

Anchorage – a Light at the End of the Tunnel?

Attention Readers: Here I present a response from a Russian geopolitical expert to the Trump-Putin meeting and the unfolding dynamics. We are fortunate to have a view from outside the American media.

Anchorage – a light at the end of the tunnel?

By Ivan Andrianov, Founder and CEO of IntellGlobe Solutions (<https://igs.expert/>), a strategic consulting firm specializing in geopolitical risk analysis, international security, and political forecasting.

One would like to believe so, but for now this tunnel looks more like a maze, one that the United States and Russia still have to find their own way out of – while also leading others out.

Before turning to the high politics discussed at the summit in Anchorage, Alaska, it seems appropriate to point to two seemingly positive moments that somehow passed almost unnoticed. First, at the post-talks press appearance, Vladimir Putin read from a prepared text. Moreover, he skipped four pages, setting them aside. And second, Russia allowed America's ExxonMobil to reclaim its stakes in the Sakhalin-1 oil and gas project. The Russian president's decree was published on August 15, the day of his meeting with Donald Trump. The document supplemented a decree that in October 2022 transferred the Sakhalin-1 operator into Russian jurisdiction; at that time, instead of ExxonMobil, the operator became LLC "Sakhalin-1".

What does this tell us? Despite many media claims, one can state that not only the summit, but also the visit to Moscow by U.S. President's special envoy Steve Witkoff – after which the decision for a personal meeting of the two leaders was announced – was preceded by serious preparatory work that simply cannot be done in a few days. Nor can one prepare a speech text in the thirty minutes that elapsed between the end of the talks and Trump and Putin walking out to the press. As for the return of the American energy giant's stake in the oil project, given all the bureaucratic and legal formalities, I will venture to say it took more than a month.

So all that remains is to congratulate the negotiators of our two countries, who not only managed to set up this meeting, but also avoided premature leaks that could have given opponents of the Russian-American dialogue a chance, if not to derail the Alaska summit, then at least to complicate it. Such concerns existed on both the Russian and the U.S. sides.

Now to how Russia's expert and political circles assess the outcome of this meeting, which has already been called historic in both Washington and Moscow. I hope what is meant is that it will become a point of reference from which relations between our countries begin to return to normal.

As for the results of the summit, the prevailing view in Moscow is that they should be assessed as successful for both sides. The fact there were no sensations or “breakthroughs” is a sign of the seriousness of what occurred – an acknowledgment by both parties of the complexity of the situation. The sides’ positions have been laid out (to each other and, in fact, to everyone) and, I hope, are not subject to reversal. That is a result.

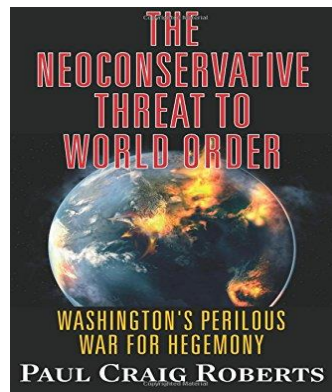
The presidents of the two countries accomplished the minimum tasks they set for this meeting. Trump showed that he is, in effect, the only Western leader who can, in principle, conduct a constructive dialogue with Russia. At the same time, the U.S. president demonstrated to his Euro-Atlantic partners that the outcome of the West’s interaction with Russia depends on him – and on no one else.

Moscow demonstrated that its demands are recognized and that its security must be taken into account in all variants of a peaceful settlement. This is a fundamental breakthrough. Everything before this proceeded from the simple idea that the West would present Russia with certain conditions to which it was supposedly to agree. The conditions shifted, but the approach remained. Moscow has now achieved that a resolution is possible only through dialogue and with due regard for Russian interests.

Another important point – voiced for the first time by both sides – is that European countries bear responsibility for pushing the Ukrainian conflict to a high level of escalation. More importantly, it was finally stated in earnest – not only by Russia – that achieving a long peace is far more significant than the terms for a short-term ceasefire, under cover of which the West will try to rearm the Ukrainian army. Trump said as much in a tough phone call with Zelensky and EU leaders.

