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Alaska Summit Shifts US Narrative on Russia-Ukraine War

Rapid Response, Institute for Youth in Policy

September 2025

Keywords Russia-Ukraine war, Vladimir Putin, Donald Trump, diplomacy, ceasefire, geopolitics

I. Executive Summary

A recent US-Russia summit held in Alaska between President Trump and President Putin failed to secure a ceasefire in the Russo-Ukrainian war, deepening divides over Ukraine's territorial sovereignty and exposing US policy contradictions. Escalating nuclear risks and inconsistent sanctions highlight the urgent need for a coherent Western strategy to achieve lasting peace.

II. Overview

On August 15, 2025, another major round of peace discussions on the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War took place in Anchorage, Alaska. The bilateral meeting was announced shortly after a "highly productive meeting" between Trump's special envoy Steve Witkoff and President Vladimir Putin on August 6. This was just two days before the deadline set by President Donald Trump's ultimatum demanding a ceasefire or the imposition of severe US sanctions. While President Volodymyr Zelenskyy of Ukraine was not invited to the meeting, he announced on X that "security guarantees are needed. Lasting peace is needed," affirming Ukraine's firm stance in the discussion.

Although the summit ended on an optimistic note, it still failed to deliver a definite ceasefire. Since the start of the war, Putin has emphasized that peace could only be reached after addressing the conflict's "root causes," a token for the Kremlin's unyielding demands in the war. This includes territorial gains for Russia and Ukraine's conversion to a neutral state. Despite Trump's post-meeting comments on the possibility of Russian concessions and a tripartite meeting involving Zelensky, no specific promises were made, raising further questions on Russia's stance.

Three days after the Alaska summit, Zelenskyy and seven other European leaders also arrived in Washington for a meeting with Trump. The meeting reinforced the need for permanent peace, European commitment to aid for Ukraine, and US security guarantees, but it similarly finished without a clear resolution.

III. History

The Ukraine-Russia conflict traces back to 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea following Ukraine's 2013-14 protests regarding the ousting of its former President Victor Yanukovich. This annexation was internationally condemned and led to armed conflict in eastern Ukraine's Donbas region, where Russian backed separatists clashed with Ukrainian forces. Despite multiple ceasefire attempts, including the 2015 Minsk agreements, fighting persisted and resulted in over 14,000 deaths by early 2022.

The situation further escalated in February of that year when Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This marked the largest military conflict in Europe since World War II. Initial Russian advances were repelled by Ukrainian forces, leading to a protracted war characterized by shifting frontlines, significant civilian casualties, and widespread displacement. International responses included sanctions on Russia, military and humanitarian aid to Ukraine, and diplomatic efforts to negotiate peace, though a comprehensive resolution remains elusive.

IV. Policy Problem

The recent summit exposed critical policy failures that undermine prospects for peace in Eastern Europe. The most blatant failure was the absence of a formal agreement or ceasefire, despite President Trump's promises to deliver critical enforcements on Russia. A core issue is Russia and Ukraine's irreconcilable divide over territorial sovereignty, with the former demanding Ukraine's withdrawal from Donetsk and a frozen frontline in Kherzon and Zaporishshia,

V. Policy Options

while the latter firmly rejects any territorial concessions. The US exacerbates this antagonism by adopting a stance contradictory to its ally's, with Trump suggesting Ukraine should cede land instead. Heightened nuclear tensions, marked by Russia's "Dead Hand" threat, its withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, and US nuclear submarine deployments further escalate geopolitical risks. Inconsistent economic pressure, evidenced by Trump's unqualified tariff threats and reports of ExxonMobil-Rosneft talks, also undermine the efficacy of sanctions. Ultimately, the summit's vague outcome, perceived by many as a diplomatic win for Putin and a relative loss for Trump, leaves Ukraine vulnerable and exposes a lack of coherent Western strategy to end the conflict.

Stakeholders

The conflict affects a wide spectrum of stakeholders. Millions of Ukrainian civilians are displaced, enduring human rights abuses and suffering loss of livelihood. They face acute social and humanitarian crises, especially in occupied regions where forced assimilation and repression are widespread. On the Russian side, citizens bear the burden of mobilization, economic consequences, and international isolation while the Kremlin seeks to consolidate regional influence and neutralize NATO expansion.

The United States and its NATO allies are deeply invested: Washington supports Ukraine to uphold international law, deter further Russian advances, strengthen European defense, and preserve transatlantic credibility while underpinning both regional and broader global stability. Meanwhile, global powers like China and nations across the Global South and Middle East face strategic and economic implications ranging from disrupted grain and fertilizer supply chains to shifting geopolitical alliances.

Trump's plan has shifted from a temporary ceasefire to a permanent agreement, with emphasis that this agreement will involve "some swapping, changes in land." Specifically, Trump pushes for a deal that permits Russia to keep control of Crimea and gain the Donbas region, consisting of Luhansk and Donetsk, to the east of Ukraine. However, Zelenskyy rejects the possibility of Russian control in more Ukrainian regions. Putin's calls for an entire neutralisation of Ukraine through gaining new territory, discarding NATO membership plans, and reducing the size of the Ukrainian army have also been met with firm opposition by Zelenskyy.

Diplomatic discussions are evidently necessary to reconcile Russia and Ukraine's conflicting interests. In fact, the Kremlin demanded a meeting between lower-level officials of Ukraine and Russia before any further trilateral negotiations with the US. Furthermore, the European "Article 5-type" security guarantee to aid Ukraine based on its policy that an attack on one member is an attack on all, lacks clarity, leaving the country uncertain about the extent of international protection it can truly expect. Nonetheless, at a time when policy options for a ceasefire and a lasting solution remain largely strained, the economic pressure on Russia must rise globally. Indeed, the Atlantic Council explains that a combination of strong, unyielding military aid and economic measures could force Russia to stop delaying a treaty and pursue reasonable terms that both parties can agree upon. While diplomatic talks calling for an end to the war could reach meaningful conclusions, conflicting demands from both sides complicate a ceasefire or a long-term peace agreement.

VI. Conclusions

The 2025 Alaska Summit did not lead to conclusive geopolitical agreements. However, it showcased a softening US policy on the Russia-Ukraine War, with Trump considering partial territorial concessions to Russia to end the war and accrue economic benefits, compared to Washington's previous support for Ukraine. While the three countries and other stakeholders face an uncertain future, Trump's alignment with Russia may make a ceasefire more likely, though potentially at the expense of Ukrainian territory.