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The Aftermath of the Helsinki Summit

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BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 919, August 12, 2018

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin held a historic summit in Helsinki, Finland on July 15 that was assessed by many as a defeat for US prestige and interests. The summit should not, however, be construed as a Russian victory. US foreign policy moves after the summit indicate that there is little chance for meaningful improvement in bilateral relations. The complexity of issues surrounding Syria, Ukraine, Georgia, and Iran will continue to weigh heavily on US-Russian diplomatic efforts.

Ukraine, which struggles with pro-Russian forces in the east of the country, was deeply apprehensive in the lead-up to the Trump-Putin summit in Helsinki on July 15. Its fears were largely unrealized. The summit, though hailed as a triumph for Putin by many Russian analysts and politicians, did not really bring about any changes in Moscow's favor. In fact, on July 25, the US Department of State issued the "Crimea Declaration," which is its strongest statement yet of the US position denouncing Russian moves against Ukraine. This might not mean much from a geopolitical point of view, but it further commits Washington to its policy of non-recognition of Russian territorial gains.

Moreover, the US announced that it would give Ukraine around \$200 million to strengthen its defense capabilities. Though the Pentagon indicated that the funds would be for training, communications, medical, and other non-lethal operational needs, the timing of the decision is notable. Ukraine is a crucial component of US containment policy.

Another contested theater in the former Soviet space is Georgia, which lies between the West and Russia. Georgian officials feared that Trump might weaken support for the South Caucasian country in the face of Russian military pressure in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. This has not happened. On the contrary: On August 1, a two-week long US and Georgia-led [Noble Partner](#)

military exercise [started](#) near Tbilisi, the country's capital. Over 3,000 troops [are taking part](#) in the drills, including personnel from the US military as well as other participating nations, including France, Germany, Norway, Poland, Turkey, Ukraine, and Britain. Washington is well aware of how sensitive the Russians are to such moves in their neighborhood and is undoubtedly sending a message to Russia.

On Syria, the US-Russian military cooperation was praised by both Putin and Trump at the summit. The Russian president said he intends to build on this "de-confliction" and engage with the US military in joint work on the return of refugees – but this idea was firmly rejected following the summit by the commander of US Central Command, General Joseph L. Votel. According to Votel, there is no firm ground on which military cooperation with Russia can be conducted in Syria.

Thus, following the Trump-Putin meeting, US-Russian military cooperation in Syria was limited to preventing raids by pro-Assad forces into territory east of the Euphrates, which is controlled by the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

Even on the diplomatic front Russian efforts were rebuffed. An invitation to the US to attend the latest meeting of the so-called "Astana Process," which was held in Sochi on July 30, was turned down by Washington.

After the summit, US senators introduced bipartisan legislation to impose new sanctions on Russia. The bill will probably include restrictions on new Russian sovereign debt transactions, energy and oil projects, and uranium imports, as well as new sanctions on Russian political figures and oligarchs. It also expresses strong support for NATO, requiring a two-thirds vote in the Senate for any effort to leave the alliance. This serves as yet another effort by lawmakers to punish Moscow for its interference in US elections and its activities in Syria and Ukraine.

To further repudiate Trump's claims at the Helsinki Summit, the heads of national intelligence, Homeland Security, the National Security Agency, and the FBI stressed once again that Russia has attempted and continues to attempt to undermine US democracy through various means.

These foreign policy moves clearly indicate that the Russia-US standoff is unlikely to diminish in the near future. Viewed in a global context, the Trump-Putin summit shows that despite Trump's willingness to cooperate with Moscow, real improvement is not around the corner.

We are entering an interesting period in world history. Geopolitics in Eurasia is gradually shifting. Global trends in trade as well as military affairs dictate that the US has to continue to contain Russia in the former Soviet space and the Middle East. However, the same trends also indicate that Beijing is going to become more and more troublesome. The White House will likely want to find common ground with Russia to enlist its help in the containment of China.

Still, as of 2018, that scenario is still distant. Russia in Eurasia poses a more immediate threat to US interests, and the measures introduced by Washington following the summit express the willingness of US officials to pursue Russia's containment. In other words, the summit might have been a blow to American prestige in the eyes of US allies around the globe, but Washington did not concede any essential points to the Russian side.

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BESA Center Perspectives Papers are published through the generosity of the Greg Rosshandler Family