



By: **Ian Bremmer**

The limits of Putin's strategy



Nearly four years into Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the push to end the war is intensifying.

Diplomacy over the past few weeks has produced not one but two proposals as American envoys shuttle between Kyiv and Moscow.

Amid public displays of applause – more often than not feigned – for President Donald Trump's efforts to stop the bloodshed, everyone is scrambling to shape the terms of peace, as well as the realities on the ground.

Yet despite the flurry of diplomatic activity, the odds of a ceasefire remain slim. We are unlikely to see one within weeks, or even within months.

The reason is straightforward: Russia and Ukraine still have fundamentally **incompatible goals**, and neither side has found sufficient reason to compromise.

Trump's singular focus on getting a deal (no matter the details) has not changed either party's strategic calculus.

Trump has made ending the war, regardless of the consequences for Ukraine and Europe, a high priority for his second term, and he is annoyed that it has not happened already.

When you want to get a deal at the lowest possible cost and don't particularly care about the terms or the wider short- or long-term implications, the path of least resistance is to pressure the weaker party.

Pressuring Ukraine

The weaker party, of course, is Ukraine, not just because it has a smaller economy, population, and military than Russia, but also because it is caught up in a corruption scandal that recently claimed President Volodymyr Zelensky's chief of staff, Andriy Yermak.

Recognizing that Zelensky is in a challenging position domestically, Trump and his advisers

smell an opportunity. Pressuring Ukraine now may be more likely to yield results.

But what they apparently don't understand is that Zelensky's weakness makes concessions harder, not easier.

Most Ukrainians still want an end to the war on Ukrainian, not Russian, terms

While recent **polling suggests** that only one-quarter of Ukrainians want to fight until total victory, a dramatic reversal from the war's early years, the same polls show that most Ukrainians still want an end to the war on Ukrainian, not Russian, terms.

Even if he was so inclined, a politically vulnerable Zelensky cannot support a deal that smells like capitulation, and which his own people and military would overwhelmingly oppose.

Maximalist demands

For its part, Russia knows that it holds the stronger position and is not trying to reach terms that Ukraine might accept.

In fact, President Vladimir Putin isn't trying to end the war at all, because he believes he can achieve better outcomes on the battlefield than at the negotiating table.

Russian forces are making slow, grinding progress in the Donbas, and though the costs are enormous – tens of thousands of casualties, economic strain, and international isolation – Putin has shown that he is willing to bear them. He remains convinced that time is on his side.

Putin is exploiting Trump's impatience for a deal

By making maximalist demands that he knows Ukraine cannot possibly accept – de jure

recognition of Russia's territorial annexations, Ukrainian neutrality with no meaningful security guarantees, and effective limits on Ukraine's sovereignty – Putin is exploiting Trump's impatience for a deal.

The Kremlin's goal is not to negotiate in good faith; it is to appear cooperative to Trump and sympathetic European leaders like Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico, in the hopes that the United States will blame Ukraine for the inevitable diplomatic failure.

In Putin's best-case scenario, this strategy gets Russia two things: greater impunity in its attacks on Ukraine (which might otherwise provoke American blowback) and a more divided NATO.

Putin's strategy has limits

But Putin's strategy has limits. Trump has already shown he can turn on Russia, too. When he grew frustrated with Putin's intransigence earlier this year, the US granted Ukraine permission to conduct long-range strikes inside Russia, imposed new sanctions on Rosneft and Lukoil, and pressured India to reduce its purchases of Russian oil.

Moreover, Ukraine, Europe, and US Secretary of State Marco Rubio have done enough (so far) to maintain intelligence sharing with Ukraine, and to continue allowing deep strikes on Russian oil infrastructure.



European countries are now fully bankrolling Ukraine's war effort. That considerably diminishes Washington's leverage over Kyiv

The other limit to Putin's strategy is that Trump no longer controls Ukraine's lifeline.

The US is selling weapons and providing intelligence, but European countries are now fully bankrolling Ukraine's war effort. That considerably diminishes Washington's leverage over Kyiv.

And whether by leveraging Russia's **frozen assets** or by issuing more common debt, European leaders have made clear that they won't let Ukraine lose for lack of money.

So, the war will grind through another round of failed talks, another winter, and probably another spring. Russian forces will keep trying to take more ground.

Ukraine will keep defending itself while striking Russian infrastructure. The human and economic costs will mount.

Ukraine's position will likely deteriorate, even as Russia pays an enormous price in blood and treasure for limited gains. There won't be enough willingness to compromise anytime soon.

I wish this were not the case. But when the parties' core objectives are fundamentally incompatible, no amount of external pressure or diplomacy can bridge the gap.

Peace will come eventually – but only when the battlefield and material circumstances force it. It won't come from Trump's current diplomatic push, no matter how many deadlines he sets.

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