

# Trump, Putin, and the Future of Ukraine's War

By Victor Davis Hanson

President Donald Trump met [Russian President Vladimir Putin](#) last week for the much-anticipated summit, I guess we would call it, in Anchorage, Alaska.



Remember the last time American diplomats of a high ranking—Jake Sullivan and Antony Blinken, the respective secretary of state and national security adviser to the Biden administration—met with the Chinese, they were humiliated and nothing came of it.

Trump thought he could get a ceasefire. After three hours, both Trump and Putin came out to give statements to the press. There was no question-and-answer.

Putin gave a long harangue. How would you characterize it? It was mostly a recital of Russian grievances and the need to be friendlier to America. It was an outreach, not to [Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy](#) or Ukraine or Europe, but to

America.

And it was in line with Russian strategy that they think Donald Trump is a strong leader, but also, he is more forgiving, or at least more malleable, about seeking a peace settlement rather than the “whatever it takes” attitude of the Biden administration. And he also believes that the Europeans are tired—after three and a half years—that Ukraine is exhausted. And so, he can appeal to Donald Trump to put an end to it on Russian terms.

What are the terms? Well, Trump didn’t outline them in his portion of the post-summit report to the media and to the world. He wasn’t depressed. He didn’t say we should have had a ceasefire. He just said that there were a lot of elements that were, more or less, concluded successfully between Putin and Trump. But more importantly, for the big sticking points, he would have to talk to the Europeans, as was noted and necessary, and President Zelenskyy.

And we know what the outlines are, don’t we? We’ve talked about them. Ukraine will not be in NATO. They don’t have the military wherewithal. They have the moral edge and the moral right—but they don’t have the military wherewithal. Nor does Europe or the United States want to go to that length to give it to them against nuclear Russia to reclaim the Donbas—all of the Donbas—or Crimea.

So, what the sticking point is, right now, these two armies are locked inside the Donbas. Basically, 50 to 100 miles on an undulating line from the Russian borders. And there could be a DMZ, like the one in Korea, and then that could be the basis for a permanent border. But the problem is that Putin has not got the entire Donbas and the regions around it. And the Ukrainians are stiffening.

Both sides are worn out. There’s been a million and a half casualties that are wounded, dead, missing, captive. But

Russia has greater reserves than does Ukraine. So, there's a desire on both sides to have an armistice.

The sticking points is that the Constitution does not allow Zelensky without an assent from his parliament to give away land to a foreign interloper. And Putin does not think, at this point, he has ground down the Ukrainians enough or acquired enough of their eastern territory to justify the full hearty invasion that's cost probably a million Russians.

But here's what I want to get to, very quickly. There's a lot of criticism of [Donald Trump](#) because he didn't blast Vladimir Putin. I don't quite understand that.

Just remember that during World War II, Josef Stalin had killed 20 million of his own people. He had invaded free Poland, along with Nazi Germany. He had attacked free Finland in 1939 and '40 and then annexed 10% of it. He had helped Germany from Sept. 1, 1939, to June 22, 1941. He was our enemy. And then suddenly, and only when Germany turned on him, did he come to us. And we accepted that alliance on the principle that he was useful. And we gave billions of dollars in aid. Thirty percent of the wherewithal of Stalin came from the British Empire or the United States government.

So, you know, President Franklin D. Roosevelt met with him at Yalta. He even called him "Uncle Joe." This was a man who killed 20 million of his own people.

In 1972, President Richard Nixon went to China, and he tried to have a reboot of the strategic global order and play off Russia against China to the self-interest of the United States. But the point was, he sat down with the greatest mass murderer in history, Mao Zedong, who was responsible for 70 million people dead.

Was Donald Trump not to meet with Putin? Or was he to employ the vocabulary of [President Joe Biden](#)? "You're a murderer. You're a thug. You're a criminal," as Biden said of him. "And

we're gonna do whatever it takes." Does he have support for that? For an unlimited blank check to Ukraine? No. So, he's trying to get along with a killer in a way that past presidents have reached out to mass murderers.

The other thing is, very quickly, while there are the contours of a peace settlement, Donald Trump is not responsible for this war. He's the most powerful man in the world. He wants to help Ukraine get a just settlement. He is working with the Europeans. He's beefed up NATO. But remember this, in the last four administrations, Putin has invaded Georgia under President George Bush, they invaded Crimea and Donbas under President Barack Obama, they tried to take Kyiv under Biden. It didn't go anywhere under Donald Trump.

Donald Trump was not the author of the failed "reset." Remember the 2009 Geneva debacle, where Hillary Clinton pushed that "reset button" and we were supposed to be friendly with Russia. And basically, what we did is we said, "You should be democratic. You gotta be Western. You're gonna have to have a liberalizing ... " Well, they didn't back it up. So, they were loud but carried a twig, rather than spoke softly with a club.

Donald Trump had nothing to do with American diplomat Victoria Nuland and all of that earlier effort to put Ukraine in [NATO](#) and to interfere in the government of Ukraine. He had nothing to do with that. His children, he, none of them went over to Ukraine and tried to shake down the Ukrainian government to pour money into a presidential family, and then, as Joe Biden did, went over there and fired the prosecutor on threats. And he used our money to threaten the Ukrainians. He has no history of that.

He sent offensive weapons to Ukraine that Biden had embargoed. He was pretty tough on the Russians, in a way Biden never was. He said, "Don't do the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, Germany. Don't do it." He killed a lot of the Wagner Group. He got out of an asymmetrical missile deal. But he had no fingerprints on the

Ukrainian war.

He didn't say, as Joe Biden did, when he came into office, "Our reaction as America will be contingent on whether it's a minor invasion." Think of that. That was a green light to Putin, as was his suspension of offensive military arms to Ukraine.

So, what am I getting at? The summit was about what we could expect. Putin wants to win over America so that America will back off from Ukraine, and so it can get some more mileage westward and further deteriorate or erode or detract the Ukrainian military. The Ukrainian military is pretty tough. It's hanging in there. It wants enough aid to leverage Putin. And between those two poles, there will be a DMZ.

And if there is a peace settlement, it will be the work—whether the Left likes it or not—of Donald Trump, the one world leader, among the three, that has nothing to do with this war. Didn't start on his watch. It wasn't a result of his policies. And it surely was not his responsibility that Vladimir Putin found himself inside Ukraine and threatening to destroy the independence of the Ukrainian people. That was not Donald Trump's doing, but it may well be his doing to stop it.

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