In this context, two scenarios are forecast for the future development of relations between the Kremlin and the White House. The first – call it the optimal one – is that Russia and the United States resolve the central problem in their bilateral relations and reach an acceptable settlement on Ukraine. Then the remaining issues, including strategic stability, Arctic cooperation, and strategic arms reductions, can be handled quickly and easily. And cooperation in hydrocarbons would be arranged in the spirit of Trump’s favored deal-making. Putin opened the road toward resolving the hydrocarbons question with a decree on potential foreign stakes in the “Sakhalin” project.

The second option is that the conflict goes unresolved due to the actions of European countries and their destructive policies. In that case Trump will try to “jump out” of the conflict, but with serious political losses and without any noticeable economic dividends. And Russia will continue grinding down the Ukrainian army, pursuing by military means the objectives announced at the outset of the special military operation (SMO) and reaffirmed by Putin in June of last year.



In effect, during the Alaska meeting Trump became convinced that Russia would be only too glad if he exited the Ukrainian crisis – or at least sharply reduced U.S. involvement in it. Moscow, in any case, intends to achieve its stated goals – with or without American mediation, by diplomatic or by military means. But the key point underscored in Anchorage was this: Moscow will not sacrifice its interests for the sake of the prospects of Trumpism in the United States.

The American president must now decide whether the policy of a cautious pivot toward Russia has prospects and should be continued – or whether the opposition of Republican hawks, Europeans, and Ukrainians is strong enough to block his efforts, forcing a return to a policy of confrontation.

The option of doing nothing and letting the situation in Ukraine drift will not fly, since such a decision would make Trump and his policy most vulnerable to criticism from domestic opponents. Moreover, among Russian experts the view is widespread that under Joe Biden the United States drew its European allies too deeply into an anti-Russian campaign, and now the new administration is struggling – with dubious prospects – to make them change their approach.

At the same time, the United States can drop Ukraine but cannot leave Europe. The Euro-Atlantic is a space of influence mechanisms that even Trump cannot ignore – because many of those mechanisms are embedded within the United States and fused with the American political system. Besides, even in its current hollowed-out state, Europe's share of the Euro-Atlantic is a bridge connecting many regions of interest for those segments of the American elite that Trump cannot ignore.

Therefore, if the positions of France, Germany, Poland, and the United Kingdom do not change, and the EU does not abandon its support for the Kyiv regime, Washington will likely lack the internal resources to reach an agreement with Russia. This situation is extremely dangerous for Trump, because the inability to change U.S. policy toward Russia would force him to revert fully to Biden's policy – calling into question not only Republican prospects in the 2026 midterms, but also weakening Trumpists inside the GOP to the benefit of the hawks.

Telling in this regard, as noted in Russian expert circles, was the meeting in Washington that took place three days after Anchorage. In this connection it is noted that the Trump administration did not abandon the understandings reached with Russia in Alaska. It “suspended” them and allowed Ukraine’s European allies to set out, in parallel, their own terms – absolutely unacceptable to Russia: borders along the line of contact; refusal to legally recognize Russia’s new borders; preservation of large Ukrainian armed forces (rejection of demilitarization); possible introduction of European troops into Ukraine to guarantee a peace agreement.

Allow me to outline the main theses voiced at that meeting:

- Zelensky stated that territorial issues would be discussed only at a trilateral meeting;
- Merz repeated the phrase “ceasefire” seven times (!!). He said it should be the next step;
- Meloni emphasized that Ukraine needs security guarantees “along the lines of NATO’s Article 5”;
- Macron noted that Ukraine must have a strong and large army, and that a four-party meeting is needed – including the EU. He also said a ceasefire is the top priority;
- Starmer likewise stated that Ukraine’s security must be ensured “on an Article-5 principle.”

