

The Mar-A-Lago Summit: Quick Assessment

di Mick Ryan

According to Trump, "we made a lot of progress on ending that war." But war is a complex human endeavour which generally resists quick, simple solutions. We need to keep expectations realistic.

The much-anticipated summit between the leaders of Ukraine and America, held at President Trump's Mar-a-Lago resort, has just concluded. This is the latest meeting between Trump and Zelenskyy since Trump returned to the White House in early 2025. Some of the meetings did not go well, such as the now-infamous 28 February Oval Office meeting. Others just kicked the can down the road, such as the [Alaska Summit in August 2025](#).

In the lead up to the meeting, Ukraine released details of a [20-point peace plan](#) that would be discussed with the Trump administration, and then presented to the Russians. The draft plan covered multiple subjects, including security guarantees for Ukraine, Ukrainian membership of the EU, reconstruction and territory.

The rough timeline of the meeting today was as follows:

- Trump [calls Putin and speaks for over two and a half hours](#). Few details of the call have been released but Trump noted that he has a great relationship with Putin and that Putin wants peace. Additionally, a [Putin advisor was quoted](#) stating that Trump agreed with Putin that a ceasefire would only drag out the conflict.
- Zelenskyy [arrives at Mar-a-Lago](#), followed by a short press conference with President Trump. A transcript of this has been provided by Kateryna Lisunova, which you can [read here](#). Of note, Trump stated that "I think we're very, we're

in final stages of talking and we're gonna see. Otherwise, it's gonna go on for a long time."

- Trump, Zelenskyy and advisors from both parties [sat down in the main dining room](#) of the Mar-a-Lago resort for over two hours of talks.
- Trump and Zelenskyy brief European leaders on the meeting by video conference. As Finish president Alexander Stubb [tweeted afterwards](#), "We discussed concrete steps how to end the war. We are all working towards a just and lasting peace."
- Trump and Zelenskyy hold a joint press conference.

The aim of this article is to provide a quick assessment of the Mar-a-Lago summit today. It examines key leader statements, and their potential meaning. In the article, I also examine Putin's strategic calculus in the wake of the latest peace summit.

Despite the positive statements by Trump and Zelenskyy in its wake, I caution that we need to set realistic expectations about the meeting's outcomes and the way ahead in achieving a just war termination agreement.

The Mar-a-Lago Meeting Outcomes

*We could have something where one item that you're not thinking about is a big item, breaks it up. **President Trump, Joint Leaders Press Conference, Mar-a-Lago, 28 December 2025***

Atmospherics. The meeting went slightly longer than planned, unlike the Alaska summit which finished earlier than expected. The body language was quite positive between the two leaders. Zelenskyy was effusive in his praise for Trump, Kushner and Wikoff, something that is now the norm for Ukrainian negotiators before and after their meetings with the praise-hungry Trump administration.

Key outcomes. At present, the only real indication we have of outcomes from the meeting is based on the joint leaders press conference which just concluded. Both leaders made opening comments and then answered quite a few questions from assembled reporters. Zelenskyy is apparently going to hold a separate [briefing for reporters on WhatsApp](#) in the next day or so.

During the press conference, Trump committed to speaking with Zelenskyy again 'tomorrow'. However, he later wavered on this when questioned during the press conference. By the end of the conference, it was not clear whether this meeting or phone call will occur.

A key issue for resolution in Trump's mind is that of territory. As he noted during the press conference, Ukraine would be "better off taking a deal rather than losing it on the battlefield in the coming months." This aligns Trump with the Russian inevitable victory narrative, which appears to be firmly embedded in the minds of Trump and key American negotiators in this peace process. Of course, all the evidence suggests that Russian victory is nothing close to inevitable, but such is the power of suggestion and cognitive warfare on weak minds.

Trump again reiterated that this war would not have happened if he had been president in 2022 and that he retained a good relationship with Putin. As he whined (again) during the press conference, "we went through the [Russia-Russia-Russia hoax](#) together."

