

Biden - Putin Summit in Geneva

What prospects for a more peaceful and secure cyberspace?

Expectations for the June 16 meeting of Presidents Biden and Putin in Geneva were low from the start. The political positions are too different, the contentious issues too numerous. That is why no joint media conference was scheduled after the talks. At the same time, there was a substantial agenda with topics of interest to both sides. It also became known during the preparations that cybersecurity would play a prominent role. What can be said about the Geneva meeting the day after?

Both sides are quite positive about the talks. The encouraging comments at the media conferences and President Biden's thumbs up as he left Villa La Grange were not feigned. However - and this is always the case with this type of meeting - the actual results will not be known for several months, after the follow-up work has been done.

The U.S. cleverly designed the Geneva meeting. The cascade - first meeting with the most important Western industrialized nations (G-7), NATO summit, talks with the EU and finally the bilateral summit with Putin - was a clever choreography. Biden was thus able to mobilize the support of allies during his first trip abroad (even if the approval of American positions was less unconditional than the U.S. would have liked). The meeting with Putin as the culmination of the trip made the Russian president appear to be a representative of a major power on a par with the U.S., which was just as important for him as the talks themselves. Of course, this does not change the fact that China is the key counterpart for most of the major international challenges facing the United States (climate change, cybersecurity, pandemic response, military buildup, etc.).

Meetings between heads of state are not spontaneous encounters, but are elaborately choreographed. Although little has been publicized about it, this was also the case for the Geneva meeting. Otherwise, it would not have been possible, for example, to agree on working groups in various areas during a meeting that lasted only four hours. With this approach, the new U.S. administration clearly departed from the transactional negotiating tactics of the Trump era. It was also important that people with many years of experience in dealing with Russia were in charge of the preparations.

Importance of cyber risks recognized

Both Russia and the U.S. acknowledged cyber risks and attacks on critical infrastructure as an important problem, even as mutual accusations were repeated during the talks. Biden presented Putin with a list of 16 categories of critical infrastructure (water supply, medical facilities, etc.) as a warning sign and, arguably, input for follow-up work.

Biden and Putin belong to a generation familiar with the Cold War from their own biographies. After the meeting, both stated that they did not want a return to the Cold War. However, they also indicated that approaches and concepts from the Cold War and the policy of détente

could be used to avoid cyber risks and unwanted escalation, particularly in the cyber domain. Therefore, it would not be a surprise if the two states soon discuss principles, measures for more transparency, confidence building, but also modalities for concrete cooperation in specific incidents such as ransomware attacks. Also sounding like an echo from the Cold War was President Biden's statement about showing Putin the potential the U.S. has in the cyber domain and what it could do to Russia.

It would be wrong to conclude from the positive signals from Geneva that there is a relationship of trust between the U.S. and Russia. Mutual distrust has remained high even after the Geneva summit. Trust is not built with talks, but in the concrete action that follows talks.

Impact beyond U.S.-Russian relations

If positive momentum does develop, it may well have an impact beyond U.S.-Russian relations. Pressure would grow on China to comply with similar arrangements. In my view, arrangements among the major powers (including China, if possible) are also a necessary precondition for universal arrangements for a peaceful and secure cyberspace. Consultations have been ongoing for almost twenty years in the UN framework. To be sure, they have produced useful insights and approaches to solutions. But on most thorny issues, a political breakthrough has yet to be achieved. It will depend on what the major players do.

The next few months are exciting for the cybersecurity field, but also difficult to predict. In any case, the train has not been derailed in Geneva. Switzerland was able to make its mark as a host state discreetly but effectively. Unfortunately, the role that international Geneva already plays in the field of digitization and cyberspace was somewhat neglected.

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