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What's needed for peace?

After Trump's meeting marathon, one thing is clear — Ukraine must navigate promises without real protection

Seven years have passed since Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin last met. Back then, in Helsinki, the Russian side was represented by the same Ushakov and Lavrov; there were talks about Ukraine and the general state of Russian-American relations; and most observers also awarded the 'victory' to Putin.

The world has changed since then. The further decline of American leadership against the backdrop of China's continued rise; the formation of new bipolarity; the reinvigoration of the Global South; and, of course, the full-scale Russian-Ukrainian war, which has multiplied the risks for Europe and presented strategic dilemmas for Trump, who has returned to the White House.

Not Munich and not Reykjavik

The meeting between the American and Russian leaders in Alaska has been compared to many things — most often to the Munich meeting of 1938 and the Reykjavik summit of 1986. Historical analogies are always conditional, and the Alaska summit has several key differences from these epoch-making and very different meetings. In Munich, in accordance with the long-standing traditions of classical European diplomacy, the great powers solved their problems at the expense of a smaller one – Czechoslovakia, which was forced to cede the Sudetenland to Germany.

Britain and France, on whose support the Czechoslovak government was counting in the event of war with Germany, made it clear that there would be no help — as a result, Czechoslovak President Edvard Beneš was forced to sign a treaty with Nazi Germany.

The Munich Agreement evokes painful associations in Ukraine, reminding it of the vulnerability of small and medium-sized powers and forcing it to repeatedly voice the 'nothing about Ukraine without Ukraine' principle as one of its key concerns. Like Britain and France in

1938, the United States may leave Ukraine without assistance. But unlike the containment strategy of that time, which was intended to prevent war, today's Western leaders are faced with the reality of an ongoing war that has revealed the balance of power and chances. This will push some leaders, including European ones, on whom Zelenskyy is counting, to provide more decisive support to Ukraine.

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In Reykjavik in 1986, the leaders of the United States and the Soviet Union not only laid the foundation for the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, but also changed the climate of international politics to such an extent that it became possible to talk about the end of the Cold War.

Relations between Washington and Moscow are not so fateful today, and the meeting in Alaska was necessary for both Trump and Putin for slightly different reasons. Dialogue with Russia is important for the American president, and he needed to understand how possible it is, where its limits lie, and what its content might be. A personal meeting with the Russian president was needed, especially because it was consistent with Trump's overall pragmatic approach, which allows him to meet and talk with anyone as long as there is a practical result. In this sense, the summit in Alaska can be compared to Richard Nixon's visit to China in 1972 — an epoch-making event that marked the beginning of the Sino-American rapprochement directed against the USSR, and also became a symbol of geopolitical pragmatism.

Trump needed to meet with Putin because it is important for him to weaken Russian-Chinese ties; to gain the opportunity for situational cooperation with Moscow on a wide range of issues, from the Arctic to arms control; and to secure Russia's restrained position in the event of escalating tensions with China. The American president's geopolitical perspective remains unchanged: he views the world through the prism of confrontation with Beijing over the future world order, and the Russian-Ukrainian war through the prism of Russian-American relations. These are much broader than the war and can be discussed even while it continues in its current form. But the war does complicate matters considerably, and Trump would prefer it to end — on whichever terms.

Prospects for peace and security guarantees for Ukraine

The agenda for the meeting in Alaska went beyond the Russian-Ukrainian war, but for Ukraine, and probably for Europe, this particular item was the most important.

Between Trump's two meetings – first with Putin, then with Zelenskyy and European leaders – the rough outlines of a peace deal emerged: the withdrawal of Ukrainian troops from the Donetsk and Luhansk regions in exchange for a freeze of the war. In April, the Russian president rejected a lesser proposal: to freeze the war along the current front line, apparently believing that he would be able to obtain better terms over time. However, it will be much more difficult for Zelenskyy to agree to new terms, if possible at all. Even continuing the war without American assistance seems more preferable to him than surrendering territory without a fight. Most likely, a simple solution to the territorial issue, the most difficult in the war, will not be found quickly.

Another key issue remains security guarantees for Ukraine. The United States does not intend to extend such guarantees to Ukraine – in the classic sense, these are considered allied obligations – either in the form of Ukraine's membership in NATO or on a bilateral level. Judging by his rhetoric, Trump considers this issue to be more European than American. And if European leaders sought support in Trump's meeting with Zelenskyy, the latter sought an opportunity to push Europe to take on some of the risks.

In these circumstances, the very concept of security guarantees has to be broadened and watered down, effectively including any measures aimed at supporting and assisting Ukraine.

There are risks, of course: the likelihood of another war is high, especially given the unresolved issues, the experience of large-scale violence, the low level of trust and the general state of international security. Ukraine's membership in NATO, which Kyiv has traditionally counted on as a panacea for all problems, is not (and never has been) a realistic option. In these circumstances, the very concept of security guarantees has to be broadened and watered down, effectively including any measures aimed at supporting and assisting Ukraine. Three dozen countries, with varying degrees of interest in supporting Ukraine, can, of course, create some kind of deterrent effect through joint efforts, but it is unlikely that Moscow will consider it credible.

The format discussed in recent days, 'almost like Article 5, but outside NATO,' leaves the question of readiness to fight for Ukraine unanswered. Even for NATO member states, Article 5 of the Washington Treaty does not mean the automatic deployment of allied troops, and therefore for Ukraine it looks more like symbolic consolation than a working mechanism.

The prospect of sending 'coalition of the willing' troops to Ukraine is also unclear at this point. The risks are too high, and the role of the United States is too uncertain, while the Europeans seem willing to take risks only with strong support from Washington.

It is quite possible that there are no effective guarantees in this situation, and that what is actually being discussed is the creation of some kind of support mechanism that is more suitable and reliable than the security agreements that have already been signed. Whether such a mechanism would be sufficient to pave the way for agreements with Moscow – and especially for resolving territorial disputes – is a key question that remains unanswered.

The situation on the diplomatic front of the confrontation with Russia has never been favourable for Ukraine. At times, events have unfolded more or less successfully, but at least since the Global Peace Summit in June 2024, it has become clear that trends are not developing in our favour. The result of these processes is the current agenda, where instead of the triumph of the united West and Ukraine, reinforced anti-Russian sanctions and the peace formula in its original form, there is talk of preparing a meeting between the Ukrainian and Russian presidents to freeze the war and the price Ukraine is willing to pay for it.



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