

Putin's PR Win and Trump's Strategic Misstep at the Alaska Summit

Written by Jinghao Zhou

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JINGHAO ZHOU, AUG 17 2025

The Alaska summit between U.S. President Trump and Russian President Putin concluded after a two-and-a-half-hour meeting with an unsurprising result: there was no agreement on ending the war in Ukraine, although both Trump and Putin claimed they had a productive meeting at a joint press conference. While acknowledging that the Alaska summit could carry some significance for a potential peace deal in Ukraine, the future of U.S.-Russia relations, and the geopolitical competition between the U.S. and China, without a doubt, the summit was not a win-win meeting. Instead, it was Putin's public relations victory and Trump's disappointment, as Trump wanted to see a ceasefire deal at the summit; otherwise, he would be unhappy. Consequently, Trump did not get there. By contrast, Putin received a warm welcome from Trump, who applauded several times as Putin walked the red carpet on American soil and rode in the presidential car.

Despite Putin's international isolation and the outstanding war crimes warrant, the summit legitimized the Russian leader and provided him with an opportunity to solidify his territorial gains. Although the U.S. attempted to offset the optics by flying B-2 stealth bombers and F-35 jets overhead while Putin walked alongside Trump, the damage was done. While European leaders found the spectacle difficult to watch, Russian media applauded the diplomatic triumph for Moscow, achieved without concessions on its part.

Putin's intention to meet Trump on U.S. soil appears to have been a calculated maneuver designed to manipulate public perception rather than to pursue genuine peace. Under the pressure of Trump's ultimatum, Putin did not want to break with Trump. By appearing cooperative, Putin provided Trump with a symbolic "ladder to step down" from his ultimatum and boosted Trump's image as a peacemaker—all while avoiding any meaningful commitment to a peace deal. This tactic buys time, enabling Russia to consolidate its territorial gains in Ukraine and mitigate the risk of further U.S. sanctions.

Contrary to popular belief, Russia is not on the brink of seeking a ceasefire. Despite significant Western sanctions and substantial military losses in Ukraine, Russia demonstrated adaptability and resilience in sustaining its military efforts. The European Union remains divided, with some member states prioritizing national energy security over unified sanctions enforcement. This disunity has allowed Russia to exploit economic loopholes, particularly through continued oil exports to Europe, which generate substantial revenue for its military-industrial complex. Western hesitation to provide Ukraine with long-range missiles and decisive military support has preserved Russia's strategic depth and limited Ukraine's capacity to strike beyond the front lines. U.S. political inconsistency has further disrupted sustained aid, signaling unreliability to both allies and adversaries.

In addition, the rebalancing of the geopolitical landscape has given Russia room to maneuver. China's deepening "no-limits" partnership with Moscow has fortified Putin's strategic position. India's growing alignment with both Russia and Beijing, driven by energy dependence and regional balancing, further isolates Washington and dilutes Western leverage. The expansion of BRICS, encompassing key Global South economies, has created a parallel diplomatic and financial architecture that favors Russia and undermines U.S.-led sanctions regimes. Pyongyang's active military involvement in the Ukraine war adds another layer of complexity, transforming the conflict into a broader anti-Western coalition. These shifts embolden Putin, reducing his incentive to compromise.

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Trump's determination to play such a risky game with Putin at the Alaska summit suggests he lacks strategic coherence and a full understanding of the complexities of international diplomacy. During his presidential campaign, Trump pledged to end the war within 24 hours of taking office. After assuming the presidency, he attempted to broker a peace deal, but Russia remained unwilling to accept terms favorable to Ukraine. Trump also expressed frustration with Zelenskyy and temporarily suspended critical military aid. Later, he made a U-turn by issuing an ultimatum to Putin and proposing a meeting that excluded Ukrainian participation. Before the summit, Trump vowed that the main goal was to push for a ceasefire. He has now dropped his demand, sparking fears that he has aligned with Putin's position since the summit. A Pew poll shows that nearly 60% of Americans lack confidence in President Trump's ability to make wise decisions on the Russia-Ukraine war, reflecting widespread skepticism over his handling of the conflict.

The no-deal summit strongly implies that a genuine peace deal cannot be determined by the United States and Russia without the participation of Ukraine and European leaders. The war in Ukraine is the central issue, yet the summit was planned as a bilateral meeting between Trump and Putin. Any summit without Ukraine's presence, robust security guarantees, and sustained external pressure would undermine the legitimacy of any outcome and consolidate Putin's victory. This absence suggests that any potential agreement would be a bilateral arrangement between great powers rather than a genuine tripartite negotiation. Thus, any potential agreement between the U.S. and Russia without Ukraine's real participation is impractical and potentially detrimental to Ukrainian sovereignty.

The no-deal summit clearly indicates that exchanging Ukraine's territory for peace is an illusion under Putin's Russia. Trump even suggested that there would be a "swapping of territories" between Russia and Ukraine to end the war. Historically, Putin has exploited diplomatic overtures to advance Russia's strategic interests while offering minimal genuine compromise. Trump appears to persist in viewing Putin as a potential partner rather than an adversary. This framing presents a serious risk: Trump may be lured into endorsing a peace deal that disproportionately benefits Russia. Such tactics could erode international efforts to hold Russia accountable and embolden future acts of aggression. Putin's well-documented record of brutality and expansionist ambition demonstrates that he wants to control the entirety of Ukraine. Trump will never be able to reach a peace deal without changing Putin's greed and ambition.

However, Russia's war machine will not be able to run indefinitely. After three years of war, Russia's effort is approaching a critical inflection point. The Russian economy is now experiencing a sharp deceleration. This economic fragility is compounded by a widening budget deficit that has already surpassed its annual target due to ballooning defense outlays and declining hydrocarbon revenues. Russia's ability to prosecute a long-term war of attrition is increasingly jeopardized by profound military strain. Russia's military has suffered disproportionately heavy losses, with credible estimates of killed and injured personnel now exceeding 700,000—a casualty rate far greater than Ukraine's. These factors suggest that Russia's capacity to sustain the war beyond late 2025 is increasingly untenable. In fact, it would be wise for Putin to start a peace process now before a deeper economic collapse and irreversible decline set in.

Trump has publicly warned that Russia would face very severe consequences if it did not stop the war in Ukraine after the summit. Although he has not specified what these consequences would entail, they could include secondary sanctions and tariffs. It is the right time for Trump to impose such tariffs, which could deal a fatal blow to Putin and force him to end his aggression. However, without coordinated action from European allies, the impact of sanctions would remain limited. That is why Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent has urged Europe to "get on board" with tougher trade measures, emphasizing that secondary tariffs are very powerful. It is now time for the leaders of the U.S., Ukraine, and Europe to demonstrate their wisdom and ability in seizing this post-Alaska opportunity to end the Russian war in Ukraine.

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