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Clara Weiss
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Russian President Vladimir Putin and US President Joe Biden to meet in mid-June

On Tuesday, the White House and the Kremlin announced that US President Joe Biden and his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, will meet on June 16 in Geneva for bilateral talks.

The meeting will take place amid high tensions between the US and Russia over a whole range of geopolitical flashpoints, most notably Ukraine, where the Kiev government's strategy to "recover Crimea" triggered a dangerous military crisis in the Black Sea region in April.



In this March 10, 2011, file photo, then Vice President Joe Biden, left, shakes hands with Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin in Moscow, Russia. (AP Photo/Alexander Zemlianichenko, File)

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Ever since the US- and EU-backed 2014 coup in Kiev, which heavily relied on neo-fascist forces, the US and NATO have grown their military presence on Russia's borders, staging numerous military and political provocations. Most recently, Washington and Berlin have heavily backed the anti-Putin oppositionist Alexei Navalny, a far-right figure falsely portrayed as a "martyr" and fighter for "democracy" by the Western press.

When coming into office, Biden appointed numerous figures that had been involved in the 2014 coup and advocate a rabidly anti-Russian course. However, Biden also made a point of prolonging the START nuclear treaty early on in his administration and proposed this summit to Putin personally amid the crisis in the Black Sea region in April. Moreover, following extensive discussions with German foreign policy leaders, the Biden administration also had announced that it would exempt the Russian-German gas pipeline Nord Stream 2 from a new round of sanctions against Russia, at least for the time being.

According to a brief statement by the White House at the summit: "The leaders will discuss the full range of pressing issues, as we seek to restore predictability and stability to the U.S.-Russia relationship." Republican Senator Ben Sasse, who is a member of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, was one of many who denounced the summit, saying, "We're rewarding Putin with a summit? Putin imprisoned Alexei Navalny and his puppet Lukashenko hijacked a plane to get Roman Protasevich. Instead of treating Putin like a gangster who fears his own people, we're giving him his treasured Nord Stream 2 pipeline and legitimizing his actions with a summit. This is weak."

At a press conference, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki defended the meeting, stating, "This is how diplomacy works. We don't only meet with people only when we agree. It's important to meet with leaders when we have a range of disagreements, as we do with the Russian leader."

The summit comes amid ongoing discussions in Washington about the orientation of US foreign policy in light of the growing conflict with China. The Biden administration has further escalated the Trump administration's war preparations against China. It has changed its policy toward Taiwan and is now also propagating the lie that the coronavirus originated in a laboratory in Wuhan.

Over the past decade, in response to growing pressure from US imperialism, Russia and China have developed an increasingly close collaboration on economic, technological and military levels. This was underscored by the three-day visit of Yang Jiechi, the head of China's central committee for foreign affairs, to Moscow this week where he reportedly engaged in strategic and security consultations with the Russian foreign ministry. A few weeks ago, Putin described bilateral relations as being at the "best level in history."

However, Russia and China so far have not established a formal military alliance. Several weeks before the US elections last year, Putin suggested that such an alliance was a possibility at a meeting with the Valdai Discussion Club, a leading Russian think tank for foreign policy. The announcement and a series of meetings between high-ranking Russian and Chinese government officials have triggered discussions in Washington about the potential costs of such an alliance for the US.

In early May, *Foreign Affairs* published a piece, "How to Encounter an Emerging Partnership. China's and Russia's Dangerous Convergence." The authors, Andrea Kendall-Taylor and David Shullman, are active in various think tanks and previously had long careers as a high-ranking intelligence officers for the US with a focus on Russia and China, respectively.

The authors stressed that they did not advocate that the US integrate Moscow into an alliance against Beijing—a strategy that Henry Kissinger, the foreign policy advisor of President Richard Nixon, reportedly advised the Trump administration to adopt several years ago. Instead, they suggested "a far more modest and incremental approach designed to demonstrate to the people around Putin the benefits of a more balanced and independent Russian foreign policy."

They wrote: "The Chinese-Russian relationship is not impermeable, and the United States should not shy away from proactive measures to exploit its fissures. U.S. efforts to capitalize on minor tensions may not change the overall trajectory of the two countries' relationship. But driving even small wedges between the partners can contribute to friction and mistrust that limit the extent of cooperation. In the Arctic, for example, Russia is seeking to limit the role of non-Arctic states—especially China—in regional governance. The United States should support Moscow in this endeavor, as it shares an interest in limiting Chinese influence in the region."

Other countries where the interests of Beijing and Moscow clashed, they argued, were Iran and Belarus. Belarus is a small country on Russia's western border. The country maintains very close economic ties to Russia. However, in recent years China has also developed major investment projects there. Belarus has become a centerpiece in the conflict between Russia and the EU and US when mass protests and strikes broke out against the Lukashenko government last August. While the Kremlin has temporarily backed the Lukashenko regime, relations are tense and volatile.

The Russian press is warning that the renewed sanctions against Belarus by the EU over the Lukashenko's hijacking of a plane carrying opposition journalist Roman Protasevich could cost the Russian economy \$5 billion and is openly discussing the removal of Lukashenko. The internet newspaper Gazeta.Ru reported Thursday that President Putin had discussed Belarus with Biden directly over the phone and later formally apologized to Lukashenko for doing so. Belarus will be an item on the agenda of the Biden-Putin summit.

The *Foreign Affairs* piece was immediately translated into Russian and has been widely discussed in Russian foreign policy circles, which for some time now have become accustomed to discussing the fate of Russia-US relations in the context of the broader US rivalry with China. Sections of the Russian oligarchy no doubt fear a Sino-Russian alliance as leverage in the Kremlin's ongoing efforts to negotiate with the imperialist powers.

On May 26, the *Washington Post*, which has been spearheading the anti-China campaign over the "Wuhan lab lie," published an opinion piece by Isaac Stone Fish. Fish is the founder of Strategy Risks, a company that "quantifies the corporate exposure" of US companies to China, an adjunct professor at NYU and visiting fellow at the German Marshall Fund think tank.

The piece argued that "Moscow has more to fear from Beijing than Washington" and that in Central Asia, in particular, Russian and Chinese interests clash. The region, where Russia used to be the dominant economic power, has over the past two decades developed extremely close relations with China. Fish also pointed to longstanding discussions in Russia's elites about potential territorial conflict with China over Siberia, and noted that,

“Russia is inescapably the junior partner in the relationship. China is Russia’s largest trading partner, while Russia isn’t even in China’s top 10.”

Fish wrote: “Despite the countless irritants in the U.S.-Russia relationship, all this means that there is now space to enlist Moscow as a silent but meaningful partner in the global campaign to curb the pernicious aspects of the Chinese Communist Party’s international influence.” Pointing to the long history of conflict between the two countries, especially during the Sino-Soviet split, he concluded: “When President Biden meets Putin in June for the first in-person summit between the two leaders, one hopes he will keep this history in mind.”

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