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Tactical Victories in Ukraine Peace Talks Will Only Lead to Strategic Defeat

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United States President Donald Trump and Russian president Vladimir Putin. **Daniel Torok / The White House**

The summit between United States President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin in Alaska and the subsequent meeting of the U.S. president with his Ukrainian counterpart Volodymyr Zelensky and European leaders in Washington have given rise to new hopes that an end to the Russia-Ukraine war may finally be in sight. After all, for the first time in several years, the parties have begun to discuss the practical parameters of a settlement.

In reality, however, the long-term prospects of the negotiations have not really changed. The participants can justifiably claim certain tactical successes, but strategically, there are only more losses in store.

The hastily convened summit in Alaska showed that neither Russia nor the United States was prepared to take the confrontation to a new level. Trump himself admitted that he did not

believe that further sanctions would force Moscow to stop the war. Putin, meanwhile, was trying to maintain his contact with Trump: the only Western leader with whom any kind of meaningful dialogue is possible.

No deal was reached, but Putin did initially manage to secure a major shift in Trump's position on the negotiations toward the Russian vision of ending the war, as evidenced by two factors. The first is Trump's firm belief that Russia, as a nuclear power, cannot be defeated on the battlefield, which means that Ukraine cannot win through military means. The second is that the U.S. president abandoned his demand for a ceasefire and instead agreed with Putin's main argument that the parties should move straight to discussions of a long-term peace solution.

The Alaska summit has created a kind of marriage of convenience: there is no love per se, but there is an understanding that confrontation is not beneficial to either side. This is the framework for subsequent U.S.-Russia interaction: not a shared approach to resolving the Ukraine war, given that the differences are still significant, but a mutual reluctance to slide into conflict. Despite hopes in Europe that Trump will become disillusioned with Putin, that seems to be an unrealistic prospect, at least for now.

This outcome suits the Kremlin just fine. It was enough for Moscow to get the U.S. go-ahead for direct negotiations with Kyiv on the Kremlin's proposed memorandum, which is what happened when Trump decided to distance himself from discussing the details of the deal.

The resulting framework was very general and included three very vague points: the exchange of territory, Ukraine not joining NATO, and security guarantees for Ukraine. The fact that the two warring sides have fundamentally different approaches to these issues has not prevented the White House from continuing to support this new format for a "settlement."

The next event that cemented the new format of negotiations was Trump's meeting with Zelensky and European leaders in Washington. The attempt to exert group pressure on the U.S. president and neutralize the results of the Alaska summit failed. Trump pushed the idea of the need to work on a full-fledged peace agreement, rather than a ceasefire and tried to convince those present that Putin was just about ready to meet with Zelensky and discuss all their differences directly.

Related article: Trump and Putin Speak the Same Diplomatic Language. Zelensky Adapts, But Europe Struggles.

The statements issued following the two summits quickly made it clear how far apart the two sides' positions remain, despite talk of progress. On the key issue of security guarantees for Ukraine, Moscow's position is virtually unchanged from what it discussed with Kyiv in Istanbul in the spring of 2022.

According to the Kremlin, any peace agreement between Russia and Ukraine should also be signed by guarantor countries: first and foremost, the permanent members of the UN Security Council, including Russia itself. Then, in the event of a new escalation, each guarantor would have the right to veto decisions.

Russia also expects such guarantees to be accompanied by a radical reduction in the size of the Ukrainian army, because that is what Moscow sees as the most reliable protection against Ukraine not rearming in the post-war years and trying to regain what it has lost.

The Europeans and Kyiv have a completely different vision of security guarantees. They envisage a military contingent from NATO countries being stationed in Ukraine, albeit limited in number and far from the front. These "reassurance forces" will not be intended to fight Russia and essentially amount to moral support for Kyiv, as well as some limited practical functions like in-country training.

Both Trump and U.S. officials involved in the issue have said outright that there will be no U.S. troops on Ukrainian territory. Air support is likely, though Trump and his team have not specified what exactly that support would mean in practice. The United States will also ask for additional payment for this air support from the Europeans, who are already shouldering the financial responsibility for all military support provided to Ukraine.

Russia has rejected the idea of such guarantees many times and following the Alaska summit, the Russian Foreign Ministry said again that there can be no NATO troops on Ukrainian territory without Russia's participation.

All of this casts doubt on the second supposed achievement of the two summits: talk of preparations for a meeting between Putin and Zelensky. This topic appears to have arisen due to a misunderstanding on the U.S. side: the Kremlin has never publicly refused to hold such a meeting, but has always stipulated that careful preparations would be essential. Putin probably simply repeated this position, which was interpreted as readiness to meet in the near future.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov found himself having to explain again: first, expert groups are set up to do their work, then the documents are hashed out at higher levels, and only then will the leaders meet, as the final stage. By presenting this process as preparation for a meeting between Putin and Zelensky, Moscow appears to be trying to convince Washington that Kyiv should begin a substantive discussion of Russia's terms.

The Ukrainian leadership is therefore now being drawn into a negotiating format that can be termed "Istanbul 2" — the same demands, not counting the new territorial claims, the same place, and the same people (at least on the Russian side). But Ukraine is now in an even more difficult situation than in the spring of 2022, facing the risk of losing the rest of the Donbas. In fact, direct discussions between Russian and Ukrainian representatives have been underway in Istanbul for a couple of months now, but have not yielded any results other than several exchanges of prisoners and fallen soldiers.

Related article: Ukraine Needs Security Guarantees Moscow Will Take Seriously. The West Isn't Up to the Task.

Europe's role in the negotiation format is largely decorative. It has neither the military nor financial resources to bring about any rapid change to the situation on the battlefield, and its key strategic ally — the United States — has now adopted Russia's position that any deal should be discussed within a direct dialogue between Russia and Ukraine.

All of this could condemn Kyiv to several months of difficult negotiations with Moscow in Istanbul amid an ongoing Russian offensive. After a few months of such negotiations, they may indeed yield a result in the form of some kind of settlement formula. But it will most likely be doomed to repeat the fate of previous accords between Moscow and Kyiv, like the Minsk agreements: rather than settling the conflict once and for all, it may serve as a prologue to another war sometime down the road.

There are at least two problems. The first is that Putin flatly refuses to understand that it is not the West that prevents Ukraine from becoming "friendly" to Moscow, but that Ukrainian society and elites will never accept the capitulatory conditions that Moscow is trying to impose on them. And no matter what points the Kremlin manages to shoehorn into agreements signed after arduous negotiations, it still won't be possible to implement them.

The second problem is that in its search for a formula to guarantee Ukraine's security, the West is trying to find one that would enable it to contain an aggressor that cannot be defeated using military means because it is in possession of nuclear weapons. With the West resolutely refusing to directly fight Russia on Ukraine's side today, there is no reason to believe it will suddenly be prepared to do so in the event of a new escalation after the current war has stopped. And that means that Ukraine cannot feel safe either until Russia is defeated, or until the Kremlin changes course — which is not in the cards any time soon.

The reality today is that Moscow is not reconsidering its maximalist demands, the United States is on its way out of the conflict, and Trump may want to abandon its confrontation with Moscow altogether, while Europe is too weak to change the tide of the war without the active input of the United States — at least on a par with what Joe Biden's administration was ready to do for Kyiv. But no matter what Putin forces Kyiv to sign, he will not get a "friendly" Ukraine. Tactically, the parties may win but, strategically, there can be no winners.

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