



The Impact of the Trump-Putin Meeting on NATO Political Cohesion

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The confidential nature of U.S. President Donald Trump's talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin and the uncertainty surrounding any arrangements agreed during them may have a negative impact on NATO's further adaptation to threats from Russia. For some Alliance members, the talks may be a signal that instead of investing in deterrence and defence, NATO should look for ways to resume cooperation with Russia. In that case, the Alliance would also find it more difficult to maintain consensus on support for Ukraine and Georgia.

The U.S. and Russian presidents met in Helsinki on 19 July for their first official summit since Trump took office in January 2017. The leaders held a two-hour behind-closed-doors meeting (with only one interpreter each) before they joined their delegations for further discussions. According to the Russian side, Trump and Putin reached important agreements and Russia is ready to implement them as soon as possible. The confidential nature of the conversation and the attitude of the U.S. president, who during a press conference that followed blamed his own country for the deterioration of relations with Russia, stirred much controversy in the U.S. and among American allies. Trump had announced recently that another meeting with Putin would be held this fall in Washington but, probably in response to a wave of criticism, the White House decided to postpone it to early next year.

Trump's Goals and U.S. Interests. Trump's meeting with Putin was an attempt to normalise U.S. relations with Russia amidst growing strategic confrontation. Although such attempts were made by previous U.S. presidents, the problems were irreconcilable, above all, the different visions of the European security system. Russia did not agree to the enlargement of NATO or a permanent US military presence in the new member states of the Alliance. By destabilising European security through aggression against Georgia, the annexation of Crimea, fuelling conflict in the east of Ukraine, and threatening NATO and EU countries, Russia has significantly increased the cost of maintaining security in Europe for the U.S., NATO, and the EU. In sending troops to Syria in defence of the regime of Bashar al-Assad, Putin also created a situation in which finding a solution to a conflict that also was destabilising European security was virtually impossible without Russia's participation.

Trump could present an exit from the stalemate in relations with Russia as a success and, in the short term, it would increase his support among the public. However, such a breakthrough takes Congress, which requires the president to consult with it before any attempts to abolish the sanctions imposed on Russia in connection with its annexation of Crimea and interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. The president's room for manoeuvre is also limited by the State Department and the Pentagon, which tend to promote cooperation with Russia that does not jeopardise the strategic interests of the U.S. and its allies. It seems that talking with Putin one-on-one was intended to help Trump circumvent these restrictions through political commitments and demand his administration find ways to implement the agreements.

The attempts to normalise relations with Russia have been accompanied by a deterioration of political relations with traditional U.S. allies. Before the meeting with Putin, the U.S. president insulted Canada during the G7 summit, which ended in acrimony. He then forced a change in the agenda of the NATO summit to strengthen criticism of Allies whose spending on defence is too low. After the meeting with Putin, the U.S. president made it clear that the admission of Montenegro to NATO in 2017 was a mistake, undermining the traditional U.S. commitment to the Alliance's open-door policy.

Despite Trump's controversial statements about NATO, strategic documents clearly indicate that maintaining the post-Cold War security architecture in Europe is in the interest of the United States. The 2017 National Security Strategy (signed by Trump) and the 2018 National Defence Strategy indicate that Russia and China are revisionist powers that in the long run may pose a threat to American security and prosperity. The defence strategy also emphasises the importance of allies for the ability to deter rivals. However, the prospect of conflict in Europe with Russia does not pose as significant a threat to the U.S. as during the Cold War. This has allowed Trump to escalate tensions with the Allies to try to force a change in trade relations into something more favourable to the U.S., which has a \$100 billion-dollar trade deficit with the EU, \$60 billion with Germany alone. While undermining the credibility of the U.S. security guarantee within NATO, he also demanded the Allies increase defence spending to at least 2% of GDP quicker than planned. The Alliance already recognises the need to increase spending to this level to be able to conduct both a collective defence mission and several crisis-response missions at the same time.

Russia's Success. For Putin, his meeting with Trump can be considered a success. The Russian president strives to rebuild Russia's position as a superpower and to do that, he aims to undermine the post-Cold War security system in Europe. The meeting took place even as Russia continues to destabilise European security and despite the evidence it interfered in the 2016 American elections. Putin used the meeting to present himself as a strong leader with whom the U.S. must cooperate even though Russia has not changed its aggressive policy. Trump's statements signalling that the U.S. shared responsibility for the deterioration of mutual relations may help Russia convert this tactical success into strategic benefits. Russia will be able to refer to the words of the American president to promote its own vision of European security, which is based on its claimed right to influence the security policy of other states. Thanks to the one-on-one meeting, Putin also gained additional psychological and political leverage against Ukraine. Russia has already stated that Putin proposed to Trump that a referendum be held on the status of the eastern regions of Ukraine, which could lead to its further partition (Crimea being the first). This is a clear attempt to intimidate the Ukrainian authorities and force them to accept unfavourable conditions for ending the conflict in a way that gives Russia a *de facto* right to decide Ukrainian foreign policy.

Impact on NATO Cohesion. The Putin-Trump summit may undermine NATO political cohesion, which would be most visible in two main areas. First of all, contrary to Trump's expectations, some Alliance member states will not be more determined to raise spending and strengthen their military capabilities. At the July NATO summit in Brussels, the Allies approved important decisions to strengthen NATO's command and force structures, but the consensus on the Alliance's adaptation to new threats is fragile. U.S. pressure in the form of extortion will make it politically more difficult for some Allies to increase spending, especially those not directly threatened by Russia. The signal that the U.S. president is ready to seek compromise with Russia may also embolden some European countries to press NATO on a return to cooperation with Russia. In the absence of a change in Russian policy, this would be a sign of NATO's strategic weakness, which could encourage Russia to escalate its demands.

Second, there is the risk of a decline in political will among NATO members to defend the wider European security system. NATO provides political and practical support to partner countries, including Ukraine and Georgia, and has maintained the open-door policy as a demonstration of the lack of acquiescence to a Russian sphere of privileged interests. It also coordinates its policy towards Russia (sanctions, arms control) with initiatives under the G7, the EU, and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe. Russian-American rapprochement may strengthen the group of countries that openly question the rationale for the sanctions imposed on Russia. Individual states may also seek to limit political and military cooperation with the former republics of the Soviet Union, both on a bilateral basis and within NATO.

The first test of Alliance cohesion may be its exercises with Georgia in 2019, in which the Allies have declared significant participation. It is in Poland's interest to support Georgia in its efforts to obtain the widest possible presence of NATO troops, including the major powers and the states from the south of Europe. It will also be a challenge for Poland to push for NATO's further adaptation to the threat from Russia, which will require the simultaneous development of NATO out-of-area crisis-response capability and increasing involvement in missions and operations in the south.