U.S.-Russia: Helsinki Summit

What is the issue?

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- U.S. President Trump recently met with his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin at Helsinki in Finland for a bilateral.
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- While it was a historic opportunity of sorts, its outcomes are uncertain.
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What is the context in which the Helsinki summit took place?

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- A tense cold war was fought between the blocs lead by the U.S. and Russia (Soviet Union) for over 5 decades, which polarised the entire world.
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- While tensions of the cold war have presently subdued, the recent summit nonetheless was an important for both the countries.
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- It was an opportunity to discuss areas of shared interest, find ways to dial down mutual tensions and work together to address global issues.
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- Notably, the past few years have seen a significant spike in Russia's international confrontations with the west and the U.S.
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- Despite these tensions, the threat posed by nuclear weapons and intercontinental ballistic missiles, were discussed at the Helsinki summit.
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- But it's not clear whether the talks will lead to any significant change in policies due to the lack of consistency in Mr. Trump's approach.
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Did the events of the 2016 U.S. presidential elections affect the summit?

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- Trump openly called for bettering ties with Russia in his campaigns, and some of his campaign aides also established contacts with Russians.
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- In that backdrop, allegations were rife that Russia had deployed hackers to prop up Trump's chances in the elections and weaken his opponents.
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- After the elections, an inquiry was set up to probe the case, and recently, 12 Russian intelligence officials were indicted by the U.S. justice department.
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- Due to the mounting evidence, Trump had earlier stated that, "while Russians might have hacked emails, it didn't influence the election results".
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- Hence, even before the summit began, there were concerns that the alleged Russia interference in the presidential elections could cloud the meet.
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- After the summit Trump had stated that he believes in Mr. Putin's assertion that Russia had no role in the electoral meddling.
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- This u-turn implicitly means that Trump has accepted Mr. Putin's version over the one stated by the U.S. intelligence, which has caused an uproar.
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- Mr. Trump could have certainly managed the summit better by addressing genuine concerns in the U.S. over allegations of Russia's election meddling.
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Why is Russian engagement essential?

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- The resolving the civil war in Syria, and the saving the "Iranian nuclear deal", are important areas that require Russia-US cooperation.
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- **Arms Race -** Cold war triggered the massive expansion of the nuclear and other arsenal of both the US and USSR (Russia), which was a scary trend.
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- In this context, "Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty" (START) was signed as a mutually declared disarmament treaty between the U.S. and Russia in 1991.
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- This was subsequently renewed as "New START" in 2010 to further the cause and this renewed deal is set to expire by 2021.
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- While Russia has displayed willingness to renew it, high-level talks between

the U.S. and Russia are needed to seal the agreement.
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- **Ukraine Crisis -** Ukraine was one of the republics within the USSR during the cold war days, and has remained a strong ally of Russia ever since till 2013.
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- While it was planning to sing an association agreement with the European Union in 2013, Russia sternly objected to it, leading to tensions.
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- Russia subsequently annexed “Crimea” (Russian speaking province in Ukraine) by force and declared its sovereignty over it with people’s support.
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- Currently, the issue remains unresolved and the various approaches adopted by the international community have come a cropper.
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What is the way ahead?

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- Many of Russia’s rough actions were internationally condemned and several economic sanctions were imposed as a pressure tactic.
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- Although, these made the Russian economy stumble for breath, Russia’s international ambitions have only grown stronger and more aggressive.
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- Hence, as isolating Russia is proving to be fruitless and abrasive, the international community needs start engaging Russia to smoothen things.
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- Russia, in turn, will have to shed its rogue attitude and be more open to address the bitterness of the past in order to build a better future.
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Source: The Hindu

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