

The Top 5 Issues President Biden Should Discuss with Putin at the Geneva Summit

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

Under current conditions, Russia cannot be a U.S. partner—yet so far, President Biden’s Russia policy has largely resembled President Obama’s failed “Russian reset.”

Since coming to power, Putin has demonstrated that he cannot be a trusted partner of the U.S., and has pursued policies that undermine America’s national interests.

In Geneva, Biden should press Putin on Russia’s recent record of military aggression, arms control, assassination attempts, cyberattacks, and human rights abuses.

On June 16, President Joe Biden will meet his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin in Geneva, Switzerland. While the two men have met before, and had two phone calls so far this year,¹ this will be the first time that the two leaders engage in substantial talks since 2011, when Joe Biden was Vice President.²

While there is nothing wrong with heads-of-state meetings, even with adversaries, President Biden should go into this summit with realistic expectations. Since coming to power in 1999, Putin has never demonstrated that he can be a trusted partner of the United States. At almost every opportunity, he has pursued policies that undermine America’s national interests and those of its closest partners.

President Biden should use this meeting as an opportunity to press Putin on issues like Russian

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adventurism abroad, arms control, the multiple assassinations of Putin critics that have occurred on the European continent, cyberattacks, and Russia's blatant human rights abuses.

Russian Aggression

President Putin's reign has sent democracy into retreat; eroded basic freedoms (of speech, assembly, and a free press); oppressed—and sometimes murdered—minority groups and political opposition figures; and left the country's economy in tatters.

To distract his people from their many woes, as well as to raise his approval ratings, Putin has pursued a dangerously aggressive and expansionist foreign policy. Along the way, he has undone the post-World War II world order and undermined America's strategic interests in many parts of the world.

Russia has demonstrated its military adventurism in several countries. In 2008, Russia invaded Georgia and today continues to occupy, illegally, 20 percent of that country's territory. More than a decade later, Russia is still in violation of the six-point cease-fire agreement.

Six years after Russia's invasion of Georgia, Putin invaded Ukraine and illegally annexed the Crimean peninsula—the first time one European country used military force to annex part of another since World War II. Russia still fuels a separatist conflict in the eastern part of Ukraine. Since 2014, the war has resulted in approximately 14,000 combat-related deaths.³ Beginning in March of this year, Moscow sent between 150,000⁴ and 300,000⁵ Russian troops, as well as 35,000 combat vehicles, 900 aircraft, and 190 navy ships⁶ to the Ukrainian border and to Crimea. Moscow reportedly ordered some of the troops back to their bases in late April,⁷ but an estimated 100,000 troops remain.⁸

In Syria, Putin continues to support Bashar al-Assad militarily and politically. In 2011, when Syria's armed conflict began, the Kremlin renewed its alliance with the Assad regime.⁹ A few years later, Russia began bombing, or aided Syria in bombing, hospitals and medical facilities that treated Syrian opposition fighters.¹⁰ More recently, Russian naval ships have reportedly been escorting Iranian oil tankers on their way to Syria to protect them from Israeli attacks.¹¹ The tankers are also suspected of carrying arms to Syria,¹² some of which could end up in the hands of Hezbollah.

On the European front, Putin has assassinated, or attempted to assassinate, several of his critics. These critics include Aleksandr Litvinenko, whose tea was laced with polonium in 2006;¹³ Boris Nemtsov, who was

killed by gunshot in 2015;¹⁴ Sergei and Yulia Skripal, who were poisoned with a Novichok nerve agent in 2018;¹⁵ a Georgian–Chechen separatist named Zelimkhan Khangoshvili, who was killed by gunshot in 2019;¹⁶ and Aleksei Navalny, Putin’s most outspoken critic, who was poisoned with Novichok in 2020.¹⁷ Through these assassinations and attempts, Moscow has proven that it is not afraid to violate the 1997 Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC).¹⁸

Russia also has launched multiple cyberattacks on U.S. government and private entities in recent months. In December 2020, Russian hackers “broke into a range of key government networks, including in the Treasury and Commerce Departments, and had free access to their email systems.”¹⁹ Approximately 18,000 “private and government users downloaded a Russian tainted software update...that gave its hackers a foothold into victims’ systems, according to SolarWinds, the company whose software was compromised.”²⁰ Multiple U.S. government agencies, the Pentagon, nuclear labs, and several Fortune 500 companies had been using the SolarWinds software on their computers.²¹

In May 2021, a Russia-based²² hacking group known as DarkSide launched a cyberattack against Colonial Pipeline, operator of one of the country’s largest fuel pipelines.²³ The 5,500-mile pipeline, which carries fuel from the Gulf Coast to New Jersey, was down for six days.²⁴ Colonial Pipeline paid DarkSide \$90 million in bitcoin as a ransom payment,²⁵ but the Department of Justice was able to recover approximately \$2.3 million of that amount a few weeks later.²⁶ Then early this month, REvil, a Russian cybercriminal group, launched a ransomware attack on JBS, the largest meat-processing company in the world.²⁷ Through these events, Russian actors, whether affiliated with the state or not, prove that they are increasing their cyberwarfare against the United States.