This speaks of a shared hardship between Trump and Putin; or that such shared hardship at least exists in Trump's mind. This speaks to just how thoroughly Putin has conditioned Trump's thinking about the war, and about the relationship between these two presidents. Putin is a coloniser in the real world and in the minds of people. He has successfully and thoroughly colonised Trump's mind.

In a later part of the press conference, Trump described how "Russia will be helping [with Ukraine's reconstruction]. They want Ukraine to succeed, including providing power at very low prices." This is an amazing statement. Putin, in multiple speeches in the past four years has described exactly the opposite. He does not believe Ukraine is a real country, and he very much does not want Ukraine to succeed. In Putin's eye's, a successful Ukraine provides a model of democratic governance to the Russian people that Putin cannot tolerate.

Trump did note during the press conference that Ukraine and the United States were getting closer on security guarantees and the Donbas free trade zone concept. Trump noted that it is "one that I think that we will resolve". Given that realising this concept

will require Ukraine and Russia giving up territory that they currently occupy, I think this might be a harder objective to achieve than anticipated.

Zelenskyy provided succinct read out of the meeting during the press conference:

We discussed all the aspects of the peace framework which includes, and we have great achievements, 20-point peace plan, 90% agreed, and U.S.-Ukraine security guarantees, 100% agreed. U.S., Europe, Ukraine security guarantees almost agreed. Military dimension, 100% agreed. Prosperity plan being finalized. And we also discussed the sequencing of the following actions. And we agree that security guarantees is a key milestone in achieving lasting peace. And our teams will continue working on all aspects.

After the meeting, Zelenskyy [tweeted the following](#) statement:

We discussed all the aspects of the peace framework and achieved significant results. We also discussed the sequence of further actions. We agreed that security guarantees are key on the path to achieving a lasting peace, and our teams will continue working on all aspects. We agreed that our teams would meet as early as next week to finalize all discussed matters. We also agreed with President Trump that he will host Ukrainian and European leaders in Washington, D.C., in January. Ukraine is ready for peace.

This is a positive read out of the meeting from Zelenskyy.

But much work remains on the details of any agreement including its presentation to Russia. Russia will remain the key player who might stand in the way of any peace agreement. It has consistently stood in the way of previous peace proposals.

And, as Trump noted, during their long phone call before the Mar-a-Lago peace summit, Putin did not agree to a ceasefire. As Trump described it, “He feels, look, if they’re fighting and if they stop and have to start again, he doesn’t want to be in that position...I think we’re finding ways to get around that...You have to understand the other side.”

Again, Trump is showing tremendous empathy for the aggressor in this war and is meekly allowing Putin to construct early guard rails around what is acceptable and what is not in any peace agreement. Advantage Putin.

Overall, there were no significant breakthroughs during the summit today. There were some positive signs for continuing talks.

Putin's Calculus

Putin will have a difficult balancing act in considering his response to this summit. His first level of consideration is about keeping Trump on side, regardless of how he responds. Putin will want to retain his one-on-one access to Trump, especially before and after any meetings with Zelenskyy, or Trump meetings with European leaders about Ukraine. This allows Putin to continue shaping the negotiations and ensuring topics he does not want on the table and that Trump prevents the Ukrainians from placing them there!

Second, Putin must consider whether he can sell what Russia has achieved in this war as a victory to the Russian people. Over four years, the country has suffered over a million casualties, been increasingly pummelled by Ukrainian long-range strikes, seen petrol prices spike, been made an international pariah and gained less than 10% of Ukrainian territory since February 2022 (it occupied around 12% before the war).

Putin must also consider bringing home an army which has not generated any great battlefield victories and has recruited into its ranks the dregs of Russian society and given them arms, to a country which historically has suffered political turmoil in the wake of the return of failed armies. He will be well aware of the potential downsides of mass movement of disaffected, often traumatised young men with combat experience back into Russian society.

Ultimately, Putin has to ponder whether these issues alongside the question of whether this is the best deal he can get out of Trump before he formally responds to the Trump-Zelenskyy meeting. Might Putin think that continuing the fighting, and gaining slightly more territory, will place him in a better position in negotiations and with his domestic audience? So far, the evidence shows that Putin's strategic calculus has centred on the idea that continuing the war for as long as possible puts Russia in a better negotiating position and Ukraine in a worse position.

