of Israel from Syria and was successfully brought down. I would like to emphasise that *we will counter any and all attempts to violate our air or land borders.*

Cooperation between us is an essential, key factor that can stabilise the entire region. So, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to meet with you and discuss these things.

**Vladimir Putin:** We are aware of your concerns. Let us discuss them in detail.

The Russians are not engaged here in discussions over some sort of 'grand bargain' to remove all Iranian troops from Syria, which as I have said they would see as counterproductive and impossible. Rather they are engaged in the classic diplomatic exercise of conflict prevention: keeping the Israelis, the Iranians and the Syrians informed about each other's moves and red lines in order to prevent an uncontrolled escalation of the conflict between them, which might risk an all-out war, which nobody wants, and which the Russians are doing their best to prevent.

Recent reports of an understanding between the Israelis, the Iranians and the Syrians supposedly brokered by the Russians whereby Iranian forces agreed not to participate in the Syrian army's ongoing military operations in south west Syria close to the Israeli occupied Golan Heights are a case in point.

The Iranians and the Syrians agreed to this, not because the Russians forced them to but because it is in their interest to. The Syrian army does not need Iranian help to defeat the Jihadis in southwest Syria so keeping the Iranians away from the area allows the Syrians to clear the area of the Jihadis without

risking a military confrontation with Israel.

Needless to say, just as the Russians were not prepared to make concessions on Crimea and Donbass or on Syria, so they were not prepared to back Donald Trump's ongoing campaign against Iran.

Not only are the Russians deeply committed to the JCPOA (which they partly brokered) but they are also committed to improving their relations with Iran.

In addition, given that the ongoing U.S. campaign against Iran is clearly intended to achieve regime change there, the Russians are bound to oppose it because they oppose regime change everywhere.

If the Russians were not prepared to make unilateral concessions to Trump on Crimea, Donbass, Syria or Iran, neither was Trump despite all the pre-summit scaremongering going to make unilateral concessions to Russians.

Stories that Trump would announce a cancellation of U.S. military exercises in Europe or even a withdrawal of U.S. troops from Europe had no basis in reality, and needless to say nothing like that happened. Nor did Donald Trump recognise Crimea as Russian or announce that he would lift sanctions on Russia.

### **The Question of Crimea**

The question of the sanctions and of the recognition of Crimea as Russian requires a little discussion since there is a widespread view that Trump is prevented by the Countering American Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATS) from either lifting the sanctions or from recognising Crimea as Russian

This is something of a misconception. In reality, as I discussed last year at the time when CAATS was enacted, CAATS is unconstitutional, as Donald Trump himself carefully explained in his Signing Statement, because of the unconstitutional restrictions it places on the President's ability to conduct foreign policy.

If and when Donald Trump decides that the time has come to lift the sanctions and to recognise Crimea as Russian, then all he has to do is apply to the U.S. Supreme Court to have CAATS set aside. His Signing Statement shows that he has had legal advice that it will do so.

That point has not yet been reached for political not legal reasons. In the meantime it is an error to think of CAATS as the insuperable constraint on Donald Trump's actions that many appear to believe it is.

Trump did not commit himself to lift the sanctions, and he did not recognise Crimea as Russian, not so much because of the legal constraints placed upon him

by CAATS but because doing so would have put at risk his political position in the US in advance of November's mid-term elections, and because – compulsive deal-maker that he is – he is hardly likely to take such radical steps anyway without first getting something back in return.

One of the fundamental problems caused by the hysterical campaign which is being waged against Donald Trump is that it causes even many of Donald Trump's supporters to believe that he is more supportive of Russia's positions on a variety of issues than he really is. The result is that he is constantly suspected of being prepared to make unilateral concessions to the Russians when unilateral concessions are precisely the sort of things which as a self-professed master deal-maker he is known to most abhor.

Donald Trump is – as he repeatedly says – an America First nationalist, and his overriding priority is to make what he considers to be the best possible deal for the United States. Unilateral concessions just don't come into it and it is a fundamental error to think that they do.

Putin understands all this very well, as he made clear during his joint press conference with Trump in Helsinki.

**Vladimir Putin:** Regarding whom you can believe and whom you can't, you shouldn't believe anyone. What makes you think President Trump trusts me and that I fully trust him? He defends the interests of the United States of America. I defend the interests of the Russian Federation. We do have converging interests, and we are seeking common ground. We have issues that we disagree on so far. We are seeking options to settle these differences and make our work more constructive.

