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Will Putin Get What He Wants on Ukraine?

By Alexander Baunov

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For now, Biden is the leader who prevented a war, but that's not to say that the summit will be followed by a rapid de-escalation: not until Moscow sees new steps being taken by Washington on Ukraine.



U.S. President Joe Biden and Russia's President Vladimir Putin. **Mikhail Metzel / TASS**

At this week's virtual summit on Ukraine with U.S. President Joe Biden, Russian President Vladimir Putin's aim was to transfer responsibility for implementing the Minsk agreements aimed at ending the Ukraine conflict from the Europeans and Ukrainians to the United States. To encourage Biden to accept this responsibility, Russia has been staging military drills close to Ukraine's borders, with enough troops massing there to launch an offensive. As Putin seeks a final formula for the configuration of the post-Soviet space, the signal is clear: if the Minsk agreements aren't being implemented, the alternative is military force.

Back in October, Putin's spokesperson, Dmitry Peskov, said that in order to help resolve the

conflict, the United States doesn't necessarily have to be part of the Normandy format for talks (that format consists of Ukraine, Russia, France, and Germany). Another way of interpreting this is that Moscow doesn't see the need for the Europeans to take part in any serious conversation on Ukraine, since it believes that any such conversation should take place directly between Moscow and Washington.

This was also the thinking behind the Russian Foreign Ministry's controversial publication of confidential correspondence on Ukraine between the ministry's head, Sergey Lavrov, and his French and German colleagues: Moscow is showing that there is nothing to discuss with Ukraine's advocates, and that talks should be held directly with its patron Washington.

It also explains Lavrov's complaints that Russia proposed including the United States in the Normandy format, but that Germany and France refused, as well as Putin's calls for firm guarantees that NATO will not expand further east: something only the United States can promise. Although this may look like an unreasonable negotiating position now, it clearly sets out the strategic horizon of Russia's demands. If those demands are satisfied, Russia is ready to promise predictability and security. In other words, the issue here is the Minsk agreements in their broadest interpretation: a chain of actions and obligations that should lead to a Ukraine that is friendly and neutral, but not necessarily subordinate to Moscow: something along the lines of Kazakhstan.

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By massing its troops at Ukraine's borders, Russia is implying that Kiev's failure to implement the Minsk agreements is a sign it wants to take back the Donbas by force. Ukraine's Western allies don't believe for one minute that Kiev would embark on such a reckless undertaking, and instead see it as a sign of impending Russian aggression.

The Americans don't want a war in Europe: it could lead to the defeat of their ally Ukraine, and the need to come back swinging at Russia. The impossibility of responding by force and the insufficiency of further sanctions would make America look weak for the second time in a year, following its withdrawal from Afghanistan. In these circumstances, it's better to work on the Minsk accords — or other agreements.

Judging by the Russian communique on the presidential meeting, as well as by the press conference given by Biden's national security advisor, Jake Sullivan, the United States is indeed prepared to push for the implementation of the Minsk agreements.

Still, Biden can't just accept responsibility for implementing the agreements simply because the Kremlin is disappointed in Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and the Europeans: that would mean he was carrying out Putin's wishes, and he has promised not to give in to him. In this respect, the buildup of troops and talk of an imminent Russian attack on Ukraine are very timely.

For having confirmed to Putin the U.S. commitment to taking part in resolving the Ukraine conflict, Biden needs something in exchange — like showing the world he has managed to stop Putin and prevent a war. That's no mean feat, and a powerful defense against those who have criticized him for even sitting down with Putin. For this reason, among others, the idea

of an impending war began to take on a life of its own even before the summit, and to have as much impact on the behavior of the parties involved as actual events.

The source of this talk of a coming war is Western media, politicians, and experts: not the Kremlin, which prefers to use secret special operations to achieve its goals, rather than openly mobilize its troops, which is simply a way of strengthening its negotiating position.

Biden has come out of this as the leader who prevented a war, but that's not to say that the summit will necessarily be followed by deescalation and the return of Russian troops to their barracks, as was the case back in the spring after the agreement to hold the Geneva summit.

This time, no dramatic deescalation is likely. Biden will be the leader who prevented a war, but not the threat of war: not until Moscow sees new steps taken by Washington on Ukraine and visible signs of work on engaging with Russian security concerns.

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The Minsk agreements themselves are not equally acceptable to Ukraine and the United States. Washington has said that the agreements are the most important and, effectively, the only way of resolving the conflict in eastern Ukraine. The United States cannot, without losing face, give public assurances that Ukraine will not join NATO. Its intentions on this issue can only be divined from indirect signs over several months, or even years.

For Moscow, progress on implementing the parts of the Minsk agreements that are most unpalatable to Kiev would show that its concerns are being taken seriously, rather than being ignored in the hope they will blow over. The problem is that Kiev is prepared to wait until any fresh insistence on the Minsk agreements being implemented blows over. Just as the West overestimates the absolute influence of Putin, Moscow is mistaken when it sees Ukraine as a mere U.S. satellite. The West may have some levers of influence over Kiev, but nothing can replace the conflict in the Donbas as a source of anti-Russian mobilization within Ukraine, and a way of attracting allies and constantly putting pressure on Moscow in international affairs.

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Russia would be satisfied with a neutral, friendly, bilingual Ukraine, but that would be seen as a humiliating step backwards by many in Ukraine. For this reason, the danger of renewed hostilities in eastern Ukraine is considerably less virtual than the presidential summit. Handing over responsibility for the Minsk agreements to the United States is Putin's final attempt to resolve the issue of Ukraine before 2024 — when his current term ends — within the existing legal framework. If that doesn't work, Putin, who is consolidating his political and historical legacy ahead of 2024, will look for other ways of resolving the Ukraine crisis.

It appears that what he manages to achieve in Ukraine will be the deciding factor in whether or not Putin stays on after 2024. From his words and an article on the issue, it's clear that Putin sees relations with Ukraine as part of his historical mission. That's not something he wants to leave in less experienced hands, nor to share the credit for in the event of success.

And in the event of failure? Well, if victory hasn't yet been achieved, perhaps it's not the time to step down.

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