**Joe versus Vlad**

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Later this week, US President Joe Biden will make his first international trip. Unlike Donald Trump whose first trip was to Saudi Arabia, Biden will see America’s closest allies first before heading to Geneva to confront or cajole Vladimir Putin on Russia’s relationships with the US and NATO. After the G-7 summit in Cornwall in the southwest of England, the president joins the NATO heads of government and state at a meeting in Brussels. And then on to the main event.

Each of these meetings could dominate this trip, for good or ill. While the G-7’s headline event is agreement on a global 15 percent minimum corporate tax, the less publicised agenda should focus on means to end the pandemic as quickly as possible — in part by making vaccines universally available — and economic planning for the recovery. Regarding this last category, discussions over sanctions against Russia and China will not yield consensus. The Nord Stream 2 pipeline is a top priority for Germany. And as American businesses view China as a golden opportunity, so too do Europeans meaning Biden’s tough policies likewise will not prove popular.

In Brussels, at NATO headquarters, unlike Trump’s heavy handed visit that offended friends, Biden has been hugely supportive of the Alliance for decades. The final communique, already drafted, will be a glowing statement of Alliance coherence and unity. Unfortunately, the many fissures and tiny cracks in solidarity will not be repaired. And Putin knows this.

Had the Biden administration had more time to draft a plan for revitalising NATO and the time to socialise it with the other twenty-nine alliance members, Moscow might have been impressed. PR is fine and necessary. However, concrete steps such as insisting on smarter defense spending rather than simply more of it; dealing more forcefully with Russian “active measures” (or “gray area operations” and “hybrid war”) to counter cyber, disinformation and misinformation operations; and emphasis on arms control and confidence building measures with Moscow would have been convincing that NATO is back after a gap year that lasted much longer under Trump.

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What then does the president expect to achieve in his meeting with Putin? First, for summits to be successful, one day is hardly enough time given that translations alone cut discussion in half. When President Richard Nixon decided on his opening to China, Henry Kissinger spent days negotiating with Beijing’s leadership to ensure both sides fully understood the interest of the other before the 1972 visit.

The Biden agenda should be to agree on a modus operandi first and then detail specific areas such as cyber; arms control; Ukraine; terrorism; and sanctions to more detailed working level discussions. Then a second summit could be scheduled in six months to reach agreement where interests are overlapping and define rules of the road where those interests may be in conflict or could collide to prevent the worst from happening. That said, unless lengthy in person consultations have been ongoing at the levels of Secretary of State and National Security Advisor, it is unclear what the US side expects to achieve.

A repeat of the chilly Baked Alaska meeting with China would not be welcome. From the open press, Putin has expressed a willingness for improving relations with the US. The SolarWinds, Colonial Pipeline and JBS hacks may of course be deal breakers as the best Putin will promise is assistance in tracking down the perpetrators, denying of course that his government was involved.

While the Open Skies Treaty should not have been allowed to expire, arms control for both sides is critical. Technologies such as hypersonic missiles; AI and machine learning; pinpoint accuracies with relatively small warheads that could target nuclear armed missiles; and others such as missile defense complicate arms control. Yet, working groups should be established to find common areas of agreement to reduce or limit arms races.

Military to military talks have often proved to be successful when focused on specific military subjects such as preventing accidental encounters such as aircraft or ship collisions and de-conflicting military interactions. Mutual restraints on exercises and advance notification as once existed likewise could be grounds for agreement. And of course any efforts to advance arms control to rebuild confidence would benefit both sides.

Domestic politics cannot be dismissed and may play an oversized role. No matter how well or badly President Biden handles the summit, he will be savaged by the (dis)loyal opposition just as Democrats dealt with Trump. Putin is less constrained. That said, progress is vital. But turning what is almost certainly Joe versus Vlad meeting into Joe and Vlad summit may be many bridges too far.

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