

The Trump-Putin Summit

July 20, 2018 (IN10933)

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On July 16, 2018, U.S. President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin held a summit in Helsinki, Finland. This was the first U.S.-Russia summit since 2010, when President Barack Obama met with Putin's predecessor Dmitry Medvedev in Prague to sign the [New START](#) strategic arms reduction treaty.

The Presidents characterized the July 2018 summit as a first step to improving relations. President Trump stated his view that the United States and Russia need "to find ways to cooperate in pursuit of shared interests" and resolve global challenges. President Putin said his goal is to restore an acceptable level of trust and past levels of cooperation on issues of mutual interest.

Media reports have focused on President Trump's [remarks](#) about whether or not he believes the U.S. intelligence community's conclusion that Russia interfered in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. However, the summit discussions apparently ranged widely and touched on many issues central to U.S.-Russia relations.

Some observers suggest the Trump Administration's efforts at rapprochement are no different than efforts of past Administrations to "reset" relations with Russia. Others point out these past efforts were temporary at best or that rapprochement is not possible until Russia reverses its actions in Ukraine and ceases interfering in U.S. and European domestic affairs, among other hostile activities.

Neither the White House nor the Russian administration has released a formal readout of the summit, which included a private meeting of the Presidents. The main topics were reportedly as follows, based on transcripts of the summit press conference and media interviews in English ([here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)) and in Russian ([here](#) and [here](#)), and subsequent official clarifications.

- **Election Interference.** In addition to his remarks on whether or not he believes the U.S. intelligence community assessment, President Trump said he directly addressed election interference in his meeting with Putin and that "we spent a great deal of time talking about it." In a subsequent interview, President Trump added that he was "very strong on the fact that we can't have meddling.... I let him know we can't have this, we're not going to have it, and that's the way it's going to be."

President Putin said he told President Trump that "the Russian state has never interfered and is not going to interfere in U.S. domestic affairs, including election processes." However, Putin also argued

that "you can't believe anybody" and insisted that one of the companies under U.S. indictment (run by a wealthy businessperson close to Putin) is a "private" company that "does not represent the Russian state."

- **Syria.** President Putin suggested that "the task of establishing peace and reconciliation" in Syria can be an area for successful cooperation and stated his view that the two countries might also cooperate on refugee return.

Putin also expressed support for the Syrian regime's current offensive ("crushing terrorists," as he put it) in southwestern Syria, where Russia and the United States agreed in 2017 to establish a de-escalation zone. Putin indicated that Russia expected the situation to return to the prewar status quo governed by the 1974 Israel-Syria Disengagement Agreement, which provides for separation of Syrian and Israeli forces around the Golan Heights.

President Trump noted the importance of assisting the "people of Syria ... on a humanitarian basis" and "creating safety for Israel." He said he made clear the "the United States will not allow Iran to benefit from our successful campaign" against the Islamic State.

- **Arms Control.** The Russian delegation reportedly presented a set of proposals to "fine-tune dialogue on strategic stability," including discussions on extending the New START Treaty, implementing the [INF Treaty](#) prohibiting intermediate-range missiles (which the United States has accused Russia of violating), missile defense, and space weapons. In an interview, President Putin said he assured President Trump that Russia "is prepared to extend" the New START Treaty, which expires in 2021.
- **Nonproliferation.** President Trump said they discussed the denuclearization of North Korea and that President Putin wanted "very much to end that problem." In an interview, he added that Putin "said he would help" on North Korea and "agrees with what I'm doing."

With respect to Iran, the Presidents referenced their opposing positions on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), from which the Trump Administration withdrew in May 2018. Putin said the JCPOA "effectively ensures the exclusively peaceful nature of the Iranian nuclear program" and expressed concern about the U.S. withdrawal. President Trump said he "emphasized the importance of placing pressure on Iran to halt its nuclear ambitions."

- **Counterterrorism and Cybersecurity.** President Putin called for restoring a Working Group on Counterterrorism that was suspended after Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine and reiterated a proposal to establish a working group on cybersecurity. President Trump said the Presidents "agreed to maintain open communication between our security agencies to protect our citizens" from "radical Islamic terrorism."
- **Ukraine.** President Putin said the Presidents discussed the Ukraine conflict and implementation of the Minsk Agreements for resolving the conflict. Putin suggested the United States could be firmer in encouraging Ukraine to fulfill its commitments. Putin also said President Trump adhered to U.S. policy recognizing Crimea as part of Ukraine. President Trump did not mention Ukraine in his public remarks.
- **Working Groups.** [According](#) to the U.S. Department of State, three concrete "modest" proposals —"a high-level working group with business leaders," "some sort of an expert council," and meetings of the two security councils "to discuss follow-up meetings"—were the "three takeaways from the meeting" and "a pretty good place to start."

To date, there is no indication that the following subjects were discussed:

- **State-Sponsored Violence.** Neither President said that assassination attempts, including the March 2018 nerve agent attack on UK citizen and former Russian intelligence officer Sergei Skripal and his daughter, or other alleged acts of Russian state-supported violence were discussed.
- **Sanctions.** Neither President indicated that [U.S. sanctions on Russia](#) were discussed.

After the meeting, many Members of Congress expressed [concern](#) about the lack of clarity concerning what was discussed in the private meeting and are [considering new legislation](#) related to Russia. President Trump has invited Putin to the White House in the fall.