The meeting between the Russian and US Presidents, Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump, is to take place in Helsinki on 16 July. Immediately after the National Security Advisor to the US President, John Bolton, had been hosted by the Russian leader on 27 June of this year, rumors and conjecture began circulating about the agenda for the upcoming summit and possible arrangements agreed on by Moscow and Washington. These rumors primarily originated in the USA, more specifically in those US elite circles that are vehemently against improving relations with Russia and see both Trump and Putin in a negative light.

According to them, Syria has been “confirmed” as the main theme for the summit. On 28 June, leading US media sources, linked to the Democratic Party, announced that Trump was prepared to make a deal with Putin, in order to withdraw the US from Syria. If this is to happen, the Syrian Arab Army will be able to establish control over the southeastern regions of the country. Still, it remains unclear whether the intended deal is in fact part of that concession by Russia mentioned earlier by the Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. According to CNN, Trump is prepared to withdraw US and pro-American forces from the southeastern regions in Syria if Russia blocks Iran’s access to these areas. Based on CNN reports, the US President believes that the US military personnel should leave Syria as fast as possible, which is why he is prepared to cede southeastern territories to the Syrian Armed forces.

It is worth mentioning that Trump’s desire to withdraw US forces from Syria has been public knowledge for quite some time. "We are knocking the hell out of ISIS. We'll be coming out of Syria like very soon," said Trump in his speech in Richfield, Ohio on 30 March. The issue of a possible withdrawal of American military personnel from Syria had also been raised earlier in private conversations between Trump and his advisors (note: according to the Pentagon, there are approximately 2,000 US troops in Syria, less than the number in several Middle Eastern
countries. And most of these US forces are concentrated in the de-escalation zone of Al Tanf). The issue is that these territories are in the hands of the US-supported “Syrian opposition” while Damascus is intent on regaining control over them.

Still, despite the importance and urgency of the Syrian problem, Trump’s first priority is something else. After all, it is widely known that Trump waited a considerable amount of time before showing his initiative towards meeting Putin, perpetually hinting that he was going to meet with the Russian leader very soon indeed, but, at the same time, allowing the relations between the US and Russia to reach their lowest point since the Cold War.

The relationship between the two nations is at its worst in recent times. Thus the fact that the meeting is to take place may be represented as a significant breakthrough. Still, one must keep in mind that immediately after his meeting with Putin, John Bolton told journalists at a press conference that no real breakthroughs were anticipated from the meeting. In reality, Trump does not need anything really groundbreaking from Putin. Western experts think that modern Russia is not the right partner for the US, since its economic status is well below that of not only the US but also China, Japan, Germany and several EU nations. And Trump is first and foremost a businessman for who business indicators play a decisive role. At the same time it is important to understand that Moscow has long realized that it is pointless to count on Trump, since his primary concerns are the US internal economic interests, and his circle includes too many influential forces, including among his own advisors, which prevent him from striving towards something more serious and positive in relation to Russia.

Still, there is an important caveat which amounts to the fact that Trump views it his mission to return the US to its dominant role in the world. But he can only do this by destroying the global economic systems created by his predecessors. Obama envisioned a very important but limited role for the USA in the world, reducing it to two economic superclusters, the Trans-Atlantic and Trans-Pacific partnerships and their peripheries. According to this vision, global networks should rule the world, with the US playing the role of a “defender” by protecting the partnerships from the periphery. This periphery has an important function and serves as the final destination for all the accumulated disputes. Clearly, this view relegated Russia to the periphery.

Notably, this “defender” role has become a point of contention for the “neo-empire” supporters versus the globalists, whose interests are first and foremost represented by the US Democratic Party. At the moment, Trump is actively abandoning the “global project” by destroying its key elements, the Trans-Atlantic and Trans-Pacific partnerships. Hence the existing paradox is the fact that Trump’s chief opponent is not China but Europe and its European Union project instead. And the project is limiting Europe’s chances of aligning itself with the unipolar world envisioned by Pax Americana. Besides, Trump understands that China’s new Silk Road initiative is purely imperial in nature, but its specific features allow the project to adapt to the global world order at minimum costs, a united Europe, on the other hand, is a different story altogether.

Thus, it is becoming clear why Trump needs Russia right now. He openly views Russia as a tool for destroying the European Union, albeit not single-handedly, but its role is still significant. Ideally, Trump would like to push Russia and the EU towards a confrontation, which is essentially already at hand, especially via the natural gas sphere. This is more or less what Great Britain did in the 10th to 20th centuries as it provoked wars involving continental European nations that primarily inflicted damage on Germany, Russia and France (England’s main rivals) while the UK remained above the fray. This ensured that it was always on the winning side. This Anglo-Saxon “divide and conquer” approach to international relations is nothing unusual for anyone well-versed in history, and its signs are readily apparent in Trump’s policies.

