



RCAS Commentary

Alaska Summit: Putin's Gambit, Trump's Retreat

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RCAS aims to become a leading research institute and think tank on Asian affairs in the Indo-Pacific region. To date, RCAS has conducted research programs on maritime disputes in the South China Sea (SCS), China's relations with the Indo-Pacific states, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), terrorism/counterterrorism in the Afg-Pak region, and so on. It is committed to promoting maritime cooperation, regional integration, and regional peace in the Indo-Pacific region at large.

RCAS has published nearly ten books in Chinese and English and more than 20 papers in SSCI/SCOPUS/CSSCI-indexed journals. Recent English publications include *Populism, Nationalism and South China Sea Dispute: Chinese and Southeast Asian Perspectives* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2022); *Pakistan's Foreign Policy: Contemporary Developments and Dynamics* (London: Routledge, 2022); *Crossing the Himalayas: Buddhist Ties, Regional Integration and Great-Power Rivalry* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2021); *The Reshaping of China-Southeast Asia Relations in Light of the COVID-19 Pandemic* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2021); *Territorial Disputes, The Role of Leaders and The Impact of Quad: A Triangular Explanation of China-India Border Escalations* (2023); *Managing the South China Sea Dispute: Multilateral and Bilateral Approaches* (2022); *China-Pakistan Cooperation on Afghanistan: Assessing Key Interests and Implementing Strategies* (2022); *Hedging Against the Dragon: Myanmar's Tangled Relations with China since 1988* (2021); and *China-Pakistan Conventional Arms Trade: An Appraisal of Supplier's and Recipient's Motives* (2020).

RCAS has also published hundreds of articles, and its researchers have been interviewed in various local and international media outlets, such as *The Diplomat* in the United States, *East Asian Forum (EAF)* in Australia, *Bangkok Post* in Thailand, *Jakarta Post* in Indonesia, *Lian He Zao Bao*, *Think China* in Singapore, *South China Morning Post (SCMP)*, *China-US Focus* in Hong Kong, *CGTN*, *Global Times*, *World Affairs* in China. RCAS researchers have actively participated in international conferences or study visits in the United States, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Myanmar, Cambodia, and other places.

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Alaska Summit: Putin's Gambit, Trump's Retreat

Sujit Kumar Datta

The Trump-Putin summit held recently in Anchorage, Alaska, had the potential to open a pivotal phase in global relations. There was hope all over the world. Diplomats, political analysts, journalists and ordinary people crossed their fingers, hoping that a meeting of the U.S. and Russian presidents would mark a turning point in the war in Ukraine.



U.S. President Trump and Russian President Putin sat down with senior advisers from each country at a highly anticipated summit in Alaska, August 15, 2025. ▲(China US Focus).

The collapse of European security, transatlantic solidarity and Western leadership depended on the success of this high-stakes meeting. However, the summit in real life did not provide much in the way of solutions. After almost three hours of talks, there was no cease-fire declaration, no roadmap to a peace treaty, no specific action plan.

Nevertheless, the symbolic meaning and strategic messages have significantly impacted the world's politics and reshaped not only Ukraine's future but also the security in Europe, the cohesion of NATO countries and the global strategic balance. In diplomacy were a game, then without a doubt Vladimir Putin scored the winning goal in Anchorage, while Donald Trump went home empty-handed.

Always the showman, claiming to be the world's greatest deal-maker, Trump had vowed on the campaign trail to end the Ukraine war within the first 24 hours after taking office. Eight months after assuming the presidency of the United States, the battle is still on. He is said to have summoned Ukraine's President Volodymyr

Zelenskyy to the White House to scold him, claiming that Zelenskyy held no winning cards in the game with Russia. When Trump later failed to put a stop to aggressive airstrikes by Moscow, his attention was on Putin, whom he labeled as not worth his sweet words.

Irritated, he threatened extreme action against Russia unless—within a period of 10 or 12 days, a cease-fire was accepted. Shockingly, he did not insist on additional sanctions or tariffs, and ended up at the Alaska summit with Putin and no conditions.

Trump had given assurances that an agreement would not be made without the presence of the Ukrainians and even suggested the possibility of a three-way meeting that included Zelenskyy. That, however, didn't materialize, probably because Putin had no interest in inviting his opponent.

Some who know Putin contend that he went to the Alaska summit with no intention of negotiating a cease-fire. At this stage, as Russian troops are fighting in Ukraine, Moscow is proudly celebrating victory. Thus, a cease-fire at that point was not possible. The fundamental aim behind Putin's attendance was to make a grand comeback onto the world stage. He had been invited by the very president of the United States of America who had given him a red-carpet welcome on American soil. So simply meeting Trump was a titanic diplomatic win. An equally important purpose was to buy time to prevent the imposition of additional tariffs or other sanctions by the Trump administration.

