

Trump is right to meet with Putin — Here is what they need to talk about

The announcement Thursday that President Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin will hold a summit July 16 in Helsinki, Finland is welcome news – though it predictably prompted immediate criticism from Democrats and other Trump opponents.

But we can discount the instant opposition. The Trump-haters criticize almost everything the president says and does, no matter what. Sometimes they sound like followers of Marx – Groucho Marx, that is – in this video clip from 1932, when he sang “Whatever it is, I’m against it.”

Meeting with Putin – the leader of a nation that can only be described as a gas station run by thugs armed with nuclear weapons – should not be taken as an endorsement by President Trump of everything the Putin government does, any more than Trump’s meeting with North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un should be viewed as giving that brutal regime America’s seal of approval.

As the late Israeli military leader and politician Moshe Dayan said in 1977: “If you want to make peace, you don’t talk to your friends. You talk to your enemies.”

Even before he was president, Donald Trump repeatedly said on the presidential campaign trail that he would try to forge a better relationship with Moscow, a geopolitical competitor of the first order. And you don’t need to be a grand strategist with a Ph.D. in international relations to understand the value of such a move.

Thankfully, the American people get it – they voted for Trump and elected him to the presidency because they wanted a change in foreign policy.

Think back to the long presidential campaign. Trump declared on many occasions that he would meet with foreign leaders who had very different interests than our own. He put forward the idea that it made sense to try to forge common ground in areas where we agreed and to craft a foreign policy based on shared interests.

Candidate Trump was advocating a foreign policy based on realism – something sorely needed following the years America spent promoting nation-building and regime change that have proven expensive and counterproductive.

There aren't many areas where Washington and Moscow share perceived areas of mutual interest. But there are many areas of tension that both sides need to discuss. Right now, U.S.-Russia relations are about as bad as they were during the height of the Cold War – if not worse.

So, what should be on the agenda for the Trump-Putin summit? Here are a few ideas:

The Syrian civil war. The war has raged since 2011, with the death toll in the hundreds of thousands. Over 5.6 million Syrians have fled the country as refugees and over 6 million have fled their homes and remain in the country. With U.S. and Russian forces both operating in the nation in close proximity, both sides need to work together to bring the warring parties together and craft a lasting peace. The conflict needs to be ended for the people of the region who have suffered for far too long, and so U.S. and Russia can end combat operations and withdraw their forces. We must end the danger of an incident sparking a military confrontation between Washington and Moscow.

Fighting in eastern Ukraine. This conflict has been on a slow burn for years. To this day, pro-Russian separatists – and surely Russian military personnel not in uniform – are battling the Ukrainian army. And Russia has absorbed Crimea after it forcibly seized it from Ukraine. While it might not make the front page of the Washington Post or New York Times, the Russia-Ukraine conflict could create a great-power showdown at any moment, just as is the case with the war in Syria. With America now arming Ukraine with deadly weapons and Russia looking to ensure Ukraine is unstable so it can never join NATO or the European Union, both sides need to come to an agreement to bring this conflict to a just conclusion.

Cyberwarfare and election interference. Washington and Moscow must begin to craft some sort of cyberwarfare rules of the road – or at least a truce, considering the stakes involved. While there is no doubt Moscow tried to interfere in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, America also has incredible cyberwarfare and information warfare capabilities that could cause havoc across the globe. In fact, many would argue – and I would say correctly – that the next major war will

start in cyberspace. America and Russia must begin to work together to draft an agreement – one that hopefully other nations like China, Japan, European countries and perhaps North Korea would all sign – that limits hostile state actions in cyberspace.

No government should attack another nation's election system, banking, infrastructure, hospitals or other critical systems that depend on the Internet. Just one false move, either by accident or on purpose, could spark a crisis where lives could be placed in harm's way – and lead to a shooting war. In the worst case scenario this could escalate to involve nuclear weapons.

Presidents Trump and Putin must do their best to forge a better working relationship and at least try to resolve the issues above and others. A summit between the two leaders won't settle all their differences but at least it is a step in the right direction to avert another Cold War and, even worse, a hot one.

Considering the other massive foreign policy challenges America faces in the months and years to come – a rising China that is a far bigger threat than Russia ever will be, a North Korea that still has not given up its nukes, and an Iran bent on domination of the Middle East – the Trump administration needs to remove as much from its foreign policy plate as it can.

President Trump is right to try and forge a better relationship with Putin. As he loves to say, we'll see what happens.

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