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Trump's Russia-Ukraine Peace Efforts: Trading State Sovereignty for Power Politics

Unit for Political Studies

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Unit for Political Studies

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On 15 August, US President Donald Trump and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin held the first US-Russian summit since Russia launched its war on Ukraine in February 2022. During their meeting, at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson in Alaska, they discussed the possibility of reaching an agreement to end the war. Three days later, President Trump met with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and six European leaders: German Chancellor Friedrich Merz, French President Emmanuel Macron, British Prime Minister Keir Starmer, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, Finnish President Alexander Stubb, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, and NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte. That meeting was devoted to discussing the terms of a Russian Ukrainian peace agreement, ways to consolidate a ceasefire, and long-term US-European security guarantees for Ukraine.

These meetings were overshadowed by an ongoing disagreement between the US and European countries over the wording of a potential peace agreement and the nature and limits of the associated security guarantees, reflecting divergent visions of the future of the conflict and its outcomes. Despite ambiguity in the statements Trump and Putin made during the brief press conference following their summit, Trump's subsequent statements indicate that Russia did not agree to a ceasefire prior to negotiations on a peace deal, and that the Kremlin had not backed down from its insistence on annexing parts of Ukraine. They also reflect Trump's tendency to accept power politics and his disregard for state sovereignty.

Prioritizing a Peace Agreement Over a Ceasefire

The day after the summit, Trump wrote on his social media platform Truth Social that he now believed that a peace agreement should take precedence over a ceasefire, noting that he had discussed this view with several European leaders who shared the same conviction.¹ This statement came just days after Trump had assured Ukraine and European countries that he would insist on an immediate ceasefire before entering into any serious negotiations on a permanent peace agreement.² He even publicly threatened that were Putin to reject this condition, he would be met with "very severe consequences," including additional economic sanctions against Russia, and possibly also against countries that buy its gas and oil.³ However, the US president has not carried through on any of these threats.⁴

Trump's new statements are in line with the declared position of the Kremlin, which rejects a ceasefire without a comprehensive settlement and believes that reaching a peace agreement will be complex due to "diametrically opposed" positions.⁵ Ukrainian and European leaders fear that such a strategy

1 Steve Holland, Andrew Osborn & Tom Balmforth, "Trump tells Zelenskiy that Putin wants more of Ukraine, urges Kyiv make a deal," *Reuters*, 16/8/2025, accessed on 21/8/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9GPg7>.

2 Ashley Ahn, "Europe Moves to Back Ukraine after Trump Drops Cease-Fire Demand," *The New York Times*, 16/8/2025, accessed on 21/8/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9GQ3A>.

3 Eli Stokols, "Despite Red Carpet Rollout, 'No Deal' between Trump and Putin," *Politico*, 15/8/2025, accessed on 21/8/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9GPS9>.

4 Peter Pinedo, "Trump Reveals 10 Striking Takeaways from Putin Summit in Hannity Interview," *Fox News*, 15/8/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9GPoX>.

5 Holland, Osborn & Balmforth, "Trump tells Zelenskiy."

could prolong the war and give Russia more time to wear Ukraine down and carve out additional territory.⁶ Some European leaders cautiously refuted Trump's statements, while avoiding entering into a direct confrontation with him. In a joint statement issued after the Trump-Putin meeting, the leaders of Britain, France, Germany, Finland, Italy, Poland, the European Union, and the European Council welcomed Trump's efforts to stop the war and his announcement that the US would be ready to provide future security guarantees once a peace agreement is reached. However, they did not back his position that peace talks should precede a ceasefire, stressing that they were prepared to continue applying pressure on Russia and strengthening sanctions and broader economic measures against its war economy, until a just and lasting peace is achieved.⁷

Accepting the Principle of Territorial Concessions

Trump has shown his willingness to accept the principle of Ukraine ceding parts of its territory in exchange for a ceasefire and a peace agreement. He is urging Zelensky to accept this principle, and accusing him of obstructing a peace agreement unless he does. In other words, the American president is showing understanding towards the country that started the war, while placing pressure on the country whose territory has been occupied. Russia is seeking complete control over the Donbas region, including the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, in exchange for freezing the front lines in Kherson and Zaporizhzhia.⁸ This proposal contradicts the Ukrainian European position that categorically rejects any territorial concession. European officials reported that Trump told them, the day after his summit with Putin, that he believed a quick agreement could be reached were Zelensky to agree to cede the rest of the Donbas region, including areas not currently under Russian control.⁹

