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Vladimir Putin Made a Terrible Mistake, and His Concessions on Ukraine are a Sign of His Weakened Position



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For the first time the Russia-Ukraine negotiations look as if they might produce a peace deal as a top Russian defence official says that Russia will “dramatically” reduce its military activities around Kyiv and the northern city of Chernihiv.

This is being done “to create the necessary conditions for future negotiations” according to Alexander Fomin, Russia’s deputy defence minister attending the peace talks in Istanbul.

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An agreement looks like a possibility for the first time since the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February. Fomin said the withdrawal was taking place because Ukraine has agreed to neutrality and a non-nuclear status.

In recent days, the Russian defence minister Sergei Shoigu told top military officials that Russia had largely completed the first stage of its operation and was shifting to “the main goal – the liberation of Donbas.”

The fact that these statements about a peace deal and a Russian pull-back are coming from senior Russian officials make it less likely that they are a propaganda manoeuvre or a delaying tactic, giving time for Russian forces to reorganise themselves after a series of setbacks.

Other Russian officials say that a peace agreement is still far off and it is possible that the Kremlin has decided to fight and negotiate at the the same time.

Whatever the outcome of the peace negotiations in Istanbul, the Russian statements are very different from President Putin’s original demand five weeks ago that the President Volodymyr Zelensky be overthrown and the Ukrainian army lay down its arms.

Since then, the military and international balance of power between Russia and Ukraine has moved sharply – and probably permanently – against the former and in favour of the latter. Putin misjudged the strength of Ukrainian resistance, the power of his own military, and the reaction of Nato.

But although Russia has failed in its strategic objectives and has captured only a couple of Ukrainian urban centres, it still has a powerful military force in Ukraine.

Pictures of the shattered buildings and wrecked bridges have horrified the world, but they mask the grim truth that the level of devastation is still below the total destruction seen in besieged cities in the Middle East such as East Aleppo, the old city of Mosul and Raqqa.

There is no reason why Ukraine should not share the fate of Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, if the fighting goes on for months or years.

Much of what Russia says that it has gained was obtainable without an invasion. Ukraine was unlikely to join Nato and the Nato powers said that none of their soldiers would fight in Ukraine. Russian demands for ‘de-Nazification’, and an end to the genocide of Russian speakers, will be easy to meet because neither allegation was true, but Putin could claim to have averted them.

The US has been ambivalent about how to keep out of a direct role in the war, but also to supply enough weapons and other assistance to keep Ukraine fighting.

“Such is the tenuous balance the Biden administration has tried to maintain as it seeks to help Ukraine lock Russia in a quagmire without inciting a broader conflict with a nuclear-armed adversary or cutting off potential paths to de-escalation,” says the *New York Times* in an analysis of US policy.

Of course, the war is not over yet. All sides in the conflict have a reason for making peace, but also a reason for fighting on to improve their positions.

A Russian motive for de-escalating around Kyiv may be that their operations in north Ukraine have failed around the capital and Chernihiv, and they are seeking to dress up this failure as a concession to boost peace talks. Since almost all information about Ukrainian victories and Russian defeats come from the Ukrainian side, the position on the battlefield may not be as clear cut as presented by the western media.

The Kremlin may also feel that it has been outmanoeuvred by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, who has offered compromises, given an impression of moderation and stressed his wish to end the war. But his proposals may be a bitter pill for the Russians to accept because they include security guarantees for Ukraine which would be more effective than membership of Nato.

Putin has nobody to blame but himself that Ukraine is stronger than it was before the war and Russia considerably weaker. Successful peace negotiations will ultimately reflect this new balance of power between Ukraine and Russia and Russia and the world.

Even now it is difficult to see how Putin, despite his absolute control of the Russian media, will play down his defeat as his his battered army slinks off home with its reputation in tatters. Through his own hubris and wishful thinking, he has created a well-armed pro-Western Ukraine – which is precisely what he went to war to prevent.

Putin blundered in imagining that Ukrainians would welcome his forces with open arms and he has been unable to devise a new strategy. The Kremlin appears to have been equally incapable of organise Russia’s vast resources in manpower to reinforce an army too small for its task.

Patrick Cockburn is the author of [War in the Age of Trump](#) (Verso).