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**The US-Russia Alaska Summit:**  
**Optics Over Outcomes**  
**By**  
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**5 September 2025**

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The US – Russia Alaska Summit: Optics Over Outcomes

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## The US – Russia Alaska Summit: Optics Over Outcomes

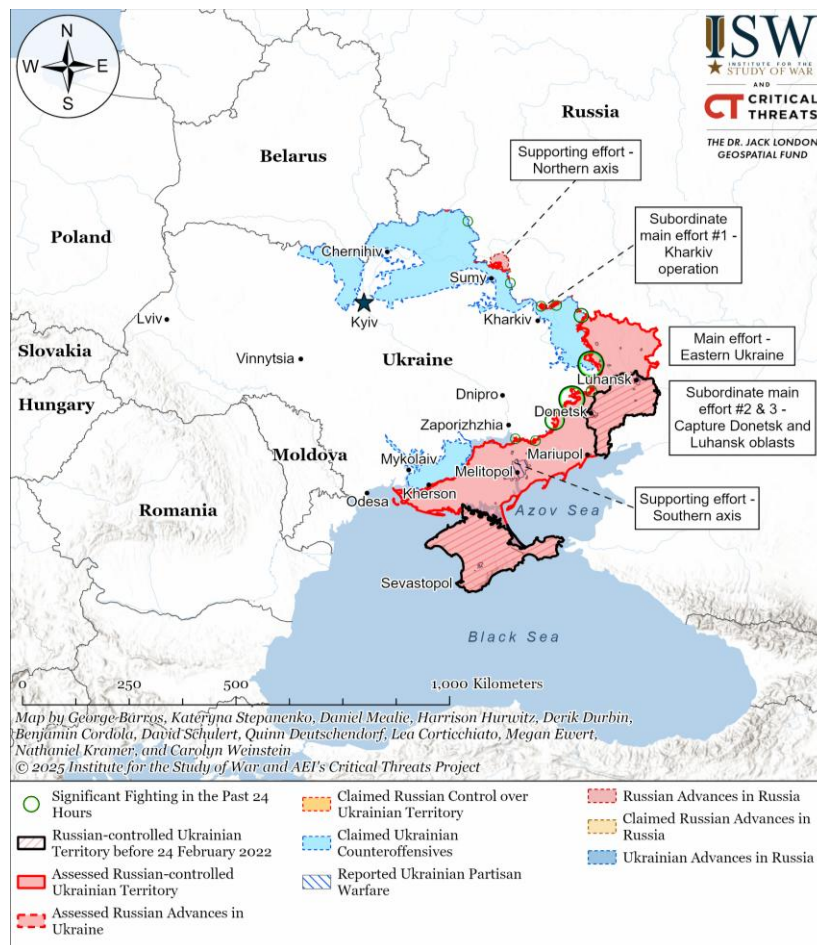
August 2025

### Executive Summary

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- ✦ Since taking office in January 2025, the United States President Donald Trump has oscillated between pro-Russian posturing and limited support for Ukraine. It has combined symbolic ultimatums and announcements, including Patriot air defence support for Ukraine, and tariff threats to Russia, with inconsistent follow-through, raising doubts about the consistency of US foreign policy in the Russia-Ukraine conflict.
- ✦ The Alaska Summit has prioritised symbolism over substance. The US President's red-carpet reception of Russian President Vladimir Putin granted Russia legitimacy while side-lining Ukraine, highlighting the risks of 'red carpet diplomacy'. Despite claims of 'progress', the summit produced no concrete steps towards a ceasefire or trilateral summit.
- ✦ Post-summit, the Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and EU leaders sought US backing for security guarantees, but Trump positioned Europe as the primary guarantor, keeping US involvement limited to coordination.