In the end, Putin appears to have achieved tangible gains without making any concessions, while maintaining his cordial relationship with Trump.¹⁰ He succeeded in transferring American pressure to the Ukrainians and their European allies, warning against spoiling the progress that had been made.¹¹ Trump stated that "it's up to President Zelensky to get it done and maybe the European nations, they have to get involved a little bit."¹² However, despite the pressure, Ukraine managed to avoid the worst-case scenario it had feared – that of Trump and Putin announcing a bilateral agreement to "end the conflict" and then pressuring Zelensky to accept it.¹³

6 Nick Paton Walsh, "No Deal in Alaska, but Putin Still Walks away with Some Big Wins," *CNN*, 15/8/2025, accessed on 21/8/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9GPbn>.

7 Ahn, "Europe Moves."

8 Christopher Miller et al., "Putin Demanded Ukraine Cede Donetsk and Luhansk in Exchange for Freezing Rest of Front Line," *Financial Times*, 16/8/2025, accessed on 21/8/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9GPLs>.

9 Ahn, "Europe Moves."

10 Maggie Haberman & Tyler Pager, "6 Takeaways from Trump's Meeting with Putin," *The New York Times*, 15/8/2025, accessed on 21/8/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9GPGf>.

11 Kevin Liptak et al., "Here's Where Things Stand as Trump, Zelensky and European Leaders Begin their High-Stakes Meeting on Ukraine," *CNN*, 18/8/2025, accessed on 21/8/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9GPEW>.

12 Pinedo, "10 Striking Takeaways."

13 Stokols, "No Deal."

US-EU Summit

Days after the meeting between Trump and Putin, Trump held a meeting with Zelensky and a number of European leaders. This gathering was marked by a warmer tone than Zelensky's previous visit, in February, when Trump and his Vice President, J.D. Vance, publicly rebuked the Ukrainian leader for not showing enough gratitude to the US and accused him of seeking to drag the world into a third world war. This time around, Zelensky made an exaggerated show of his gratitude. He was accompanied to Washington by six European leaders, along with the NATO Secretary General, whose presence was seen as an attempt to bolster Zelensky's position in the face of potential pressure from Trump, given that the latter had seemed determined to conclude a final agreement to end the war, even if that required forcing concessions from Ukraine.¹⁴

Zelensky, with European support, sought to extract security guarantees from the US in the event of an agreement, while the European leaders worked to consolidate the image of a "coalition of the willing" in the face of Russian pressure.¹⁵ One of the most notable outcomes of the meeting was Trump's announcement of his willingness to offer US security guarantees to Ukraine as an alternative to its application for NATO membership, although he did not clarify the nature of these guarantees.

The next day, the issue dominated discussions among European leaders. British Prime Minister Keir Starmer proposed that an international force be deployed to Ukraine after a ceasefire or peace agreement, of size between a few hundred observer troops up to a defensive force of tens of thousands. While Trump indicated that Putin might not oppose the deployment of European troops, Russia was quick to reject the idea outright. Nevertheless, Trump has continued with his efforts to arrange a face-to-face meeting between Zelensky and Putin, possibly also including himself.

Ukraine's Dilemma over Security Guarantees

In addition to the issue of Russia's annexation of territory by force, the nature of potential US security guarantees for Ukraine in the event of a peace agreement with Russia is the most sensitive issue for its European allies – and for Russia, which views these guarantees as a direct threat to its own national security. Even the US is approaching the issue with extreme caution, fearing that it could find itself embroiled in a confrontation with Russia. This helps explain the continued US ambiguity on the issue so far. Trump informed European leaders, a day after his summit with Putin, that he was open to providing security guarantees for Ukraine, including the possibility of US support for a European-led security force inside Ukraine,¹⁶ providing such guarantees do not include the deployment of US troops on the ground, which he would view as a red line.

