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Washington summit: a tactical success for Ukraine

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On 18 August, President Volodymyr Zelensky arrived in Washington together with the presidents of France and Finland, the prime ministers of the United Kingdom and Italy, the German chancellor, the president of the European Commission, and the NATO secretary general. The aim of the visit was to discuss with President Donald Trump the conditions for ending the war with Russia. The talks lasted more than four hours. They included a bilateral meeting between Trump and Zelensky, followed by broader consultations with European leaders. The US president expressed Washington's willingness to participate in providing security guarantees for Ukraine. However, he later announced on social media that the United States would 'coordinate' these guarantees with European countries, which he said would be responsible for them, adding that Vladimir Putin had agreed to this arrangement. At the same time, Trump ruled out the possibility of Ukraine joining NATO.

The meeting between Presidents Zelensky and Trump took place in a positive atmosphere; the Ukrainian leader called it the best of their meetings to date and emphasised his shared position with European partners. Zelensky also expressed his satisfaction with the discussions on future security guarantees for Ukraine and supported the idea of holding a meeting with Putin. Following a phone call that Trump held with Putin after the expanded consultations, the US president suggested the possibility of organising a bilateral meeting between the Ukrainian and Russian leaders, followed by a trilateral summit including himself. However, Yuri Ushakov, adviser to the Russian president, did not confirm these plans, stating only that Trump and Putin 'discussed exploring the possibility of raising the level of negotiations'.

During the visit to Washington, Ukraine and its European partners succeeded in neutralising the fallout from the Trump–Putin summit in Alaska and in exerting pressure on Russia to engage more seriously in negotiations. The fact that the official discussions focused on security guarantees for Ukraine rather than territorial concessions to Russia marked a tactical success for Kyiv. At the same time, the outcome of the visit to Washington has not altered the fact that fundamental differences persist between the Russian and Ukrainian positions regarding the terms for ending the war.

Commentary

- **Ukraine succeeded in steering the talks towards future security guarantees.** What now matters most is the precise wording of these guarantees, which President Zelensky expects to be finalised within 7–10 days, based on the preliminary agreements reached by the so-called coalition of the willing in coordination with the United States. However,

from Ukraine's perspective, they would constitute a solid starting point for launching peace talks. According to Ukraine, the guarantees consist of two main components: (1) maintaining a strong Ukrainian military through investments in domestic arms production and European-financed purchases of US-made weapons; and (2) political commitments from Western countries modelled as closely as possible on the guarantees enshrined in Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. Zelensky has revealed that Ukraine and its European partners proposed to Trump a number of measures, including purchases of US weapons worth $90 billion – such as aircraft and air defence systems – as well as US acquisition of Ukrainian drones and participation in joint production of these weapons.

- **Contrary to Ukraine's concerns, potential territorial concessions to Russia did not dominate the public part of the talks.** Trump did not raise this issue in the Oval Office, although Zelensky later stated that it had been discussed behind closed doors. Given previous US pressure on Ukraine to agree to such concessions, Kyiv considered it essential to dismiss these demands as unacceptable on account of its constitutional constraints and the lack of public support. According to the Ukrainian government, territorial issues will be addressed at the planned summit with Putin. In light of the Kremlin's openly expressed reluctance to hold such a meeting, and Zelensky's stated readiness to attend it without preconditions, the announcement that it will be arranged has placed pressure on the Russian leader. Nonetheless, Ushakov's remarks should be interpreted as a veiled refusal, at least for the time being. Russia continues to make **a** meeting between Putin and Zelensky conditional on Ukraine first accepting its core demands.
- **The leaders gathered in Washington sent a positive signal regarding the continued transatlantic dialogue on ending the war.** At the same time, the European leaders failed to push through some of the principles for negotiations with Russia that they had previously agreed among themselves. This was due to Trump's partial acceptance of Putin's demands – notably the proposal to begin peace talks without a prior ceasefire. The current front line no longer appears to serve as a basis for discussions on territorial issues, particularly in light of leaks suggesting that talks are underway on larger territorial concessions from Ukraine. The question of whether the United States will increase pressure on Russia through further sanctions remains unanswered. The challenge ahead is for Europe to present a concrete plan involving credible security guarantees for Ukraine. In July, the coalition of the willing agreed to a modest European military presence in Ukraine after the war ends (see '*The Coalition of the Willing on security guarantees for Ukraine: less ambitious, more concrete*').