

ISSUE BRIEF

No. 4886 | JULY 12, 2018

The Trump–Putin Summit: The U.S. President Must Be Strong, Clear, and Consistent

Luke Coffey

On July 16, President Donald Trump will meet his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin in Helsinki, Finland. While the two have met on the sidelines of other international meetings in the past, this will be the first time that the two leaders engage in substantial talks. While there is nothing wrong with heads-of-state meetings, President Trump should go into this summit with his eyes wide open. Since coming to power in 1999, Putin has never shown 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 Trump should use this meeting as an opportunity to press Putin on issues like aggression against Ukraine and Georgia, Moscow’s support for Syria and Iran, and meddling in the election campaigns of Western democracies.

Russian Aggression

President Putin has not been good for Russia. His reign has sent democracy in retreat; eroded basic freedoms (of speech, assembly, and a free press); oppressed—and sometimes killed—minority groups and political opposition figures; and left the country’s economy in tatters.

To distract his people from their many woes, he 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 shown that it will use military force and military occupation to expand its territory and influence. Russia invaded the Republic of Georgia in 2008 and continues to occupy, illegally, 20 percent of that country’s territory. A decade later, it is still in violation of the six-point cease-fire agreement.

Six years later in 2014, 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.

In Syria, Russia is propping up President Bashar al-Assad allowing him to prolong the violence and suffering experienced by millions of civilians. Russia has made excuse after excuse for Syria’s illegal use of chemical weapons against civilians. Moscow has made a mockery of “de-escalation zones” as has recently been seen by the tragic events unfolding in southern Syria.

Russia has weaponized its natural gas exports to Europe, turning off the tap when countries dare go against its wishes. It has conducted cyberattacks against the U.S. and its NATO allies and partners. Moscow has even conducted military exercises to simulate a nuclear strike against NATO member Poland and NATO partner Sweden.

Russia is undermining America’s security and interests in other regions of the globe, too. It is wide-

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib4886>

The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002
(202) 546-4400 | heritage.org

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

ly reported to be providing weapons and training to the Taliban in Afghanistan. It consistently provides diplomatic cover for Iran and its nuclear program and abets Tehran's destabilizing actions across the Middle East. Russia has also meddled in the domestic election campaigns of the U.S. and its allies.

Strength, Clarity, and Consistency

Vladimir Putin respects three things: strength, clarity, and consistency. President Barack Obama displayed none of these traits. He weakened America's foreign policy hand by downsizing the military and cutting back its presence in Europe. In addition, his Russian "reset" policy in 2009 confused and alarmed many U.S. allies—both in Europe and around the globe.

As long as Putin remains in power, nobody should expect Russia to become a credible partner for the U.S. In dealing with Putin, President Trump needs to show resolve, pushing back when pushed. At the Helsinki Summit, President Trump should:

- **Take a realistic approach to Russia.** As long as Putin remains in power, the experiences of the George W. Bush and Obama Administrations show that Russia will not be a credible partner of the U.S. The Trump Administration should learn from the mistakes of the past instead of repeating them in the future.
- **Refrain from referring to NATO's military exercises or presence in Eastern Europe as provocative.** When President Trump referred to U.S. and South Korean military exercises as "provocative," he fed right into the North Korean propaganda machine. NATO exercises play an important role in maintaining the readiness of the alliance to fulfill its core mission of collective defense. They are only a threat to Russia if Russia chooses to invade a NATO member.
- **Resist Russia's attempts to link Ukraine to its role in Syria.** The current sanctions on Russia are linked only to Ukraine and the progress, or lack thereof, taking place there—not in any other region (such as Syria). Putin is likely to try to parlay an increasingly important role in Syria into a reduction in sanctions and legitimization of Russia's control of Crimea. The U.S. should resist these efforts, making it clear to Russia that U.S. policy toward Russia when it comes to Ukraine will be judged by Russian actions there, not held hostage to promises of helpful behavior elsewhere.
- **Issue a public non-recognition statement on Crimea.** In 1940, acting Secretary of State Sumner Welles issued a statement declaring that the U.S. would never recognize the legitimacy of Soviet occupation of the Baltic states. The Trump Administration should issue a similar declaration stating that the U.S. will never recognize the legitimacy of Russian claims to annexed Crimea. President Trump should remind Putin that he does not have a veto over future NATO enlargement.
- **Press Russia to fully restore Ukraine's internationally recognized territory.** This includes the Crimean peninsula and the Donbas region in eastern Ukraine. From these two regions, Russia must remove all of its troops, Russian mercenaries, and security officials. Moscow must also introduce a robust disarming and demobilization program for Russian-backed separatists in these regions.
- **Push Russia to live up to the commitments it made in the Minsk II cease-fire agreement in Ukraine.** President Trump should make it clear that the U.S. expects Russia to honor its commitment to the Minsk agreements and de-escalate violence in Ukraine.
- **Make a clear commitment to continue Ukraine-related sanctions against Russia.** Russia continues occupation of Crimea as well as daily violations of the Minsk II agreement, fanning the flames of a conflict that continues to engulf Ukraine. As long as Russia violates Ukraine sovereignty, the U.S. should continue economic sanctions against those who are responsible.
- **Push Russia to live up to its commitments in the 2008 six-point cease-fire agreement with Georgia.** It is utterly unacceptable that almost 10 years later, Russia still does not fully abide by the cease-fire agreement. The U.S. should work with allies to pressure Russia to allow international monitors and humanitarian aid into the occupied regions, and to pull back Russian forces to their pre-August 2008 locations.

- **Press Putin to end his support for Syrian President Assad and demonstrate a genuine willingness to work with the international community to bring a political end to the Syrian civil war.** When it appeared that Assad was on the ropes in 2016, Russia militarily intervened and has since propped up the Syrian dictator. This has since prolonged the killing, which has left more than 600,000 people dead and has turned Syria into a breeding ground for Islamic extremism. The sooner this civil war ends, the better for everyone.
- **Reiterate America's commitment to Europe.** President Trump should reiterate that it is in America's best interests to remain actively engaged in NATO. A peaceful, stable Europe has led to economic, political, and military dividends that have had an immeasurably positive effect on the U.S.
- **Commit unconditionally to America's NATO treaty obligations.** As long as the U.S. remains a member of the Alliance, it must make crystal clear to any adversary that an attack on one NATO member will be considered an attack on all. Any deviation from this Article 5 commitment will only invite aggression.
- **Pressure Putin to cease all meddling in the domestic elections of the U.S. and its allies.** All 17 U.S. intelligence agencies concluded that Russia meddled in the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign. Similar accusations have been made against Russia concerning elections in France, Germany, and Italy. This behavior is not acceptable for a G8 member.

The Failure of Obama's Reset

Russia's actions today have their roots in the failure of the Obama Administration's "reset," combined with Putin's imperial ambitions. Russia has been able to exploit the situation to its own benefit, calculating that the West will not respond in any significant way. Putin cannot be a partner to the U.S. under current conditions. The sooner President Trump understands this, the safer America and her allies will be.

—*Luke Coffey is Director of the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy, of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for National Security and Foreign Policy, at The Heritage Foundation.*