Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

By: Richard Haass

What can go wrong in Shenzhen?



China's technology hub is hosting the annual gathering of the 21 members of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC).

But what is capturing the lion's share of the world's attention is something else: a planned three-way meeting between US President Donald Trump and his Russian and Chinese counterparts, Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping.

In principle, amid ongoing wars in Iran and Ukraine, and given growing Chinese influence in Asia and beyond, a summit among the leaders of three of the world's most powerful countries to discuss these challenges should be welcome, despite or, more accurately, because of their many differences.

As Winston Churchill famously remarked, "meeting jaw to jaw is better than war."

And in principle, the three leaders could usefully address what should be done to limit the proliferation of nuclear weapons, ensure that AI is more a force for good than harm, and end ongoing wars and prevent new ones.

But principle is one thing; in practice, we are likely to see something else.

Start with nuclear non-proliferation.

China has the world's fastest-growing nuclear arsenal and has repeatedly expressed no interest in joining US-Russian arms control arrangements until it reaches a position of parity.

In any case, there are no US-Russian nuclear agreements to join anymore; all of them have expired.

The three presidents can discuss what is known as horizontal proliferation, the spread of nuclear weapons to others, but the reality is that Russia and China have not reined in North Korea's growing program.

Quite the contrary: the Kremlin may now be actively helping the Kim regime to improve its arsenal as the price of North Korea's agreement to send troops to fight alongside Russia against Ukraine.

On that front, other countries have surely noted that Ukraine handed over its Soviet-era nuclear weapons three decades ago, and that the US attack on Iran most likely would not have occurred if Iran possessed nuclear weapons.

Hypocrisy and diplomacy

The three leaders may well extoll the virtues of nonproliferation, even though they have done much to undermine its appeal.

It would not be the first time hypocrisy and diplomacy went hand in hand, but that does not lower the stakes.

The most that can reasonably be expected on AI is some agreement to warn one another if and when rogue agents break out of their virtual "sandboxes." Anything more ambitious seems unrealistic given the competitive nature of their relations and how central AI promises to be to their economic and military strength.

The three leaders will discuss the situation in the Middle East and call for an end to the war with Iran. But they will not do much, if anything, about it.

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China and Russia enjoy seeing the United States bogged down militarily in the region; they also benefit from the resulting rise in isolationist sentiment in the US.

Both have contributed in various ways to Iran's ability to fight the war. China, as a major energy importer, would prefer that the war not escalate and cause harm to the region's oil fields, refineries, and export infrastructure, but Russia, as an energy exporter, benefits from high prices.

All this takes place against the backdrop of intense Russian bombing of Ukraine and repeated demonstrations of Putin's lack of good faith in negotiations to end the war.

China, for its part, has been a consistent backer of the Russian effort, because it does not want to see Putin humiliated and possibly overthrown and sees a clear upside in the US spending its finite resources outside of the Indo-Pacific.

'Strongman' summit

Further limiting what can be expected from this "strongman" summit is that none of the three leaders arrives in Shenzhen with all that much strength.

Trump is fresh off a decisive repudiation by American voters in this month's midterm elections, as his Republican Party lost control of Congress and many state governments.

His administration is also on the defensive for not doing more to stop the export of advanced chips by Nvidia to China.

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Likewise, Putin is losing rather than gaining ground in Ukraine and cannot defend his own energy infrastructure from attacks by Ukrainian drones.

Xi faces a host of domestic economic problems, and his continuing purges of the military leadership suggest that his efforts to assert control at home are meeting resistance.

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Abysmal trade

What comes to mind is the February 1945 Yalta Conference, at which US President Franklin D. Roosevelt, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, and Soviet leader Joseph Stalin met to decide the fate of eastern and central European countries liberated from Nazi Germany.



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The danger, of course, is that Trump would cede influence to Putin in Europe and to Xi in Asia in the hopes of receiving economic benefits or gaining their acceptance of US primacy in the Western Hemisphere.

But that would be an abysmal trade, given the relative economic and military weighting of the three regions.

A photo-op with the three leaders (even though it gives Putin more legitimacy and standing than he deserves) would be preferable to almost any imaginable agreement. Sometimes less is more. This is almost certain to be one of those times.

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