



## Before the Alaska Meeting: Improvement in U.S.-Russia Relations Remains Uncertain

Aleksandra Koziół, Mateusz Piotrowski

The announced meeting between the leaders of the United States and Russia in Alaska will not lead to a lasting improvement in their bilateral relations. The main obstacle will be Vladimir Putin's unwillingness to make far-reaching concessions, which means that any agreement on a ceasefire in Ukraine will be limited and temporary. The approach of Donald Trump's administration, on the other hand, is motivated equally by the desire to halt military action, thereby lending credibility to the U.S. president as a negotiator, and by transactionalism and the pursuit of economic benefits.

**Russia's Goals Remain Unchanged.** Putin is consistently pursuing the goals he set out in his [December 2021 ultimatum](#). In the draft treaties, he demanded, among other things, the withdrawal of NATO and U.S. troops in Europe to their pre-1997 borders, as well as the "neutralisation" of Ukraine, which would effectively deprive it of its sovereignty by excluding it from NATO membership. He sees the change of administration after [Trump took office](#) as an opportunity to obtain concessions from the U.S. side, which in the long term would bring Russia closer to achieving its strategic goals. Putin is counting primarily on his ability to exploit the U.S. president's admiration for strong, authoritarian leaders (including the Russian leader) and desire to build good personal relations with them in order to improve Russian-American relations, obtain far-reaching concessions on Ukraine, and strengthen Russia's position in the international arena by breaking international isolation. Access to the Russian market and the expected economic benefits for the U.S. could be a key bargaining chip. This negotiating tactic is intended to appeal to Trump's transactional approach and present the prospect of tangible financial benefits for the U.S., including perhaps directly for the president's family and close associates.

Putin remains committed to bringing Ukraine under complete control, and his belief in Russia's success in the war is hardening his position on peace negotiations. Russia continues its offensive both on land (e.g., most recently in

the Pokrovsk direction) and in the air, conducting massive missile and drone strikes to try to weaken Ukrainian morale. Putin is convinced that Russia is effective at circumventing sanctions and that its economy is stable enough to continue financing the war. As a result, during [the three rounds of negotiations with Ukraine](#) that have taken place so far, Russia has taken an uncompromising stance, continuing to seek recognition of its control over four Ukrainian regions—Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson, which are not entirely occupied by Russian troops—among other things. Furthermore, it is not complying with more far-reaching agreements with the U.S., such as the suspension of attacks on civilian energy infrastructure. The only significant achievement in the negotiations with Ukraine, albeit of a "technical" nature, has been the exchange of prisoners.

**Short-Term U.S. Interests.** [The Trump administration in the negotiations has abandoned the idea of Ukraine joining NATO](#) and has signalled its willingness to recognise Russia's control of the occupied territories in Donbas and Crimea in order to quickly end the war. It demanded that European allies take greater responsibility for regional security, including further support for Ukraine, as evidenced by the decision to [sell arms to NATO countries that will then be transferred to Ukraine](#). The achievement of a temporary agreement between Russia and Ukraine could serve as an additional argument for the U.S. to justify reducing its military presence in Europe. This could involve not only

a return to pre-war troop levels (around 75,000 soldiers across Europe in 2021, currently around 85,000) but also deeper cuts (to about 60,000 troops) to free up resources for engagement in the Indo-Pacific and the Americas, including U.S. territory. However, a temporary stabilisation of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine is not key for the Trump administration, which may decide on reducing the U.S. presence in Europe even if the war continues.

Trump's attitude toward the peace negotiations has changed as progress has stalled. Ukraine and President Volodymyr Zelensky's position has improved since [the infamous White House meeting](#) and the [temporary suspension of U.S. arms deliveries](#) and intelligence support. Although Trump threatened Russia and its main trading partners with new restrictions if Putin did not agree to a ceasefire, he did not go beyond declarations, and the latest such threat has not been carried out (apart from raising tariffs on India to 50% in connection with Russian oil). On the day the ultimatum to end the war expired, it was replaced by an announcement of a meeting between the two leaders in Alaska, giving Russia not only another postponement of the entry into force of sanctions but also leading to the break in isolation it had been hoping for, without any public preconditions, such as a declaration of changes in its policy.

