

Presidents Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin held a historic summit on Monday vowing their determination to forge a reset of troubled relations between the world's greatest nuclear powers.

Trump bent on forging a personal bond with the Kremlin chief despite allegations of Russian meddling in U.S. politics, went into the summit, blaming the "stupidity" of his predecessors for plunging ties to their present low.

"I think it's a good start: very, very good start for everybody," the U.S. leader told reporters after meeting Mr. Putin for more than two hours with just their interpreters present, and just before they were joined by their national security teams.

Mr. Putin said the talks with his U.S. counterpart were "very successful, useful." He added that it's a difficult period in the U.S.-Russian relationship, but the summit "reflects our desire to restore trust."

Mr. Trump said he had raised the issue of alleged Russian meddling in U.S. elections. "We spent a great deal of time talking about it. He feels strongly about the issue and has an interesting idea," Mr. Trump told a joint news conference with Mr. Putin. Asked if he trusted U.S. intelligence agencies which concluded that Russia interfered in the 2016 election, Mr. Trump said he had been told by his CIA chief that it was Russia, but that he saw no reason to believe it. "President Putin was extremely strong and powerful in his denial today."

Mr. Putin denied any such interference, saying the allegations were "complete nonsense." He said U.S. prosecutors could ask to interrogate the Russians accused of meddling in the U.S. elections. "He can send us a request to question these people he suspects," Mr. Putin said of Robert Mueller, the former FBI Director who is looking into alleged Russian interference in the November 2016 vote.

Many in Washington were agog at Mr. Trump's decision to sit one-on-one with Mr. Putin, a former KGB spymaster, worried about what he might bargain away after previously cozying up to the autocratic leaders of China and North Korea.

Indeed, some domestic critics wanted the Helsinki summit called off entirely after 12 Russian military agents were indicted under a long-running probe into Moscow's alleged manipulation of the 2016 election.

But Trump convinced his unique brand of diplomacy can make inroads with Mr. Putin, pressed ahead and looked forward to “having an extraordinary relationship” as the pair sat down to discuss everything from Syria, Ukraine, and China to trade tariffs and the size of their nuclear arsenals.

Mr. Putin, basking in congratulations from Mr. Trump and other world leaders on the successful staging of the World Cup in Russia, said: “The time has come to talk in a substantive way about our relations and problem areas of the world.”

Mr. Trump added: “Frankly, we have not been getting along for the last number of years. And I really think the world wants to see us get along. We are the two great nuclear powers.”

Mr. Putin scoffed at a suggestion that Moscow had some compromising material on Mr. Trump. “It’s hard to imagine greater nonsense,” he said. “Please get this rubbish out of your heads.”

House before his summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin opened, U.S. President Donald Trump on Monday fired a Twitter broadside at his domestic opponents, blaming the diplomatic chill on the investigation into alleged Russian election meddling.

“Our relationship with Russia has NEVER been worse thanks to many years of U.S. foolishness and stupidity and now, the Rigged Witch Hunt!” Mr. Trump tweeted.

‘We agree’

Russia’s Foreign Ministry tweeted in response: “We agree.”

Mr. Trump’s U.S. opponents tried, in turn, to gain traction for the sarcastic hashtag lampooning his reluctance to criticise the Kremlin: #BAF (Blame America First).

After a stormy NATO summit in Brussels last week, Mr. Trump was accused by critics of prioritizing his ties to Mr. Putin over the transatlantic alliance.

But over breakfast with Finland’s President Sauli Niinisto, he insisted NATO “has never been stronger” and “never been more together”, thanks to his insistence on all allies paying their fair share.

In a weekend interview with CBS News, Mr. Trump admitted that Russia remains a foe, but

he put Moscow on a par with China and the European Union as economic and diplomatic rivals.

Protesters have been on the streets of Helsinki to denounce the policies of both Mr. Trump and Mr. Putin. Greenpeace draped a giant banner down a church tower urging: ‘Warm our hearts, not our planet.’

As they sat down for their first formal one-on-one summit, the American and Russian leaders seemed almost theatrically sour. Mr. Trump and Mr. Putin did not shake hands when they entered, sullenly, but only when they began a lengthy closed-door meeting that had the diplomatic world on edge.

And when White House spokeswoman Sarah Sanders tweeted out a picture, she chose a somber black and white showing Mr. Putin’s eyes lowered and Mr. Trump looking dully angry.

Awkward body language

The body language was awkward, but television footage later showed Mr. Trump offering a stone-faced Mr. Putin a reassuring wink.

But after the talks, both leaders welcomed the meeting as a “good start” and a “very successful” one. Issues from the alleged Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, the Ukraine crisis and Syrian civil war all appeared in the discussions.

In response to a question about whether he had wanted Mr. Trump to win the election, Mr. Putin said he did, because the businessman had pledged to improve ties between Washington and Moscow.

Mr. Putin praised cooperation between Russian and U.S. security services, adding that he favored continued cooperation in “the fight against terror and ensuring cybersecurity”.

The Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said separately that the talks were “better than super” in comments reported by Russian news agencies.

REUTERS, AFP

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