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Cold reality check

While Europe stays delulu, Russia is dictating the terms

Right away: what took place in Alaska on Friday was unorthodox diplomacy, to put it mildly. As a rule, and especially in the always-sensitive field of peace diplomacy, summits between heads of state come as the well-calibrated finale. They are only held once the numerous technical points of contention accrued over the course of a conflict have been resolved in thematic working groups, and a final document is ready for signing.

For good reason, because when a summit fails, it doesn't just dent the prestige of the rulers involved, but trust and hope will be lost, as will painstakingly pieced-together agreements. Trump, however, staged this summit as an opening act, after just a few days of warm-up and with comparatively little systematic preparation. This was an enormous risk. Under the circumstances, a breakthrough could hardly have been expected.

Key summit outcomes

Even so, the summit has pushed practical constraints that had long been taboo but can no longer be ignored into the foreground: Russia has dominated on the battlefield since late 2023, while Ukraine has steadily weakened, despite receiving unprecedented Western support. In the spring of 2022, Josep Borrell – predecessor of EU High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy Kaja Kallas – was bloviating about how this war must be won on the battlefield. Now, this scenario is becoming a reality, albeit not quite in the way Borrell imagined. Russia is advancing. Therefore, a ceasefire without conditions, as demanded by Ukraine and European governments, is a nonstarter. After all, why should Putin agree to give up his strategic dominance, only to get nothing in return?

Another such practical reality that is now coming to light is that, for Russia, this war was – and still is – about so-called root causes. By this, Moscow means the West's zero-sum security policy in Central and Eastern Europe since the end of the Cold War. This, too, is a reason why Russia does not want to simply freeze the war, but insists on

comprehensive political negotiations to construct a new kind of relationship between Russia and the West alongside talks to end the war.

Accordingly, the most important outcome of the summit is that there will be substantive peace talks instead of the basic ceasefire that Zelenskyy and his European friends had sought in an audience with Trump two days before Anchorage. This is the key factor in determining how things will proceed.

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A ceasefire of the kind demanded by Ukraine and the Europeans borders on denial of reality. It amounts to closing their eyes to the causes of this war, as well as to the need for a new security arrangement in Europe — one that is adequate to the contours of a multipolar order. Plus, such a ceasefire would be brittle: without a sophisticated monitoring mechanism endorsed by both sides, even a single shot fired along the vast frontline or in the air over Ukraine or Russia would trigger new battles. It didn't help that European representatives openly announced that they would rearm Ukraine and rapidly deploy their own troops during a ceasefire.

A Solomonic take on the deadlock between the European and American positions would mean viewing them not as contradictions, but as parts of a whole. As the Colombian ex-president, peace negotiator and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Juan Manuel Santos explains, a ceasefire is an important step — but one in the direction of a comprehensive peace settlement. A ceasefire creates trust, making negotiations easier when parties refrain from unleashing death and destruction on each other. The next step should now be a well-structured framework agreement supported by both sides, setting out the thematic clusters and rules of the negotiation process.

The outcome of the summit means that, for the first time since April 2022, there is now a process, a virtual space and – even if hastily designed – a mechanism within which the parties to the conflict and other stakeholders can discuss any open questions. As the initial hectic hours and days after the summit showed, this process has already begun — perhaps a little too precipitously.

Accepting reality

Russia's military dominance and its insistence on a new security arrangement in Europe are realities that cannot be wished away — but that won't stop Europe's foreign policy establishment from trying. The Europeans' reaction to the summit – apart from quiet relief that it didn't turn into the new Yalta they had worried about – was horrified hand-wringing and hair-tearing. Horror at the prospect of peace actually breaking out. And horror at how they had failed to win over Trump for their side of the argument, despite doing everything they could: promising eyewatering sums for American weapons, kowtowing to his demands for new tariffs, sending the right people to play golf with him. In short, everything that was supposed to flatter a vain, ageing, confused narcissist. And still they didn't manage to leverage the Americans and their military power for European concerns. *Sad!*

Rather than seizing this opportunity for peace, European leaders are resorting to a well-worn strategy: playing the 'spoiler'. Those who are not strong enough to prevail in a conflict torpedo attempts at peaceful resolution through badmouthing, sabotage and manipulation.

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A good many of them stick to stubborn voluntarism: if we just believe hard enough, everything will stay the same and will work out exactly the way we want it to. Thus, Kallas writes on X that 'the US holds the power to force Russia to negotiate seriously', and that, combined with the EU's continued support of Ukraine and the 19th package of sanctions, it can make Russia give up the war. In any case, 'European security is not up for negotiation.'

In a recent interview, Austria's new Foreign Minister Beate Meinl-Reisinger was upbeat about how, eventually, 'the coffins would be piling up' in Russia and Putin would run out of time. This faction of voluntarists pines for the old, reliable America — the one that incessantly talked about the rules-based order and enabled the Europeans to punch above their geopolitical weight.

Then there are also other voices – increasingly numerous and loud – who demand that Europe finally face the fact of America's fickleness, abandon its illusions, and go to war with Russia on its own. What drives these European spoilers? Apparently, it is the conviction that peace must absolutely not be allowed to break out and that war must absolutely continue; that nothing short of a clear defeat of Russia is acceptable to

Europe. How such a defeat is to be achieved in actual military and strategic terms, however, remains unclear.

A new security architecture for Europe

Now that we are finally talking about root causes, we must also talk about a new, different security architecture for Europe. This is precisely this *bête noire* of European think tanks and foreign ministries that no one wants to tackle. Given the aforementioned material constraints, Russia will take part in these conversations at eye level. This prospect, coupled with the realisation that Europe can no longer leverage the old men in the White House for its own ends, is causing panic.

In contrast to the panic among European politicians about a possible end of the war, a new Gallup poll finds that 69 per cent of Ukrainians want the war to be stopped through negotiations. We could try to wish this away and keep telling ourselves that 'Ukraine is against it'. It doesn't take much to sabotage such a clunky, improvised peace process.

The emerging outline of a settlement is not much different from the one Ukraine almost completed in spring 2022, before its Western partners advised against it. Three years later, hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians have died, entire cities have been destroyed, and the country's military situation has deteriorated dramatically. There is one significant difference, though: since the petering out of the Istanbul talks, Russia has occupied more territory and now demands that Ukraine recognise this 'new reality'. This is a clear affront to the prohibition of violence — but also one of the toughest nuts to be cracked at any upcoming negotiations. With political will and vision, it may well be possible to wrest concessions from Russia on this issue.

Europe can now bank on more war — and find itself entangled ever deeper in it. Or it could get serious about peace and lean in with a state-of-the-art effort.



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