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‘Alaska signals shift towards rehabilitating US-Russia relations’

The upcoming Trump-Putin meeting could reset relations between the two powers. Balázs Jarábik on Ukraine ceasefire talks and territorial ‘swaps’

Russian President Vladimir Putin and US President Donald Trump are expected to meet in Alaska later this week. How significant do you consider this meeting to be, and what results do you anticipate from it?

The upcoming Alaska meeting between Presidents Trump and Putin mainly signals a shift towards rehabilitating Russia in US foreign policy, as well as reviving a bilateral agenda that has been largely frozen since the 2016 ‘Russia Gate’ controversy. Its significance goes beyond any single issue and reflects a broader desire on both sides to reset their complex relationship.

While Ukraine will inevitably be high on the agenda, it is only one part of a wider set of topics that will likely include key arms control matters such as the INF Treaty, questions of strategic stability and the strategically important Arctic region. In this sense, the meeting should be seen less as an attempt to resolve one specific conflict, and more as an effort to re-establish a stable channel for managing a range of contentious yet strategically important issues between Washington and Moscow.

Trump has suggested that a potential deal could involve ‘some swapping of territories’. What would that mean in practice?

When Trump spoke of ‘swapping territories’, this should be understood in the context of a potential freeze in the war in Ukraine — an idea both sides have indicated is on the table. Such an arrangement would require not only Kyiv’s approval, but also the support of key European partners. The summit comes after months of backchannel diplomacy and expert-level talks. Moscow’s presidential aide, Yuri Ushakov, has confirmed that a proposal exists that Russia

broadly finds acceptable. While not all details have been finalised, it seems that the two sides are closer to reaching a deal than they were after the initial proposal focused on a ceasefire in February.

In practice, 'swaps' could mean adjusting control lines in contested areas — possibly involving territories Russia currently holds in Kharkiv, Sumy or parts of Dnipropetrovsk, totalling around 1 700 square kilometres. However, it is hard to imagine Ukraine agreeing to a complete withdrawal from the entire Donbas region – more than 7 000 square kilometres remain under Ukrainian control – unless there were a major collapse along that frontline. Moscow, for its part, is actively pushing for a larger encirclement in Donbas, underlined by recent battlefield gains, which highlight the fragile and fast-changing military situation behind any territorial negotiations.

Last week, Trump's ultimatum to Putin to agree to a ceasefire in Ukraine expired, and his special envoy, Steve Witkoff, was heavily criticised for providing 'conflicting narratives' about Putin's intentions. How reliable do you consider US statements to be at this stage?

At this stage, US statements should not automatically be dismissed as unreliable or controversial. President Trump is known for using strong rhetoric and ultimatums as negotiation tools to push talks forward, so some of the more dramatic remarks need to be seen in that light. For example, Vice President JD Vance clarified that 'swaps' do not mean full Ukrainian withdrawals, which helps to counter some of the speculation fuelled by the media. Much of the confusion comes from anonymous leaks and conflicting reports, which distort the actual state of diplomatic preparations — about which we know very little.

On a strategic level, the US has succeeded in applying real pressure on Russia, particularly through coordinated efforts with Saudi Arabia to keep global oil prices low and through secondary tariffs on India for continuing to buy Russian oil — a measure Delhi sees as deeply unfair. These tools often get overlooked amid the competing narratives, but remain important factors in shaping Moscow's calculations.

How likely is it that President Volodymyr Zelenskyy would survive politically if Ukraine were to suffer a significant territorial loss in the east to Russia?

Zelenskyy has reportedly shown pragmatism by openly acknowledging the possibility of territorial 'swaps' in recent statements. It's important to note that military withdrawals are not unconstitutional in Ukraine — similar measures have been taken in

earlier phases of the conflict. What would be far more politically sensitive and contentious is a complete withdrawal from the entire Donbas region. So far, even opposition parties have supported Zelenskyy's position against such a total pull-out from Donbas.

Territorial losses would certainly put Zelenskyy's political standing under pressure, but his ability to remain in office would depend largely on the terms of any ceasefire or freeze, and on how the situation is presented domestically within Ukraine's broader political landscape.

President Zelenskyy and other European leaders have already rejected the idea of ceding territory to end the war with Russia. What other options remain for Europe and Ukraine if no deal is reached now?

The situation remains fluid. While Zelenskyy and European leaders have indeed rejected any formal ceding of territory to end the war, recent European statements emphasising 'active diplomacy' hint at a subtle shift away from a strictly uncompromising position. In essence, freezing the conflict would serve the interests of both Ukraine and Europe, especially given current battlefield trends, which could deteriorate quickly if US military aid were reduced.

The main challenge is persuading Moscow to accept such a freeze, as it would not be an optimal military outcome for Russia at this point. Still, signals from the Alaska summit suggest the US has made some progress in pushing this idea. Without concrete details, though, any further speculation would be premature — and I prefer to avoid it.

This interview was conducted by Nikolaos Gavalakis.



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