Which brings me to the fundamental reason for the summit, and why it is also a mistake in my opinion to see it as an empty show or a damp squib.

Donald Trump sought the summit – it is clear that the initiative for the summit came from him – because as he has repeatedly said since before he was elected President, prior to the summit he did not know Putin well.

The number of times Trump has said this is in fact practically beyond count. For example, he said it during a news conference in Miami on 27th June 2016

I don't know who Putin is. He said one nice thing about me. ... I never met Putin...

He also said it during the second Presidential debate on 9th October 2016

I don't know Putin...

Trump has gone on to say the same thing again and again since. He has also repeatedly said that only time would tell whether he and Putin would get on with each other and would be able to come to agreements with each other.

### **The Need for a One-on-One**

A fundamental prerequisite for any successful negotiation is for the two parties to the negotiation to know each other's minds so that a modicum of trust and understanding – essential if any agreement is to be reached – can be established between them.

As a businessman Trump knows this very well. He therefore needed to meet with Putin in a lengthy one-to-one encounter in order to get to know Putin properly so as to see whether Putin is in fact the sort of person he can negotiate and eventually do a deal with.

That is the reason why Trump insisted that his first meeting with Putin should take the form of a one-to-one encounter.

That by the way is absolutely standard practice in negotiations – both commercial negotiations and diplomatic negotiations – with leaders of negotiating teams often meeting privately in one-to-one meetings in order to get to know each other better to see whether a deal between them is even possible. Once a proper relationship between them is established the full negotiating teams can be brought into the negotiations in what in diplomacy are called 'plenary sessions'. Needless to say it is during the plenary sessions – with each side's experts present – that the details are discussed and ironed out.

Not only is this standard practice in negotiations – Putin does it all the time – but it is simply not true as some people are suggesting that there was no one else present in the room when Putin and Trump met with each other.

Both Putin and Trump obviously had interpreters present. Trump doesn't speak Russian and Putin speaks English badly. The job of the interpreters – who are full time state officials – is not just to interpret what the leaders say to each other but also to prepare a written transcript (a "stenographic record") of what they said.

Once this transcript is written up – something which normally takes no more than a few days – it is circulated to senior officials including in the U.S. case to

the U.S. President's two most important foreign policy advisers, Bolton and Pompeo. By now it is highly likely that Bolton and Pompeo have already seen and read through the transcript, and that they therefore know exactly what Putin and Trump said to each other.

Since the one-to-one meeting was first and foremost a "get-to-know" you session, no binding agreements would have been reached during it, and neither Putin nor Trump – each in their own way an experienced negotiator – would ever have imagined that they would be.

In summary, the one-to-one meeting between Putin and Trump is not a sign of some secret understanding between them; far less is it a case of an "intelligence asset" meeting his "controller" as some are crazily suggesting.

On the contrary it is further proof of what each of them has repeatedly said at various times: before the summit they did not know each other well, so that the summit was called precisely in order to give each of them the opportunity to get to know the other better.

The essential point about the summit is that Putin and Trump did find that they could deal with each other and did discover areas of common concern which in time it might be possible for them to build on as they search for areas of agreement between them. During their joint press conference Putin confirmed as much:

We do have converging interests, and we are seeking common ground. We have issues that we disagree on so far. We are seeking options to settle these differences and make our work more constructive.

As for the points of possible convergence, Putin in his usual structured way set them out:

I consider it important, as we discussed, to get the dialogue on strategic stability and the non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction on track. We made a note with a number of concrete proposals on this matter available to our American colleagues.

We believe that continued joint efforts to fully work through the military-political and disarmament dossier is necessary. That includes the renewal of the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty, the dangerous situation surrounding the development of elements of the US global missile defence

system, the implementation of the Treaty on the Elimination of Intermediate-Range and Shorter-Range Missiles, and the topic of deploying weapons in space.

We are in favour of continued cooperation in the sphere of combating terrorism and ensuring cybersecurity. Notably, our special services are working together quite successfully. The most recent example of that is the close operational interaction with a group of US security experts as part of the World Cup in Russia that ended yesterday. Contacts between the special services should be made systematic. I reminded the President of the United States about the proposal to reconstitute the anti-terror working group.

We covered regional crises extensively. Our positions do not coincide on all matters, but nonetheless there are many overlapping interests. We should be looking for common ground and working more closely, including at international forums.

