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The Coming Trump-Putin Summit

By Chris Cheang

Synopsis

Following his summit in Singapore with Kim Jong Un, Trump now turns to Russia's leader Vladimir Putin. Their high-level encounter this month might provide the basis for some tangible movement to ease bilateral tensions. They could well make bold, unexpected moves to stabilise relations.

Commentary

CONVENTIONAL WISDOM assumes that the scheduled 16 July 2018 Summit in Helsinki between Presidents Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin would not lead to any breakthrough in Russo-US relations.

The fact that it will take place at all is in itself an achievement, given the background of tense bilateral relations and ongoing allegations of collusion with Russia by the Trump campaign team in the United States presidential election that propelled him to the presidency last year.

Expecting A Bold Move?

One cannot totally dismiss a bold move by either president to reduce bilateral tensions. Both leaders have a host of well-known issues to discuss and resolve if possible.

These include the Syrian civil war, hostilities in eastern Ukraine, the follow-up to the North Korean denuclearisation process, arms control, the alleged Russian interference in the 2016 presidential elections, the perceived Russian threat to the Baltic states and NATO's military build-up in reaction to it, the Skripal affair and the most vital and immediate issue for Russia, the lifting or easing of US sanctions.

It would appear, at first glance, that neither leader could afford to make any move that

might be interpreted as political weakness or as an unnecessary concession, by their respective domestic constituencies.

President Trump faces a hostile mainstream media in the US (and in the West at large), as well as politicians in the US who are not enamoured of Russia. It is also well-known that he has been cast as “soft” on Russia by his critics and opponents.

While President Putin has less cause for concern when it comes to taking into consideration the views of his domestic audience, he too cannot totally disregard the fact that during the last several years, especially since the 2014 annexation of the Crimea and the outbreak of hostilities in eastern Ukraine, the Russian media and politicians, including himself, have cast the US and the West in a negative light.

He would not want to come across as inconsistent or wavering in his determination and leadership to confront Russia’s Western opponents, of whom the US is obviously the most important. Secondly, to yield to any US pressure on the several issues dividing Russia and the US during the scheduled Summit, would place President Putin in an unenviable position with his supporters as well as his detractors.

It is believed that his inner circle and members of the powerful siloviki (the men who run the military and security establishments) would look askance at any move by him that might damage Russia’s image or weaken its military position vis-à-vis the US.

Reasons for Normalisation

Nevertheless, both Presidents have strong incentives to normalise and stabilise relations. After the unprecedented Singapore Summit with Kim Jong Un on 12 June 2018, President Trump certainly has an interest in ensuring his meeting with President Putin will attain some measure of success. President Trump will be guided by the following factors:

In his worldview, business and economic/trade relations are paramount concerns and appear to taken precedence over political, security and traditional links. The larger the trade imbalance, even with allies, the greater the need to correct the imbalance, irrespective of the level of the bilateral relationship.

In that regard, President Trump has consistently criticised Germany, a close ally, for its trade imbalance with the US and in his eyes, for not adequately shouldering its share of the common defence effort in NATO.

Action too has been taken against China’s large trade balance with the US. On the other hand, Russia’s total trade with the US in 2017 totalled less than US\$24 billion, with the balance in Russia’s favour to the tune of only US\$10 billion, according to the US Census Bureau. In that sense, Russia is possibly not regarded as having “taken advantage” of the US.

Russia’s Bargaining Chips

Second, Russia has consistently been considered as an invaluable and indispensable

ally against ISIS by President Trump; he has made this point many times since he took office and did so too during his presidential campaign.

Third, Russia is the only country which has enough nuclear weapons to either destroy or incapacitate the US. That is a fact which his predecessors had always acknowledged. He too therefore cannot ignore this reality.

For President Putin, it is in Russia's interest to stabilise and normalise relations with the US. Ultimately, Russia is in the weaker position vis-à-vis the US in particular and the West in general, in military and economic terms, and President Putin is fully aware of this fact.

Moreover, since the end of WW II, the US has been considered by Moscow as the "main opponent" and if the current tensions in the relationship could be eased and normalised, that would be a feather in Putin's cap.

A lessening of tensions with the US is more than likely to make the political atmosphere amenable to the gradual lifting of both US and EU sanctions. That remains Russia's immediate objective.

Moreover, in major speeches before and after his reelection, Putin stressed that he would focus his energy on domestic development issues during his current term; in that respect, stable and normalised relations with the US and the West in general would remove a major obstacle to the realisation of his plan.

Despite the possible misgivings of members of the siloviki, President Putin remains the *primus inter pares* in the political arena, strengthened by his overwhelming victory in the March 2018 presidential elections and he can be expected to override any doubts about his approach to the US.

Like the rest of the world, ASEAN will benefit from a reduction of political tension in Russo-US relations; moreover, it might also benefit if that were to lead to a gradual change in the US' sanctions policy towards Russia. Hence, ASEAN can only welcome the scheduled Summit between Presidents Trump and Putin and hope for a tangible outcome.

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