

Putin can win without a shot fired

Global perspective

Moscow's troops are not there to fight a war, but to frighten Paris and Berlin into giving Russia the eastern provinces of Ukraine on a plate.



Marko Pavlyshyn

On Thursday, Ukraine, Russia, France and Germany commenced a new round of talks within the so-called Normandy Format with the aim of de-escalating the crisis-level tensions ignited by Russia's massing of more than 100,000 troops on Ukraine's northern and eastern borders and in occupied Crimea on the south.

The sides agreed to respect the ceasefire that is supposed to have been in place all along, and to reconvene for further talks in two weeks.

This might sound like a step in the right direction, signalling negotiations that lead to a new understanding and make an invasion less likely.

But the talks could also become a gateway to giving Russia what it wants without a shot being fired.

Whatever is said at the talks, the most significant fact about them is who is taking part, and who is not. The United States and Britain, which have consistently helped Ukraine with defensive weaponry and diplomatic support, are not party to the discussions. Both countries have made tough statements about the costs Russia will bear if it invades.

France and Germany have been lukewarm at best. Germany has been unwilling to rule out opening the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline in the event of a Russian invasion and has refused to allow Lithuania, Latvia or Estonia to put their German-made weapons at Ukraine's disposal. Many in Kiev see Germany's offer to send Ukraine 5000 military helmets as a form of mockery.

Parties to the Normandy Format talks

have agreed that the starting point for negotiations should be the Minsk agreements, whose goal was to stop the fighting in eastern Ukraine and to find grounds for a peaceful settlement.

Neither the first agreement, signed in Minsk in 2014, nor Minsk II (February 2015) succeeded.

The war, in which Russia actively supports its proxies with its active-service personnel, matériel and money, has continued as a generally low-intensity conflict with occasional flare-ups ever since. The death toll to date is 14,000. The internally displaced number 1.5 million.

The terms of Minsk II have not been implemented – fortunately for Ukraine, for they are a threat to Ukraine's security, stability and, indeed, its sovereignty. Under Minsk II, Ukraine would be forced to change its constitution, conferring special status and broad autonomy on the eastern regions that Russia controls through its puppets, the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics. This

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special status would include the right to form local militia units and to engage in "cross-border co-operation" with regions of the Russian Federation.

Effectively, implementation of the accord would create a Russian-controlled province in Ukraine – which, however, would be represented in Ukraine's Parliament. As critics of Minsk II in and outside Ukraine have pointed out, Russia would be able to destabilise or paralyse the country at times of its choosing.

Ukraine's efforts to integrate with the European Union and NATO, for which currently there is broad political and popular support, would be stymied. The prospects of Ukraine remaining a functioning democracy, demonstrating that authoritarianism is not the only pathway for countries in the post-Soviet space, would be eroded.

In December 2021, the Institute for the Study of War, a US-based think tank, prepared a meticulously researched and

documented set of reports on the conflict. The first of these argues that Russian President Vladimir Putin may have put in place the components of an imminent threat of invasion without in fact intending to invade at all.

The purpose of staging the plausible semblance of a threat may be to entice Europe and the US into diplomatic negotiations intended to de-escalate the conflict – extracting, as the price of Putin's not doing what he had no intention of doing anyway, concessions that correspond to what he wanted to achieve in the first place.

The report's authors note that the economic cost of a conventional war and occupation would stretch the capacities of the Russian economy. The human cost of the war and of combating a fierce Ukrainian insurgency would stir discontent even in an authoritarian state with controlled media. A serious war would require an information campaign preparing the Russian population to expect and accept sacrifices and deaths. There has been no such campaign so far. For these reasons, the report argues, full-scale war may not be Russia's primary aim.

If the outcome of the Normandy Format negotiations is that France and Germany push Ukraine into accepting anything like the terms of Minsk II, Putin will have won.

Moreover, his victory will have been handed to him by the very Europe that Ukraine so ardently yearns to join.

He will have brought Ukraine into Russia's orbit, scoring a major symbolic victory over the West, which will again serve to prove that the West will not defend democracy if that defence involves inconveniences, such as endangering the gas supply.

If, on the other hand, the West shows firmness and solidarity, and refuses to be hoodwinked into believing that a geopolitical defeat is a diplomatic victory, the Russian Federation can fall back on the military option.

That is why the West must do two things simultaneously: use the resources of diplomacy to obtain a peace that strengthens, rather than jeopardises, Ukraine's sovereignty; and emphasise the costs in the form of sanctions and diplomatic isolation that it will impose, should Russia invade.

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