¹⁴ Richard Hall, "Zelensky Returns to the White House with a Squad of European Leaders. What You Need to Know," *Time*, 18/8/2025, accessed on 20/8/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9GPf5>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Bojan Pancevski, Laurence Norman & Daniel Michaels, "Trump Tells Europeans He Is Open to U.S. Security Guarantees in Ukraine," *The Wall Street Journal*, 16/8/2025, accessed on 20/8/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9GPxa>.

During the White House meeting, under European pressure, Trump confirmed that the US would take part in peacekeeping after any agreement. However, he did not specify the nature of the US role, saying only: “the United States would be ‘involved’ in keeping peace in Ukraine after any agreement with Russia... Trump later said in a Truth Social post that European countries would provide the guarantees, ‘with a coordination with the United States of America.’”¹⁷ This statement suggests that the US would continue to do what it is doing now: selling weapons, providing intelligence support, and possibly providing limited air cover.

Although European leaders welcomed this proposal, they made clear their irritation at its ambiguity. They and the NATO Secretary General proposed the idea of security guarantees similar to Article 5 of the NATO charter, without formally including Ukraine in the alliance, such that any attack on Ukraine would be considered an attack on the guarantor states.¹⁸ However, this formulation would represent a red line for Russia, which rejects the presence of any NATO or European forces near its borders. Moreover, NATO itself has reservations about this approach, as it would mean any future attack on Ukraine could automatically trigger Article 5, which could lead to the outbreak of a full-scale war. In contrast, Russia is leaning toward a model similar to the Minsk Agreement of 2014 or the Budapest Memorandum of 1994, which included written security guarantees but stipulated that US, British, and French forces would stay away from the Russian border. Meanwhile, Britain and France, are leading efforts to support Ukraine, by deploying European forces away from the front lines, securing airspace and sea lanes, protecting nuclear facilities, and strengthening the Ukrainian army in terms of training and armament.

Conclusion

Washington’s evolution from supporter of Ukraine into mediator in the conflict has shifted the balance of power in Russia’s favour. Yet this was not enough for Trump, who tends to be understanding towards power politics, encouraging powerful regional states to pursue such policies everywhere, including the annexation of other countries’ territories by force. There was a stark contrast between Trump’s humiliating reception of Zelensky at the White House in February and the warm welcome he laid out for Putin in Alaska. Indeed, through this summit, Putin achieved most of his desired goals. It contributed to breaking his diplomatic isolation and averting the possibility of additional US sanctions, even if only temporarily. Furthermore, he succeeded in convincing Trump to accept the principle of territorial concessions in the Donbas region as a precondition for any peace agreement, and made a ceasefire conditional on this principle.

Thus, if and only if Ukraine accepts these concessions, discussion can proceed on US security guarantees or military aid to Ukraine. That said, when Trump was asked about military aid, he clearly

¹⁷ Michael Birnbaum & Cat Zakrzewski, “In hurried D.C. summit, Europeans try to bend Trump away from Kremlin,” *The Washington Post*, 18/8/2025, accessed on 21/8/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9GPih>.

¹⁸ Andrea Shalal & Max Hunder, “US Would Help Assure Ukraine’s Security in a Peace Deal, Trump Tells Zelenskiy,” *Reuters*, 19/8/2025, accessed on 21/8/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9GPoJ>.



replied that the US was no longer giving weapons away, but rather selling them. Nevertheless, European leaders, by presenting a united front in support of Zelensky, helped tip the balance in Washington and reduced the likelihood of Trump fully accepting Putin's terms. However, Europe remains unable to do what is necessary to leverage its current capabilities and potential as a global power in strategic terms, allowing it to rely on itself without needing US protection or being obliged to submit to Washington's conditions.

It is difficult to measure Trump's chances of successfully concluding a peace agreement between Russia and Ukraine, given the complex roots of the conflict and its historical and geopolitical intricacies. However, he remains greatly concerned with reaching a peaceful settlement to this particular conflict, as this is linked to his ambition to win the Nobel Peace Prize – an ambition that is unjustified and incomprehensible except through an analysis of his personality. It was striking that during the Alaska and Washington summits, the White House publicized nominations supposedly submitted by countries like Israel, Pakistan, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, suggesting they had endorsed him for the prize.