Another significant part of Putin's victory was the opportunity restate his demands regarding the war's termination. He was very clear that the dilemma of the war ought to be resolved so that its deeper origins could be addressed. Among the demands were Ukraine's demilitarization, assurances that it will not join NATO and new elections. It is also believed that he told Trump that the international community had already accepted Ukraine's eastern territories as being under Moscow's control and part of Russia.

The list of demands, which was powerfully showcased on a global stage, significantly enhanced Putin's strategic advantage and underscored his undeniable progress toward his goals.

Amid the aforementioned factors, the impact of the "America first" policy pursued by Trump—particularly the aggressive application of tariffs—has been significant, albeit unintentional, as it has compelled countries to diversify their partnerships and reassess their economic relations. The recent U.S. tariff imposed on Indian goods—now totaling 50 percent—as punishment for India's purchases of Russian oil is a good example of the consequences of taking sides. Not only has this introduced a sense of urgency in the short term for Indian exporters, who now face a huge competitive

handicap, but it also strained a key strategic alliance that the U.S. had carefully nurtured in the face of emerging Chinese influence.

The reaction of India has been one of principled defiance and practical readjustment. Although both the United States and European Union have criticized India for its continued use of Russian oil, New Delhi has raised the strong argument that its oil business has been effective in stabilizing global energy markets. It noted the level of hypocrisy by the West, which continues to trade with Russia—even highly valued imports to U.S. nuclear plants that contain uranium and palladium.

India has become more assertive in its foreign policy, as Prime Minister Narendra Modi recently commented, emphasizing that India would place the utmost importance on its national interests and economic security. India, as one of the world's fast-growing economies, is sending strong signals that it will not bow to external pressure and instead will work toward achieving energy security and economic stability.

Pressure from Washington has driven India to pivot toward closer economic and diplomatic links with both China and Russia. Even though some border issues have persisted and its most recent military confrontation with China was not long ago, India is showing a more practical readiness to de-escalate the situation and seek mutual gain. Recent warming with Beijing, such as renewing pilgrim traffic to Mount Kailash and Mansarovar, issuing tourist visas to Chinese citizens and talks on easing investment restrictions all point to the realization in New Delhi that it needs China to protect its global manufacturing and supply chains.

It has been reported that Indian industries, primarily in the electronics sector, have incurred substantial losses as a result of prior restrictions, prompting a drastic reconsideration of whether a complete decoupling of the Chinese economy can be achieved. This conditional accommodation of China can be described as a strategic move, as India is geopolitically trying to strike a balance while anchoring its economic growth.

At the same time, India has a long-standing and robust strategic and economic relationship with Russia. Russia remains an essential source of military hardware, and its cheap oil has assumed importance in terms of energy security for India. The never-ending travel of Indian leaders to Russia seems to confirm the strength of the bilateral relationship. The recent visit of India's national security adviser to Moscow further seals this unbroken trend.

A multi-alignment approach will enable India to pursue strategic autonomy and not become entirely tied to any single actor, thereby allowing it to navigate the complex landscape of great power politics without a single, strong anchor.

The merging of the Trump administration's self-proclaimed shift in priorities, such as putting America first, has by default lost friends in the process and weakened the teeth of multinational organizations. Coupled with the aggressive, pragmatic reinforcement of relationships between India, China and Russia, it heralds a dramatic change in the world balance of powers. The U.S., which was the undeniable architect and remains a guarantor of the liberal international order, is increasingly regarded as an erratic ally, one that prioritizes unilateral benefits over collective stability. This perception has compelled other key powers to consider alternative structures and systems.

A more active collaboration of India, China and Russia, frequently relayed through initiatives such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, represents a concerted effort to create a more multipolar international sphere. Details of talks in these blocs regarding de-dollarization and the establishment of alternative payment mechanisms pose a direct threat to decades of U.S. dollar and Western financial dominance. As these three giants of the economic and military world strengthen their cooperation in the realms of trade, energy and defense, their total impact on global affairs will increase significantly.

China, in particular, is likely to emerge as the dominant power in this evolving global landscape. Beijing is already transforming the global economic landscape with its unrivaled manufacturing capabilities, ambitious Belt and Road Initiative and increasing technological prowess. Should India, a fast-growing player in the worldwide economy, and Russia, a vital energy and military actor, continue to align their interests with those of China, the center of the global economy will likely shift in an easterly direction. This would represent a weakening of America's economic hegemony, which does not mean irrelevance but does mean the termination of the unipolar moment.

The legacy of Donald Trump may endure, not because he made America first but because he contributed to a new global order through the law of unintended consequences. His "America first" policy has indirectly paved the way for China's rise and is leading to a truly multipolar world order, since it has taken down many of the established rules of trade and alienated strategic partners. "America first" has set in motion a major power shift in which China will become the global captain over the next 10 to 20 years.

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