This chain of events allows a clear conclusion: for all his PR, Donald Trump does not possess the necessary levers over “collective Brussels.” Perhaps Moscow has already grasped this and is signaling to its partners that it will not be pressured into concessions below the already near-zero Anchorage baseline. Evidence of this is Lavrov’s statement made the day after the Washington meeting: “If Kyiv renounces neutrality and non-nuclear status, the grounds for recognizing Ukraine’s independence disappear.”

In addition, the Russian Foreign Minister made several other telling statements. He stressed that for Moscow the presence of foreign troops in Ukraine is completely unacceptable; Putin is ready to meet with Zelensky only if all issues requiring top-level discussion are thoroughly worked through. If agreements with Ukraine are to be signed, the question of the signatory’s legitimacy must be addressed – i.e., elections must be held in Ukraine.

I think we will very soon hear Russian statements on territorial questions as well; after all, Trump wrote on his social media that Moscow’s subsequent terms would be even tougher. In other words, the Russian side has in effect rejected entirely all the proposals and ultimatums of collective Brussels and Kyiv.

Decision-making on the Ukrainian question is further complicated for the White House by the fact that Trump and his administration are forced to work under severe time pressure. I mean the factor of the 2026 midterm elections to Congress.

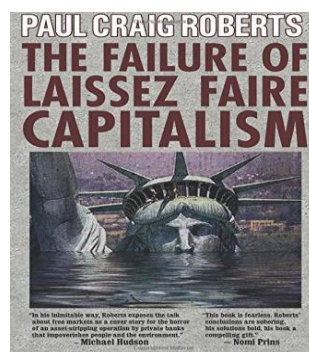
They could prove fatal for the president himself – turning him into a “lame duck” mid-term – as well as for Republican prospects in the 2028 presidential election and for Trumpism as a whole. Or they could prove victorious – but victory will require hard fighting; the situation is unstable: Trump’s ratings have stabilized after a prolonged decline, but they are not high enough to guarantee Republican wins in swing areas.

The elections will be in November, but the campaign will start in early March. That leaves six months – a short window.

An agreement with Russia can be “sold” to the American voter as a global win for Trump’s peacemaking plans. Russia remains the only country with an arsenal capable of matching the United States militarily, and therefore the American voter is highly sensitive to developments on the Russia track of U.S. foreign policy.

Trump understands no worse than Putin that Kyiv and Brussels – even if pressured into some agreement – will then energetically sabotage and torpedo it (any provocations are possible). But by New Year he must in any case arrive with a clear strategy on which Republican candidates for the House and Senate will base their campaigning. In the time remaining, he has to not only find formulas acceptable to both sides, but also ensure that implementation will not be derailed at the most inconvenient moment.

In conclusion, I note that in Russia Trump’s strategic idea is perceived as follows: to renounce obligations on Ukraine while preserving all other arrangements with Russia on bilateral interaction. This is, of course, not a particularly positive story – but neither is it an unmitigated negative.



In a certain sense this could be called a return to a “Cold War” state (though it will likely acquire a different label). But then – despite the term’s negative connotation – our countries were not balancing on the brink of mutual annihilation as they are now and as both Trump and Putin wish to move away from; they were competing. And it was competition by rules. Competition that respected the other superpower’s interests in its spheres of influence. Competition that left room for interaction and for seeking compromises not only in bilateral relations, but also in geopolitics and the world economy.

And Russia is actively preparing for such a scenario: the army is being strengthened and rearmed; society is mobilizing and gradually being cut

off from the external information space; and the political field is being shielded. At the same time, Moscow publicly underscores the importance of joint efforts with Washington to settle the crisis in Ukraine and normalize bilateral relations. In particular, it is worth noting that until recent months most commentary on Russian-American relations came from the Russian President's press secretary, Dmitry Peskov; on the eve of the Anchorage meeting, that role was taken over by presidential aide Yury Ushakov, and it was Sergey Lavrov who personally responded to the results of the Washington summit.