Hence, it is clear that at the meeting Trump will promise Putin a partial repair to damaged relations in a number of areas, including Syria, in exchange for Russia intensifying its disputes with the EU. In particular if we are to take into consideration the fact that the English are already playing on Trump’s side and are actively pushing Europe towards a conflict with Moscow in every imaginable sphere (note: for example the Skripal case). The gas wars that the White House is waging against the Kremlin by pressuring the EU to purchase its more expensive liquified natural gas (LNG) instead of Russia’s pipeline gas objectively turn Washington into Brussel’s as well as Moscow’s opponent. Trump is applying maximum efforts in order to prevent deliveries of Russian natural gas via the southern gas corridor, TurkStream, from taking place and to impede the construction of Nord Stream II, which would be a serious blow to the Russian economy. Hence, Trump’s goal is to apply the right amount of pressure in order to pit the EU against Russia and ensure they do no unite instead. By and large, Washington leaves Moscow with two unattractive alternatives of either losing the European gas market, followed by the fall of Gazprom and subsequently, its connected industries, or facing tougher US sanctions. Trump’s task is to maintain the right threat level, gradually shifting it in the needed direction.
Still, Trump’s primary target is not Russia, but the destruction of the European Union, which has transformed from a regional to a global status and has surpassed the US according to key indicators. This threatens the US role as a political powerhouse, which can build an American neo-empire only on the ruins of the current global world order. Hence the US needs to dismantle the current order, and then begin establishing its new foundations. For Trump, Russia is not a very important player, who the US would like to use at a cost of insignificant concessions in order to help Washington realize its goals with respect to the EU. Hence, Trump is travelling to Helsinki in order to misdirect Putin with discussions about Syria, Ukraine and the importance of improving relations between the US and Russia but without substantially easing sanctions. Although, unlike Trump who is solving global issues in US interests, Moscow is more concerned with specifics, such as improving relations with Washington, which includes the issue of sanctions; the arms race (nuclear weapons, the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), NATO’s expansion towards Russian borders and others), the conflict in Ukraine and the war in Syria.

Thus returning once again to the issue of Syria. With respect to the Syrian “deal”, widely reported by CNN, Moscow has limited options in the Syrian Arab Republic (SAR) and a narrow scope of solutions, thus making it difficult to create something “special”. In reality, there are two versions of this “deal” considering the fact that its outcome apparently involves Trump “withdrawing the US forces” from Syria (note: naturally, this “disengagement” does not include removing advisors, technical specialists and “overseers” from the occupied territory in Syria. The question remains “Who is Washington planning on transferring responsibilities of maintaining the current status quo established by them to?”).

The first version is the “limited deal” and includes the US ceding the de-escalation zone around Al Tanf and closing their eyes to the ongoing military operation, staged by Damascus and involving Russia, in the de-escalation zone in Daraa. In principle, this is already happening de facto. According to this version of the deal, military units from Arabic nations (the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt and other nations acting on behalf of the League of Arab States, plus European nations in NATO (most likely alliance members loyal to Washington and with interests in the region, such as France) will occupy the territories to the east of the Euphrates. Overall, much of the Euphrates’ left bank is already in the hands of French military units. The Russian side will then have to ensure that the established zone is free of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, Lebanon’s Hezbollah and pro-Iranian Shiite units near the border with Israel. Based on the US plan, the means, Moscow will need to employ in order to force these Iranian proxy forces out, are not Washington’s concern.

The second version of the deal is much less likely, and involves relinquishing the territories to the east of the Euphrates to Damascus, under Russia’s firm control over the process that may be gradual and not immediate in nature. The US would also be quite satisfied if the territory transfer were to happen by force. This scenario is quite convenient for Washington in a sense that the US could then burden Moscow with the cost of maintaining these additional territories. And even though these areas are in better shape in comparison to western and northwestern regions of the country, they are much more difficult to defend against militants of the banned terrorist group DAESH. In addition, Damascus and Moscow will then become opponents in the eyes of PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) Kurds. Furthermore, the Syrian war will continue for years to come, weakening all of its participants. Naturally, Washington and Tel Aviv will try to pass on the responsibility of forcing Iran out of the zones, relinquished to it, to Moscow. Misunderstandings between Russia and Iran have already arisen after Israel had outlined its conditions for the Daraa operation, which include Iran and Hezbollah leaving that region. This version of the “deal” is highly unlikely, but anything could happen.

The essence of any US version of the “deal” is to burden Russia with the responsibility and costs of maintaining Syria, and to create an environment conducive to destroying Russia’s situational politico-military alliance with Iran. Particularly if one understands the temporary nature of this alliance and Russia’s and Iran’s dissatisfaction with it. Trump, on the other hand, will not be taking any risks if he offers this “deal”, especially since Russia’s TurkStream aim in Syria remains unrealized after Turkish forces occupied northern regions of Syria bordering Turkey.

Everything seems to suggest that Moscow understands the situation both in relation to the EU and Syria, as, all too often, Washington, including Trump’s leadership, has deceived Russia. The Kremlin does not harbor any illusions about the possibility of close and egalitarian relations with the USA, and understands what the US + Russia arrangement means (note: with the Russian Federation being the lesser partner). It is aimed against the EU and subsequently China.

Hence Russia has three options

1. It remains on its own.
2. Russia has an egalitarian partnership with the EU.
3. and Russia has an egalitarian partnership with China. The third option is highly unlikely considering Beijing’s rising and in many ways independent status, its growing economy in terms of size and technological level, and China’s increasing global and regional ambitions.

The meeting with Trump is thus a necessity, even if its sole purpose is to hear what Trump wants from Putin, and continue on its course to overcome differences with the EU. Russia has always been an integral part of Europe and a crucial player in its policies. If this remains the case, Russia will surely not lose.

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