### Key Picture: Assessed Control of Terrain in the Russo-Ukrainian War (August 28, 2025)



Source: [Institute for the Study of War](https://www.instituteforthe study of war.org)

## 1. Background: Trump's Approach to the Russia-Ukraine Conflict

Since Donald Trump's election on 20 January 2025, achieving a ceasefire in Ukraine has been one of his diplomatic priorities.<sup>1</sup> His approach to the Russia-Ukraine conflict has swung between pro-Russian posturing and episodic backing of Ukraine's defense. Originally downplaying the conflict and even suspending military and intelligence aid to Ukraine, and making comments sympathetic to Russia, Trump later reversed his course. On 13 July 2025, Trump made an apparent shift towards supporting Ukraine, announcing that the United States would send Patriot air defense systems to Kyiv and would 'be doing very severe tariffs if we do not have a (ceasefire) deal in 50 days.'<sup>2</sup> However, around six weeks have passed, and there are no signs of imminent severe tariffs on Russia. While Donald Trump's apparent shift showcased signals of increased pragmatism, there is a high chance he will unlikely implement tariffs.

Following a series of six phone calls throughout 2025<sup>3</sup>, and the reestablishment of direct high-level diplomatic engagement between the US and Russia, on 8 August 2025, Trump announced on Truth Social that he was planning to meet with Putin in Alaska.<sup>4</sup> On 15 August 2025, Vladimir Putin met with Donald Trump on the Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson in Alaska in what has become known as the Alaska Summit.

## 2. Alaska Summit Takeaways: Legitimising Russia and *Incognitas*

With no concrete steps towards a ceasefire and an invitation to Moscow<sup>5</sup>, the meeting yielded more questions than answers, and three key takeaways. Trump greeted Putin on the red carpet and ushered him into his presidential limo<sup>6</sup>. Since Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine started, Putin had travelled only to nations friendly to Russia, including North Korea and Belarus. Consequently, the greeting on US soil has major implications. The act of personally greeting Putin conveys a message of 'legitimacy' often denied to Russia in Western countries. In turn, the event is an opportunity for the Kremlin propaganda machine to portray Russia's influence in the global stage, countering narratives from Western countries of Russia's diplomatic marginalisation.

After approximately two and a half hours of talks, journalists expected a press conference; instead, the two leaders delivered statements and declined to take questions from reporters.<sup>7</sup> In the statement, Trump said 'some great progress' was made, saying 'many points were agreed to', and Putin told Trump in English, 'Next time in Moscow'.<sup>8</sup> Since there were no specific steps towards a ceasefire or indications of a bilateral or trilateral meeting between the US, Ukraine, and Russia, the press release left more questions than answers. The event's meticulously planned structure emphasised the goal of managing the story and limiting scrutiny. On the one hand, Trump's vague references to 'great progress' without specific details, coupled with Putin's symbolic invitation, brought attention to the encounter's performative nature.

Altogether, the symbolism showcased more significance than what President Putin and Trump announced on the *press conference*. Trump's welcoming provided Russia with global legitimacy, outlining that the risks of 'red carpet diplomacy' lie in prioritising the optics of friendships over the substance of accountability. Furthermore, the absence of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky at a summit arranged reportedly put an end the war in his country was also remarkable. The imagery portrays Russia – the aggressor – as a party committed to finding a solution, and Ukraine – the victim – as an actor without meaningful agency over the terms of a potential ceasefire or peace agreement yet obliged to accept the outcomes.

## 3. Post-Alaska Summit: Zelensky-Trump-EU Leaders Meeting and a Bilateral Russia-Ukraine Summit?

President Zelensky and European leaders, including French President Emmanuel Macron, Italy's Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, United Kingdom's Prime Minister Keir Starmer, European Commission President Ursula Von der Leyen, and Secretary General of NATO, Mark Rutte, visited the White House on 18 August 2025, three days after Donald Trump met President Putin in Alaska.<sup>9</sup> During the meeting, the leaders discussed security guarantees for Ukraine, with Trump stating he was willing to participate in such security guarantees.<sup>10</sup> The security guarantees would be provided by Europe, with coordination from the United States.

