

After the Alaska Summit: Ukraine Not Closer to Peace

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The Alaska summit between Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin has not brought Ukraine closer to peace. Worse, it legitimized Putin's war policy and brought him back onto the international diplomatic stage. Unless European NATO members can make a greater contribution to supplying weapons and impacting the military balance at the front line, including through security guarantees, they will be unable to impact the outcome of such negotiations. Any territorial concessions of Ukraine would further undermine international law.

The summit between US President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin in Alaska on August 15 did not bring Ukraine closer to peace. Mainly serving Trump's interest in being a peacemaker, it did not provide any preconditions for Russian concessions. Worse, it legitimized Putin's war policy and brought him back onto the international diplomatic stage. Thus, the Alaska summit was another low point in US diplomacy. Furthermore, the Trump administration's whole negotiation process demonstrates the weakness of the EU and its member states because European governments do not play a decisive role in security issues on their own continent. Despite Europe's efforts to present a united front in support of Kiev, US security guarantees and US pressure on Putin are necessary for achieving peace.

WINNING TIME FOR WAR NOT PEACE

Donald Trump's meeting with Vladimir Putin in Alaska made it clear that this kind of diplomatic effort does not make sense because the Russian president

has no interest in ending the war in the foreseeable future. Instead, he prioritizes winning it on the battlefield. The summit helped Putin to win time to continue Russia's military advancement into territory in eastern Ukraine. It showed that the mere wish of the US president for making a peace deal is not enough to achieve it; to do so, he and the European states would need to impact the military situation on the ground and put the aggressor under pressure. Talking just to talk does not serve the goal of reaching peace or an agreement when the Russian side does not want a diplomatic solution. In this case, talking rather legitimized the Russian president and his war policy.

In the end, the Alaska summit served to meet Vladimir Putin's demand for an exclusive summit with Donald Trump without European leaders and Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky. Putin's idea is to end this war in a Yalta-like big summit through which he meets with the US president at eye level, and they bilaterally decide the future of Ukraine and the European security order. Additionally, it was the Russian president

who defined the agenda and outcome of the Alaska summit not the president of Ukraine or the United States. Trump agreed that no ceasefire is needed for negotiations and there should be a peace agreement – exactly what Putin wanted. In the press conference afterward, Putin addressed the audience first. He spoke against diplomatic practices and then, unopposed by the US president, could argue his view of the reasons for the war and spread his usual disinformation.

While Trump remains unwilling to sanction the Russian president for his ongoing brutal war, he puts the Ukrainian president under pressure to make concessions. Trump has argued that it is up to President Zelensky to move closer to a peace agreement through surrendering territory. Thus, Trump is putting pressure on the victim while the aggressor seems to have free hand – a position that further undermines US political credibility in Europe, Ukraine, and beyond. The Alaska meeting and Trump's normalization policy with Russia will also further estrange transatlantic relations and weaken Western support for Ukraine, another key goal of the Kremlin.

TRUMP AS A BAD DEALMAKER

Trump's policy completely fails to recognize that Putin is not interested in peace. The entire discussion about what territory Ukraine must give up serves as a distraction from the ongoing conflict and the key questions of what military support Ukraine requires and how security guarantees need to look to change Russia's cost-benefit calculation of the war. It is wrong that the Russian president would be satisfied with four Ukrainian regions and Crimea. Instead, he wants to control the whole of Ukraine and get Russia's traditional sphere of influence recognized by the US president. Even worse, Putin would use the annexed territory to attack deeper into Ukrainian territory.

There is a complete mismatch in what each side is negotiating. From Putin's point of view, Russia is not fighting the war to make a real estate deal about land but to fulfill his personal legacy of bringing Ukraine back under control and restoring a leading role to Russia in European security. Trump seems not to understand that his policy not only further undermines the bargaining position of both Ukraine and Europe toward Russia but also strengthens Putin's image globally.

If Trump follows the path of pressing Ukraine into territorial concessions, this could set a dangerous precedent for the further weakening of international law – whereby the sovereignty of states and internationally recognized borders no longer apply. Other authoritarian countries around the world will learn that, if they take territory of other states by force, they will be punished neither by the US president nor anybody else. This is the power of the strong logic that Vladimir Putin promotes. The US president seems to be closer in his world view to the Russian president than to the European allies in NATO. Given the way things currently stand, Trump is obviously a bad dealmaker. He is not able to negotiate at eye level with Vladimir Putin.

