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The Trump-Putin Meeting: From Hamburg to Southern Syria

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The first meeting between US President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin since Trump entered the White House took place in Hamburg, during the G20 summit of July 7-8, 2017. Relations between the two powers have been marked by tension over disagreements on various areas of conflict around the world, and from the reports in the United States about alleged contacts between Trump and Russia during the presidential campaign and Russian cyber interference in the election process. Tensions rose further when US forces attacked pro-Assad coalition forces in Syria and when Russia opposed the condemnation of North Korea in the Security Council regarding Pyongyang's long range missile program. Nonetheless, reports were that the meeting between the leaders, which lasted longer than planned, was constructive, though very few details about the conversation itself or any agreements reached were provided, other than an announcement on the agreement to impose a ceasefire in southwestern Syria and establish a de-escalation zone there.

Despite the insistence on the meeting's positive atmosphere, it is impossible to ignore the fact that tensions between the two nations have mounted in recent years. To promote its objectives in the international arena, Russia is engaged in an assertive foreign policy that exploits crises around the globe for leverage. Russia uses hybrid warfare, incorporating limited military engagement with information warfare and political subversion, while making extensive use of information warfare. The West, led by the United States, has responded with economic sanctions, political isolation, military pressure, and efforts to expand NATO to former Soviet Union states. Russia reacted aggressively in both Georgia and Ukraine (its moves in Ukraine were met with harsher sanctions), intervened militarily in Syria, and inserted itself in the North Korean matter. When he took office, Trump professed his desire to reduce competition and confrontation between the United States and Russia, but this sentiment aroused much domestic criticism. In Europe, too, there were fears that Russia and the United States would grow close at the expense of

transatlantic relations, which perforce would limit Europe's room to maneuver vis-à-vis Russia.

The agenda for the Trump-Putin meeting included the crises in different arenas: the Middle East, the Far East (resulting from North Korea's ballistic missile launch), and Eastern Europe, particularly the crisis in Ukraine. Moscow was eager to approach these crises together, and on that basis reach agreement with Washington. Another topic discussed was cyber security (not surprisingly, Putin denied the allegations of Russian interference in the US presidential election); at the meeting, the two leaders agreed to establish a joint framework for formulating cyberspace agreements. Regarding Ukraine, it was decided that a joint Russian-American committee would formulate compromise proposals. In other words, there is no discussion yet about lifting sanctions, but the management of the Ukraine crisis has been taken out of European hands.

More concrete decisions to emerge from the meeting referred to southwestern Syria, apparently following a US demand to discuss the topic separately from the political efforts underway under Russian auspices in Astana and Geneva between the belligerent elements. The United States agreed in principle to the reconciliation process Russia is leading; it was decided to establish a joint committee for coordinating a future arrangement in Syria after the Islamic State is defeated – an objective prioritized and favored by the Trump administration; the United States did not rule out the Russian idea of setting up de-escalation zones in Syria, meaning freezing the situation according to the current internal balance of power, providing humanitarian aid to the population, and enabling displaced persons to return home; the United States did not oppose the creation of zones of influence for the states involved in the fighting – Russia, Iran, and Turkey – or even their involvement in formulating agreements, but made sure to add Jordan to the list.

The United States position on Iran's presence and influence in the Syrian sphere is unclear. It seems that this topic will be discussed by the two powers at a later stage in the framework of a joint committee. It appears that the United States has agreed to let Bashar al-Assad remain President of Syria during the interim and stabilization period (at least until the defeat of the Islamic State in Syria), even though Secretary of State Rex Tillerson stressed that "the Trump administration sees no long term role for the Assad family and the Assad regime in Syria."

As for the ceasefire, it was reported that the de-escalation zone would include Daraa, Suwayda, and Quneitra in southwest Syria, and the new arrangement would be coordinated among the United States, Russia, and Jordan. The end of hostilities began on July 9, 2017, and it was decided that foreign troops would be removed from the region

(this probably includes the Iranian forces and the Shiite militias, including Hezbollah). The mechanism to enforce the ceasefire and supervise arrangements in the zone has reportedly not yet been determined, but Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov made it clear that supervision of the ceasefire would be in the hands of the Russian military police, in coordination with Jordan and the United States.

Israel was not mentioned at all in the context of the ceasefire arrangement and the establishment of a de-escalation zone in southern Syria, although it was quite active behind the scenes in influencing the positions of the United State, Jordan, and Russia. In a conversation with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Putin assured him that Israel's interests would not be harmed.

Nonetheless, Israel has scored up several achievements: (a) close coordination with the United States and Jordan to prevent a situation conflicting with Israel's security interests in southern Syria, as well as US willingness to participate in the supervision of the ceasefire, though without putting boots on the ground; (b) an agreement on distancing Iran's forces and proxies from southern Syria, as per the red lines presented by Prime Minister Netanyahu: preventing Hezbollah's force buildup via Syria (i.e., supplies of advanced weapons), preventing the embedding of Iranian and/or Hezbollah forces on the ground near Israel's border, and preventing Iranian military entrenchment elsewhere in Syria; and (c) non-intervention by Iran and Turkey in determining the de-escalation zone borders in southwest Syria and supervising the ceasefire there. In addition, Israel is not committed to the ceasefire and has no active role in supervising its enforcement, in accordance with Israeli policy highlighting the need to avoid being dragged into the Syrian crisis on the one hand, and maintaining operational flexibility of action, on the other.

Although Iran is not included in the settlement in southern Syria and despite the limits on the deployment of Iran's forces and its proxies in southern Syria, it is expected that Israel will have to confront an attempt on the part of President Assad – whose confidence is rising because of Russia's support and the US acquiescence that he remain in office, at least in the meantime – to advance forces to southwest Syria and the Golan Heights. Because Assad's forces rely on help from Iran's proxies – Shiite militias and Hezbollah – Israel may have to fulfill a counter-threat if any of the red lines it announced are crossed.

In conclusion, the Russian-US arrangement over southern Syria represents a test, both for the chances of jumpstarting a coordinated process between the world powers over a future settlement in Syria and for the relations between them on other contested issues.