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Cheang, Chris

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Trump-Putin Helsinki Summit: So Who Gained?

By Chris Cheang

Synopsis

The recent Helsinki meeting between Presidents Trump and Putin will be recorded in history as the commencement of a long process of stabilisation and normalisation of US-Russia relations, which hitherto have been described as worse than during the Cold War. In that respect, the meeting could be described as a limited success.

Commentary

THE HELSINKI summit between President Donald Trump and President Vladimir Putin on 16 July 2018, tellingly, ended without a joint statement. Such a document could have at least outlined the differences between the two major powers and how they intended to overcome them. In that respect one could argue that Helsinki was a failure.

However, the absence of any expectations of the meeting and the wide gulf between the two countries on a variety of issues, as well as the profound mutual suspicions, made it clear that even had a joint statement been issued, its value would have been questioned. To that extent, the fact that the meeting took place at all could be seen as a limited success.

Summit's Value for Both Sides

The Helsinki meeting was done in two parts – a two-hour long private session between the two leaders followed by a bigger meeting with their senior aides present. Prior to this meeting, observers of Russo-US relations on both sides were correct to have concluded that the relationship was bordering on hostility, with some commentators even predicting open conflict were the relationship to continue along that path. The reasons for this state of affairs are well-known.

For both sides, the summit might pave the way for further meetings at the experts' level to iron out differences and seek ways to resolve a host of issues. In his prepared remarks to the media at the press conference, President Putin cited four issues that the two leaders dealt with:

These were arms control; the Syrian and Ukrainian crises; the North Korean denuclearisation process; the Iranian nuclear issue as well as the most thorny bilateral issue – what President Putin described as the “so-called Russian interference in the electoral process in the US”.

President Trump, on his part, echoed President Putin's points on the need for arms control “for the sake of peace”, nuclear non-proliferation (meaning the North Korean issue), Syria, as well as Islamist terrorism. He also emphasised that they had discussed “the issue of Russian interference in our elections”.

Value of Meeting to Trump

For President Trump, Helsinki provided some level of justification for his consistent course and views on the need to improve bilateral relations, his argument being that this path was vital, since both countries possessed the majority of destructive nuclear weapons in the world.

It also is a reflection of his belief that allegations of collusion between his presidential election campaign and Russia, would finally be put to rest, with President Putin's consistent denials, this time before the media of both countries and a world audience.

The only disadvantage to President Trump of the meeting is the fact that his perceived pro-Russian sentiments in sections of the US media and among his political opponents and critics, have been deepened after Helsinki, judging by the commentary on and remarks about the meeting.

Nevertheless, President Trump does not appear to be too concerned about the domestic reaction to his meeting and this fact can be seen by his invitation to Putin to visit the US in the autumn.

Value to President Putin

On the other hand, President Putin's prestige at home has risen with this meeting.

As pointed out in an earlier commentary, it is in Russia's interest to stabilise and normalise relations with the US, given that it is the weaker of the two powers. Moreover, the US has consistently been seen, despite the rise of China and its growing importance to Russia, as the “main opponent”.

A reduction of current tensions in the relationship is in Russia's clear interest as that would lead ultimately to lifting of US and EU sanctions. Russia's Euro/Western-centric leaders, and President Putin is not an exception to this rule, have consistently and regularly focused their main attention on the US, in the first instance and the EU.

Meeting President Trump in Helsinki represents the pinnacle hitherto of President Putin's efforts to break the West's isolation of Russia since relations worsened after the annexation of the Crimea and the Ukrainian crisis.

Third, coming after the successful hosting of the 2018 World Cup, Helsinki represents a high-point in President Putin's foreign policy (and domestic) achievements in the last few years and has been presented to his people as such. Like their leaders, the Russian people measure their country's place in the world and accomplishments against those of the US/West.

Fourth, by ensuring that the relationship with the US would now move forward, President Putin seeks to signal to China that Russia will not remain in a tenuous situation vis-à-vis China for any longer than necessary. In that regard, he might be hoping to strengthen further economic links with China, with a stronger hand than in the recent past and without coming across as a supplicant. Russia's close links with China became all too apparent after the Crimean and Ukrainian crises.

Finally, President Putin was given an opportunity before a world audience and more importantly, before President Trump (again) to personally counter allegations of Russian interference in the US electoral process during the press conference and in an interview with Fox News thereafter, even if he knew that there still would be doubting Thomases among members of this audience.

Value to Rest of the World

The world as a whole and ASEAN as a region, can take some comfort from the probability that the Russo-US relationship from now onwards, is likely to move towards some form of stability and normalisation, even if the process is going to take some time.

The hitherto hostility in their relationship is neither in their interest nor in that of the wider world, not least because of the destructive potential of their nuclear weapons.

Chris Cheang is a Senior Fellow in the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. He served three tours in Moscow in the Singapore Embassy.