Of course, we talked about regional crises, including Syria. With regard to Syria, restoring peace and harmony in that country could serve as an example of successful joint work.

Of course, Russia and the United States can take the lead in this matter and organise cooperation to overcome the humanitarian crisis and help refugees return to their hearths.

We have all the requisite elements for effective cooperation on Syria. Notably, Russian and American military have gained useful experience of interaction and coordination in the air and on land.

I would also like to note that after the terrorists are routed in southwest Syria, in the so-called "southern zone", the situation in the Golan Heights should be brought into full conformity with the 1974 agreement on the disengagement of Israeli and Syrian forces.

This will make it possible to bring tranquillity to the Golan Heights and restore the ceasefire between the Syrian Arab Republic and the State



of Israel. The President devoted special attention to this issue today....

We paid special attention to the economy. Obviously, there is interest in cooperation in the business circles of both countries. The US delegation was one of the biggest at the St Petersburg International Economic Forum in May. It consisted of over 500 US entrepreneurs.

To develop trade and investment, President Trump and I agreed to establish a high-level group that would unite captains of Russian and American business. Business people better understand how to go about mutually beneficial cooperation. Let them consider what can be done and make recommendations.

### **The Nuclear Issue**

The emphasis – as I discussed in my [article](#) of a month ago – is on arms control, though Putin also seems to have gone out of his way to reassure Trump that the restoration of the Syrian government's control over southwest Syria would not put in jeopardy Israel's position in the Golan Heights. In addition there also seems to have been a fair amount of discussion about future economic cooperation.

The result was an agreement between Putin and Trump to reopen channels of communication between their governments and to meet regularly with each other as they feel their way towards a rapprochement.

To be clear, that rapprochement will not mean and is not intended to mean that the U.S. and Russia will cease to be adversaries and will become friends.

Instead what is being discussed are steps to bring to a stop the downward spiral in their relations, with each side obtaining a better understanding of the other side's moves and red lines, so that hopefully geopolitical disasters like the 2014 Maidan coup can be avoided in future.

That would be a major advance over what has existed previously given that since the USSR collapsed in 1991 the U.S. has refused to acknowledge that Russia has any right to any opinions at all, let alone to act independently or set out red lines.

Needless to say the more often Putin and Trump meet the more 'normalised' relations between the US and Russia become, with each meeting provoking less controversy than the previous one, with the whole process beyond a certain point becoming routine so that it attracts ever less attention and (hopefully)

eventually becomes uncontroversial.

It is because the powerful forces in the U.S. who scorn the idea of a 'geopolitical ceasefire' and want ever greater confrontation between the U.S. and Russia do not want to see relations 'normalised' in this way that their reaction to the summit has been so hysterical.

As of the time of writing it is these people who in the media and on twitter are making the running. However it may be a mistake to see in the volume of the noise they are making a true reflection of their influence.

Last February's Nuclear Posture Review suggests that there is a very powerful constituency within the U.S. and specifically within the Pentagon which might potentially support the sort of 'geopolitical ceasefire' with Russia that Donald Trump appears to be gradually working towards.

The Nuclear Posture Review shows that some sections of the US military understand how dangerously overstretched the US has become as it responds simultaneously to challenges from Russia in Europe and from China in the Pacific. Both Putin and Trump mentioned during their news conference the extent to which their respective militaries are already in contact with each other and are working well together

**Donald Trump:** Well, our militaries do get along. In fact, our militaries actually have gotten along probably better than our political leaders for years, but our militaries do get along very well and they do coordinate in Syria and other places. Ok? Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:**.....On the whole, I really agree with the President. Our military cooperation is going quite well. I hope that they will continue to be able to come to agreements just as they have been....

That may be a sign that there is more understanding of what Donald Trump is trying to do – at least within the U.S. defence establishment – than the hysteria the Helsinki summit has provoked might suggest.

Overall, provided it is clearly understood that what Putin and Trump are working towards is a detente style 'geopolitical ceasefire' and not 'friendship' – and certainly not an alliance – it can be said that their summit in Helsinki was a good start and a success.

What happens next depends on whether the forces of realism and sanity in the

U.S. can prevail over those of megalomania and hysteria. Given how entrenched the latter have become unfortunately no one can count on this.

However some sort of process which may in time lead to detente and an easing of tensions between the nuclear superpowers has begun. Given the circumstances in which it has been launched that is more than might have been expected even a short time ago, and for that one should be grateful.

*This article originally appeared on The Duran.*

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