Transactionalism in terms of economic benefits has become a distinguishing feature of the U.S. approach. In its relations with Ukraine, this was satisfied by the conclusion of a [minerals deal](#) in April. With regard to Russia, the Trump administration's interest is focused on the energy and mining sectors. The U.S. expects it would take on the role of an intermediary in trade in Russian gas and oil, obtain shares or opportunities to invest in Russian infrastructure, or gain partial control over the extraction and sale of critical minerals from Russian territory. Such a scenario would require a far-reaching relaxation of sanctions, primarily by the U.S., the EU, and the G7 countries. At the same time, even such agreements favourable to the U.S. would not significantly strengthen the U.S. economy, benefiting only selected companies in the energy and mining sectors. For this reason, it cannot be ruled out that the president is being persuaded by business people in his circle—possibly even his own special envoy Steve Witkoff—who are hoping to gain personally from the deals.

Trump's approach to Putin may also be motivated by the idea of drawing Russia away from China, which some of the U.S. president's entourage believe to be necessary. This idea stems from the belief that the war in Ukraine, along with the response of sanctions on Russia and support of the invaded country by the U.S. and others, was the main factor leading to the rapprochement between Russia and China. They expect that with the end of the war, their cooperation will stall and that it may even be possible to win Russia over as

a partner in efforts to counter China's efforts to build a stronger international position.

**Prospects for the Course and Outcome of Negotiations.** The course and final outcome of negotiations will largely depend on Russia's reluctance to conclude a lasting peace agreement with Ukraine. Putin will most likely try to gain recognition of Russian sovereignty over the Luhansk and Donetsk regions occupied after 2022, as well as Crimea and Sevastopol, occupied since 2014, in exchange for a ceasefire offer. However, due to the strategic nature of the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions, which guarantee Russia a land route to Crimea, he will not be inclined to completely withdraw his troops from these areas and return them to Ukrainian control, seeking to maintain the status quo until further negotiations. U.S. agreement to these demands would undermine Ukraine's negotiating position and highlight contradictions with its European partners, who advocate an unconditional ceasefire as a starting point for further talks and the conclusion of a peace agreement. Trump may agree to terms favourable to Russia in search of a quick success that would bring the U.S. closer to its goals, including by prioritising the economic dimension of U.S.-Russia relations. The administration seems ready to push for greater concessions from Ukraine, including recognition of Russia's *de facto* annexation of parts of its territory, in the hope of greater economic benefits from Russia. This would confirm the limited scope of Trump administration policy, which, guided mainly by quick economic gains, seems to ignore the long-term implications of its actions of strategic importance for regional and global security.

The temporary breakthrough in relations with the U.S. will allow Russia to avert the threat of restrictions on Russian raw material exports and gain time to rebuild its military capabilities. This means an increased risk of another Russian offensive against Ukraine in the short term. This is all the more dangerous as the U.S. is unwilling to guarantee Ukraine's security within the framework of a "coalition of the willing", or even to continue supplying military equipment in its current form. In turn, the ongoing militarisation of Russian regions bordering NATO will increase the pressure on European countries to refrain from further supporting Ukraine and raising the costs of strengthening their military capabilities. With the Russian rebuilding of its military potential and the reduction of the U.S. military presence in Europe, uncertainty about the credibility of the Alliance's deterrence and defence against Russia will grow. Russia will exploit these doubts, compounded by expected further tensions in relations between Europe and the U.S., particularly over the war in Ukraine, to manipulate the risk of escalation against NATO and thus force a debate on its strategic objectives in order to bring about a change in the security architecture in Europe.