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Helsinki Summit

In the absence of authentic details as to what transpired between US President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin at recently concluded one-to-one summit in Helsinki (Finland), media is abuzz with speculative reports. Finland has the distinction of hosting summits between the U.S. and the former Soviet Union in 1975, 1988 and 1990 and as a member of the European Union, Finland kept its role as bridge-builder between the West and the East. It hosted two other summits, in 1992 and 1997 — the latter brought together Bill Clinton and Boris Yeltsin. The Trump-Putin summit was held without any prior published agenda for discussion and no communique was issued after the summit was over. However, some issues came to the fore at the post-Summit press conference jointly addressed by President Trump and his Russian counterpart, which inter alia included: the question of Syrian civil war, Russian annexation of Crimea and resumption of U.S.-Russian talks on nuclear arms control.

Media reports indicate that with regard to the question of the Syrian civil war, withdrawal of Iranian troops from Syria was preferred by Trump to which Putin could not make any commitment. However, both sides reportedly agreed on keeping Iranian troops away from Israel-Syria border and President Trump is reported to have expressed his willingness to help Syria with humanitarian assistance. A subsequent media report citing a Russian military spokesperson revealed that Moscow had sent formal proposals for a joint U.S.-Russian effort to reconstruct Syria and facilitate the return home of Syrian refugees. With regard to Crimea issue, media reports based on Russian President's interview with a leading American TV channel indicated Putin's desire of acceptance of the disputed 2014 referendum in which the people of Crimea had reportedly voted to become part of Russia and the reports also pointed out President Putin's insistence on Ukraine not becoming part of NATO. It was further revealed from the media reports that President Trump and President Putin had agreed to hold talks on extension of the START treaty, which is due to expire in 2021 and further negotiations on the Intermediate Nuclear Force (INF) treaty.

Confirmation about official agreements reached at the Helsinki summit between President Trump and President Putin was denied by the White House and the US Pentagon. However, media reports citing the statement of a Russian military spokesperson indicated Russian readiness for practical implementation of the agreements arrived at between the sides in the realm of international security, cooperation on Syria and discussions on extending the START treaty. Willingness of both Washington and Moscow on resuming talks on nuclear arms control, which have been floundering since 2010, is welcomed by many experts because it entails a significant opening for reducing the global risk of nuclear war. Prospects for the resumption of US-Russian arms control seemingly looked bleak prior to the Helsinki summit. Nevertheless, willingness of both sides to resume talks on nuclear arms control is a welcome signal, especially in the wake of major arms reduction treaties being in trouble and both Washington and Moscow engaged in a new nuclear arms race, squandering away trillions of dollars on weapons they don't require.

Media reports based on statements of Russian diplomats and some ministers indicate Moscow's readiness to "work together" on the disarmament agenda including the new START Treaty, US anti-missile systems, the INF Treaty and weapons in space. In the wake of conflicting reports about Helsinki summit, its import should not be lost, especially in the wake of deteriorating US-Russian relation, since a beginning has been made to break the stalemate and subsequent such summits could help in bringing bilateral relations on an even keel. Washington has invited President Putin to visit the United States and an identical gesture has come from Moscow for President Trump. While asserting that a proper summit could prove useful and commence the necessary process of taking US-Russia relationship to a better place, some experts suggest that a future summit would also require that the two leaders be candid with one another on problematic issues. Recalling the summit between President Ronald Reagan and Premier Mikhail Gorbachev in the past, these experts opine that Trump and Putin could use nuclear arms control to foster a new transformative partnership by breaking through stale strategic dogma and take a giant step toward world peace. — BK