

Wide disagreements, low expectations as Biden, Putin meet



Flags of the U.S., Russia and Switzerland are pictured in the garden in front of villa La Grange, one day prior to the meeting of U.S. President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin in Geneva, Switzerland June 15, 2021. Peter Klaunzer/Pool via REUTERS

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- Summary
 - First meeting since Biden took office
 - Hope for more stable relations
 - Expectations low for any breakthrough
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GENEVA, June 16 (Reuters) - U.S. President Joe Biden and Russian President

Vladimir Putin square up on Wednesday for their first meeting since Biden took office with deep disagreements likely and expectations low for any breakthroughs.

Both have said they hope their talks in a lakeside Geneva villa can lead to more stable and predictable relations, even though they remain at odds over everything from arms control and cyber-hacking to election interference and Ukraine.

"We're not expecting a big set of deliverables out of this meeting," a senior U.S. official told reporters aboard Air Force One as Biden flew to Geneva, saying the two are expected to talk for four or five hours starting at around 1.30 p.m. (1130 GMT).

Putin arrived in Geneva on Wednesday, Reuters TV footage showed.

"I'm not sure that any agreements will be reached," said Putin's foreign policy adviser Yuri Ushakov.

Relations have deteriorated for years, notably with Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea from Ukraine, its 2015 intervention in Syria, and U.S. charges – denied by Moscow – of its meddling in the 2016 election that brought Donald Trump to the White House.

They sank further in March when Biden said he thought Putin was a "killer", prompting Russia to recall its ambassador to Washington for consultations. The United States recalled its ambassador in April.

The senior U.S. official said the United States was looking at "areas where working together can advance our national interests and make the world safer."

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said whether or not to send back ambassadors would be decided by the two presidents. "Today the presidents will need to determine how to proceed with the heads of the diplomatic missions," Peskov was quoted as saying by Russian news agencies.

While the issues may be vexing, the surroundings will be serene when the presidents meet in Villa La Grange, an elegant mansion set in a 30-hectare (nearly 75-acre) park overlooking Lake Geneva.

LOCKDOWN

On Wednesday, the summit perimeter was under a tight lockdown with heavy police presence. Following a their bilateral meeting, Biden and Putin will continue on to their discussions with broader U.S. and Russian delegations including U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, along with interpreters.

Arms control is one domain where progress has historically been possible despite wider disagreements.

In February, Russia and the United States extended for five years the New START treaty, which caps their deployed strategic nuclear warheads and limits the land- and submarine-based missiles and bombers to deliver them.

The senior U.S. official said Biden would also define areas of vital national interest where Russian misconduct would bring a response. Biden signed an executive order in April giving Washington wide latitude to impose sanctions on Moscow.

In a sign of the strained ties, the talks will not include any meals, and Putin and Biden are expected to hold separate news conferences rather than a joint one.

“No breaking of bread,” said the senior U.S. official.

Vladimir Frolov, a former Russian diplomat, told Reuters Putin wanted respectful ties and to be treated like members of the Soviet Politburo were in the 1960s-1980s, with “a symbolic recognition of Russia’s geopolitical parity with the U.S.”

“In exchange, they (Moscow) would be willing to cut back on some of the loony stuff,” Frolov said, saying he meant “no poisonings, no physical violence, no arrests/kidnappings of U.S. and Russian nationals. No interference in domestic politics.”

Dmitri Trenin, director of the Carnegie Moscow Center think tank, set the bar for Wednesday’s talks low.

“The principal takeaway, in the positive sense, from the Geneva meeting would be making sure that the United States and Russia did not come to blows physically so that a military collision is averted,” he said.

In contrast to Trump, whose 2018 summit with Putin in Helsinki included a meeting accompanied only by interpreters, Biden and Putin are not expected to have any solo dealings.

Standing beside Putin in Helsinki, Trump refused to blame the Russian leader for meddling in the 2016 U.S. election, casting doubt on the findings of his own intelligence agencies and sparking a storm of domestic criticism.

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