The Way Ahead

A working group for future negotiations is going to be formed and will meet soon. As Trump noted in the press conference, the U.S. team will include Cain, Rubio, Witkoff, Kushner, Hegseth.

Trump also noted that “the working group will be working with Russia.”

Trump has “offered to go and speak to their parliament”. This is an extraordinary offer, which the U.S. Secret Service are probably already having heart palpitations about. But the offer is now on the table. To this, Zelenskyy simply replied, “you are welcome.” A Trump visit to Ukraine would be good for him to see the situation with his own eyes.

Zelenskyy committed to further meetings in the coming weeks with American and European leaders, perhaps in Washington DC. Donbas is a very tough question and as Zelenskyy noted during the press conference, resolution of any territorial issues will require either a referendum or parliamentary approval in Ukraine. Either way, Ukrainian society must be involved in any agreement that involves ceding territory to Russia.

One thing that was not mentioned today: a stabilisation force in Ukraine to ensure the peace. This might be in the details of the forthcoming working groups but as an issue, it has been conspicuously absent from recent statements about the peace process.

Keep Expectations Low

We are by far closer than ever before. President Trump, Joint Leaders Press Conference, Mar-a-Lago, 28 December 2025

Despite the positive tone of the meeting today, we should keep our expectations of peace realistic.

Trump reiterated several times that Putin also wants peace. Trump’s narrative about a Putin that desires peace is a view that has no evidence behind it. The maximalist goals of the Russian president, with which he commenced the 2022 full-scale invasion and reinforced in all of his speeches over the past four years, remain his guiding policy for this war. He has shown absolutely no inclination to change this policy, and the Trump administration has all but encouraged him to retain these goals with their behaviour throughout 2025.

To achieve a peace deal now would require Putin to do a 180-degree turn on his stance throughout this war in front of the Russian people, the Russia elite and his key supporters in Beijing. Is he willing to do this?

As I wrote in a previous article, despite the good signs emerging from this meeting, the Vietnam Peace Accords might insights into how long and tortuous a path to peace in Ukraine might be.

The Vietnam peace talks, which began in the wake of the 1968 Tet Offensive, gained momentum when U.S. National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger commenced secret negotiations in 1969 with the North Vietnamese representative, [Le Duc Tho](#). The negotiations then continued, facing numerous challenges and setbacks, through to October 1972 when a tentative agreement was reached. However, this agreement was delayed because of objections put forward by the President of South Vietnam, Nguyen Van Thieu. Eventually, an accord was finalised in January 1973.

But the Vietnam accords failed to secure a lasting peace. North Vietnam continued its military conquests against the background of the Watergate scandal and the U.S. Congressional cut off of funding for the war. Ultimately, the North Vietnamese military campaign led to the fall of South Vietnam in April 1975, and as a result, the reunification of Vietnam under communist control.

To provide a sense of just how complex war termination agreements can be, I recommend [perusing the Paris Peace Accords](#), signed in 1973. This is a 200-page document, which is full of diplomatic nuance and the many, many conditions, articles and other aspects that governed the implementation of the accords.

And, as we have seen throughout 2025, there has been constant changing of the Trump position on Ukraine and achieving a war termination agreement. This [recent article](#) charts Trump shifting positions during the past year. Notwithstanding the very positive leaders press conference today, let's see what Trump says after his next phone call with Putin.

There remains a long way ahead in the peace negotiations, and the agreement of strategic level outcomes. After that will come the production of the very difficult implementing details and then the actual execution of withdrawals. The potential for flare ups in fighting in this phase will be very real.

For now, the brutal ground combat between Ukraine and Russia, and the nightly long-range drone and missile strikes will continue. And while the Ukrainians hope for peace, their armed forces will be faced by a Russia that will be attempting to seize as much Ukrainian territory, and destroy as much of the Ukrainian state, as it can before any peace deal is signed.

For Ukraine's defenders, the war continues unabated.