TOOTHLESS EUROPEANS

The Alaska summit also showed that Europe has no real influence over the US president. Leaders from the EU and its member states will not sit at the negotiating table on Ukraine since Europe is not sovereign in terms of its own security. Europeans have failed to prepare for the new global order in which “might makes right” is the new reality and multilateral institutions or international law no longer matter. Neither Putin nor Trump take the European countries seriously. The press conference in the White House with Ukrainian President Zelensky and key European leaders on the Monday after the Alaska summit was a humiliating display by key European politicians who serve to please a king-like Donald Trump. European countries have no bargaining position toward the US president because he can always threaten them with withdrawing US security support.

Europe as we know it is a product of US policy after the Second World War. Since then, US security guarantees through NATO have been the key to European prosperity and security. Although it already became clear in Trump's first administration from 2017 to 2021 that these security guarantees were not necessarily permanent, Europe took no action – it neither made a serious investment in defense nor strengthened European security capabilities. Now, a fundamental question has become even more urgent: can Europe survive as a normative power without a US liberal normative framework and security guarantees? European leaders have not yet answered this question.

EXPECTATIONS FOR GERMANY

The fact that German Chancellor Friedrich Merz organized a meeting with Donald Trump and other European leaders before the summit with Putin can be seen as somewhat of a

success. Ukrainian President Zelensky even joined the meeting in Berlin in person, which suggests that Ukraine is now bidding on Germany to be their key supporter. Yet, Kiev's high expectations come at a very difficult time for Germany, politically and militarily. While Merz has demonstrated that he can organize a united position of key European countries in support of Ukraine, it is unclear whether he can really make an impact on Trump and fulfill those expectations in terms of military support and security guarantees.

The meeting organized by Merz had one main aim: to define red lines for what Trump could negotiate with Putin, thus preventing any agreement at the costs of Ukraine and European security. That seems to be the only impact Europeans can make at the moment – to keep the situation from getting worse. While Europeans have been able to keep Trump from sealing a bad deal with Putin so far, they do not have much to offer in terms of impacting the outcome of bilateral negotiations between the leaders of the United States and Russia or putting Putin under pressure.

NO SECURITY GUARANTEES WITHOUT THE UNITED STATES

The Trump-Putin summit and the meeting in the White House with Zelensky have again shown that Europe is not a key actor in ending this war. Europe lacks leadership, unity, a common assessment of the real threat, and military capabilities. German Chancellor Friedrich Merz is constrained by domestic challenges and, for at least the next few years, by Germany's lack of military capabilities.

Europe must redefine its role in European security and on the world stage. Germany has to play a key role in European security by investing heavily in European defense as is now finally the case. Germany's investments are

also helping to build an independent European wing in NATO, but that will take time that Ukraine does not have.

Since Putin has the impression that he can win this war on the battlefield and is not interested in an independent Ukraine, security guarantees and military pressure are key to any ceasefire agreement. European countries could sit at the negotiating table if they could provide such security guarantees for Ukraine and supply weapons to the country on a much larger scale. But these are also areas where Europe is not united and not able to act without the United States. To establish security guarantees, it needs US support in terms of logistics, controlling airspace, and the intelligence to build up credible deterrence against further Russian aggression. Key weapons systems for Ukraine still come from the US industry. Until the US military, in combination with European states, can provide Ukraine with the security guarantees that European countries are unable to supply alone, it is up to Ukraine to continue to resist Russia on the battlefield and President Trump on the need to make territorial concessions. It is now essential that Europeans get their act together – that it is not merely a few countries in its north and east, including Germany, that are key supporters of Ukraine, but that all European states are willing to supply weapons. If this does not happen, there is no peace in sight.



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DGAP receives funding from the German Federal Foreign Office based on a resolution of the German Bundestag.

Publisher

Deutsche Gesellschaft für
Auswärtige Politik e.V.

ISSN 2749-5542

Editing Helga Beck

Layout Marie Bauer



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