Back in Russia, President Putin exhibits a disregard for human rights. He allows police to beat, injure, and imprison peaceful protestors,²⁸ lets fires break out across the country due to corrupt local governments,²⁹ and steals billions of dollars from citizens for his and his counterparts’ gain.³⁰ He also bars opposition leaders and Kremlin critics, such as Aleksei Navalny³¹ and Garry Kasparov,³² from running in elections, even though these figures likely would work to improve Russians’ standard of living.

In addition, Putin orders the arrests of innocent Americans based on illegitimate charges and makes them his political prisoners. American citizens Paul Whelan³³ and Trevor Reed³⁴ currently remain in Russian prison, without proper medical care.³⁵

A Blueprint for the Summit

When then-Vice President Biden met with Vladimir Putin in 2011, he emphasized that the U.S. needed to “establish closer...relations with Russia.”³⁶ Putin has proven, however, that he is not a viable partner for the United States. Diplomacy aside, there are many issues that need to be addressed. At the Geneva Summit, President Biden should bring up five main issues:

1. **Military Adventurism Abroad.** President Biden should insist that Putin completely withdraw Russian forces from Georgia’s Abkhazia and Tskhinvali (South Ossetia) regions and from Ukraine’s territory, including both the eastern Donbas region and the Crimean peninsula. President Biden should also press Putin to stop protecting Iranian tankers in transit to Syria, especially because the oil shipments are in violation of U.S. sanctions, and he should criticize Russia for its failure to eradicate Syria’s chemical weapons.³⁷
2. **Arms Control.** President Biden must raise concerns about the existence of a Russian offensive chemical weapons program, Russia’s growing arsenal of unconstrained, non-strategic nuclear weapons, and novel nuclear weapons entering Russia’s strategic forces. President Biden should make clear that any future arms control agreement with Russia must cover all existing nuclear weapons.³⁸ Finally, President Biden should refuse to make any concessions on U.S. missile defenses. While Russia maintains the false accusation that U.S. missile defenses harm its strategic stability, all existing and planned U.S. missile defense deployments would not affect Russia’s massive nuclear arsenal and are necessary to defend the U.S. and allies from North Korean missiles.
3. **Assassinations and Assassination Attempts.** Russia claims that it destroyed its chemical weapons stockpiles, but it continues to research, develop, and weaponize Novichok nerve agents at the very least.³⁹ The 1997 CWC prohibits the development, production, acquisition, stockpiling, retention, transfer, or use of chemical weapons by state parties.⁴⁰ President Biden should hold Putin accountable for violating the CWC in the past and urge him to cease violating it in the future.

4. **Cyberattacks.** Russian actors have shown that they are not afraid to launch major cyberattacks against the United States, but President Biden should make clear to Putin that cyberattacks are unacceptable. They harm and shut down critical U.S. infrastructure. President Biden should also declare that U.S. companies, such as Colonial Pipeline, should not be expected to pay a ransom to gain control over their networks again.
5. **Human Rights.** Finally, President Biden should urge Putin to allow Russian citizens to protest peacefully without government interference, especially because Russia is supposedly a democracy. President Biden should also encourage Putin to prioritize the rights of his people—by ridding the local governments of corruption, by ceasing stealing money from citizens for his own gain, and by allowing opposition figures to run in future elections. President Biden should also urge Putin to release Aleksei Navalny from prison, since he remains there based on false charges. Finally, President Biden must do whatever he can to bring Paul Whelan and Trevor Reed home, where they belong.

Russia's Imperial Ambitions

So far in his presidency, President Biden has held Russia accountable for some of its transgressions, but not all of them, in an effort to “be proportionate” and have a “stable, predictable relationship.”⁴¹ This could appear to be a return to the era of the Obama Administration’s failed “Russian reset.”

President Biden needs to remember that Putin has imperial ambitions and will continue to exploit current situations to his own benefit if he is not met with significant response from the West. Under current conditions, Putin cannot be a partner to the U.S. The sooner President Biden understands this, the safer America and her allies will be.

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