

— Opinion

The 3 things Australia should think about Trump-Putin peace talks

The choice to remain in full solidarity and partnership with Ukraine is not only more important than ever; it is to Australia's benefit too.

Vasyl Myroshnychenko *Ukraine's ambassador*



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As Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin meet in Alaska, beyond the PR and stage-managed pageantry, there are three aspects that Australians could consider.

1. Russia's war on Ukrainians, rather than happening a "long way away", is of significant consequence to Australia's immediate region and its future geopolitical arrangements.
2. Any so-called "deal" that involves ceding Ukrainian territory or curbing its sovereignty has a huge impact on Australia's long-standing foreign policy goals;
3. Australia's interest – an end to the war – cannot be fulfilled without the full engagement of Ukraine and its allies in a workable and just peace.

As President Volodymyr Zelensky has pointed out, it is directly in contravention of Ukraine's constitution for a Ukrainian government to cede sovereign territory. **Getty**

Risk to national security

In the first respect, it needs to be recognised that, in making war on Ukraine, Russia is more broadly positioning itself as a (albeit unworthy) global power, which includes the projection of strength into the Asia-Pacific region.

It is noteworthy that thousands of North Korean troops have been deployed into war-related combat zones, and that North Korea and China, including through commercial intermediaries, are the major suppliers of the Russian war machine.

Indonesia and Russia conducted their first-ever bilateral naval exercises, dubbed Latma Orruda 2024, held in the Java Sea near Surabaya. Also, the idea of permanently based Russian strategic bombers being hundreds – not thousands – of kilometres from Australia cannot be ignored and should be of significant concern.

Fundamentally, Australia should be fully cognisant of the clear fact that Putin wants a presence on its doorstep, and policymakers ought to proportionately reply to that emerging risk to national security.

Endangering Ukrainian territory

In the second respect, going into the Alaska meeting (to which Ukraine has not been invited and which is already a personal victory for Putin as he requested it), there have been suggestions at the most senior level that there ought to be some [sort of “deal” for peace](#).

This would ostensibly involve the secession of Ukrainian land, which could include currently occupied and other territory in the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts of Ukraine, in exchange for cessation of hostilities. Such a “deal” might enshrine Russian control of some 25 per cent of Ukraine – the equivalent of Australia losing, say, all of NSW and Victoria.

That such an arrangement would put at risk Ukrainian statehood – which is Putin’s real goal – and subjugate millions of innocent people to an oppressive regime is clear and well understood by most of Ukraine’s allies, such as those in Europe. It, however, has further-reaching consequences, including for Australia and its region, that should be pointed out.

Namely, legitimisation of Russian control of Ukrainian territory, taken through an illegal and unprovoked military invasion and held under a brutal occupational regime, creates a precedent and premise for those in Australia’s region who may have an expansionist agenda, be that in the South China Sea or elsewhere. It would effectively amount to a quasi-legal *imprimatur* for others’ regional hegemony by force of arms. More simply put, it represents a green-means-go signal for would-be geopolitical bullies. This in turn, would massively impact the national security architecture that Australia has built over decades.

More broadly, a “deal” involving forcible secession of Ukrainian territory to an aggressor state has the effect of tearing up the very fabric of the international rules-based order that has well-served the globe for many decades. This includes abandonment of the guiding principle that is multilateral recognition of territorial sovereignty, including those of the member states of the United Nations. Moreover, it allows autocratic ambition to take primacy over democratic values.

Rewarding Russia through occupational recognition destroys the already-threatened charter of the United Nations and the long-held vision of peace and stability it represents. (I say “already-threatened” as it is extraordinary that terroristic and ethnocidal Russia remains a nuclear-armed, permanent member of the UN Security Council with full veto power.) Here, I note that Australia both helped to create and has

long substantially engaged with the UN – of which the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic was also a founding member.

No deal without Ukraine

In the final respect, it is completely unrealistic to think that anyone can unilaterally find a solution to the war without the full participation and assent of Ukraine itself. Hence, discussions in Alaska could well be seen as a spectacle without serious substance and [a vast photo-op for Putin on American soil](#).

Be that as it may, as President Volodymyr Zelensky has pointed out, it is directly in contravention of Ukraine's constitution for a Ukrainian government to cede sovereign territory. It is also wholly unworkable to establish new lines on a map that, without substantive security guarantees for Ukraine, Russia will simply use as the start line for further military incursions in the future.

As Zelensky has said: "Any decisions that are without Ukraine are at the same time decisions against peace. They will not bring anything. These are dead decisions. They will never work."

Dr Olenka Pevny of the University of Cambridge has poignantly commented in this respect that "the exertion of political power to compel a sovereign state to relinquish its right to territory and to act against its constitution is fundamentally unjust and morally indefensible. Offering territorial or economic concessions to an aggressor state undermines the principles of international law and erodes the foundations of a just and durable peace. Peace imposed in the absence of justice is neither sustainable nor ethically defensible."

And without such a peace, Australia continues to confront an unstable and unpredictable world. On the eve of the Alaskan meetings, Australia's choice to remain in full solidarity and partnership with Ukraine is not only more important than ever; it is to Australia's benefit too.