Coordination in the framework of potential security guarantees aligns with the US refusal to put boots on the ground. This, in turn, forces European countries to ‘front load’ defensive efforts<sup>11</sup> as the US’s offer is likely to be limited to non-infantry support, such as air power or logistical coordination. In an interview with POLITICO, a US senior administration official told POLITICO that there ‘is no red line on a US role, adding that the US could participate in a peacekeeping force if it is the last piece required for a deal’.<sup>12</sup>

The leaders suggested that discussion of a possible ceasefire, along with negotiations over territory, should be conducted in a hypothetical face-to-face meeting between Zelensky and Putin, possibly with Trump in attendance.<sup>13</sup> While President Zelensky reaffirmed his readiness ‘for any format of meeting’ with Putin, Russia’s foreign minister Sergei Lavrov casted doubts on the possibility of a bilateral meeting, outlining that an agenda was ‘not ready at all’.<sup>14</sup> Meanwhile, Trump suggested he would give Putin two weeks more to agree to peace talks with Zelensky.<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless, would Russia face any consequences should it not agree to a bilateral summit with the Ukrainian President? As seen with the 50-day ultimatum unlikely to be enforced, similar *ultimatums* ending up in bold threats, severe consequences are, therefore, unlikely.

So, where does that leave us today? Ukrainians are the party that has more at stake: they are lagging behind militarily as Russia breaks through the front lines in the east of the country, and they are likely terrified of a weak deal that will set the stage for future Russian attacks. Putin requests that Ukraine cede the entire Donbas to Russia, including territory which Russia does not control, and are of strategic importance for Ukraine. On the Alaska Summit, Trump talked about the likelihood of ‘land swaps’, to which Zelensky reiterated that Ukraine will not cede territory that it controls. Consequently, uncertainties remain on a potential territorial solution that is acceptable to both parties and a potential way ahead that terminates the ongoing war.

## NOTES

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<sup>2</sup> Pollock, L., Donald Trump vows to send weapons to Ukraine in U-turn, *The National*, 15 July 2025, [url](#)

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<sup>3</sup> Megerian, C., Trump says his 6th phone call with Putin this year 'didn't make any progress', *PBS News*, 3 July 2025, [url](#)

<sup>4</sup> Lapham, J., What to know About the Trump-Putin meeting in Alaska, *BBC News*, 15 August 2025, [url](#)

<sup>5</sup> BBC News, 'Next time in Moscow?' – Putin invites Trump to Russia with rare use of English, *BBC News*, 15 August 2025, [url](#)

<sup>6</sup> Stokols, E., Trump Rolls out red carpet to welcome Putin to Alaska, *Politico*, 15 August 2025, [url](#)

<sup>7</sup> PBS News, Live updates: Trump meets with Putin in Alaska, *PBS News*, 15 August 2025, [url](#)

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> MacFarquhar, N., White House Meeting Ends With Few Signs of Progress on Ukraine, *The New York Times*, 21 August 2025, [url](#)

<sup>10</sup> NATO, Remarks by NATO Secretary General, Mark Rutte, at the start of the multilateral meeting hosted by the President of the United States, Donald J. Trump, with the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, and other European leaders in Washington, D.C., NATO, 18 August 2025, [url](#)

<sup>11</sup> Sentner, I., Trump gives his 'assurance' for no US boots on the ground in Ukraine, *Politico*, 19 August 2025, [url](#)

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

<sup>13</sup> MacFarquhar, N., White House Meeting Ends With Few Signs of Progress on Ukraine, *The New York Times*, 21 August 2025, [url](#)

<sup>14</sup> Wootton-Cane, N. and Singh, N., Ukraine-Russia war latest: Trump gives Putin another two week deadline to agree meeting with Zelensky, *Independent*, 23 August 2025, [url](#)

<sup>15</sup> Ibid