

Ukraine and Russia

Will Vladimir Putin really agree to stop his killing machine?

The offer of a ceasefire creates a dilemma for the Kremlin



Photograph: AP

Mar 12th 2025

THE BALL, so America's secretary of state said on March 11th, is back in Vladimir Putin's court. Ukraine had just agreed at talks in Jeddah to an American plan for [a month-long ceasefire](#), and in return America has already restarted the flow of weapons and information that Donald Trump [cut off](#) following his spectacular [Oval Office shouting match](#) with Volodymyr Zelensky 11 days earlier. For once, it is Mr Putin who has a fateful decision to make. It is not clear how far America is prepared to go to ensure he comes to the right conclusion.

A ceasefire does not favour Russia. A temporary pause will give Ukraine a chance to resupply and it may endure, because polling suggests that Russians are tired of war. Whichever side resumes fighting first will invite international condemnation and the ire of Mr Trump. A violation would show the American president up as weak and credulous. He would not like that.

Mr Putin's problem is that he has not yet got what he wanted in Ukraine. His aim was to subjugate or cripple the country; sever its connections to the West; be rid of its troublesome president, Mr Zelensky; and permanently hobble its armed forces. His overarching ambition, as he has repeatedly made clear in writings and speeches, has been nothing less than to restore Russia as a great power with an extended sphere of influence, starting with Ukraine, its ancient heartland.

In fact, despite having lost an estimated [150,000-210,000 Russian dead](#), all Mr Putin has managed to do is capture roughly 11% of Ukraine's territory, much of it now devastated by his own soldiers, adding to the chunk of around 7% that he seized in 2014. The end has not justified the means.

What Mr Putin surely wants is to win from Mr Trump what he has failed to seize on the battlefield. And at times Mr Trump has seemed alarmingly willing to satisfy him. He has repeated Kremlin talking-points that Mr Zelensky is a dictator because he has not held an election since the war began. He has ruled out NATO membership for Ukraine. He has shown little desire to "backstop" a peacekeeping force after a deal, and has excluded stationing American troops in the country. He talks of doing business deals with Russia as if the removal of sanctions were just around the corner. Most of all, his willingness to bully Ukraine at a time of national peril has spilled over into NATO, whose members have started to doubt whether they could count on him.

The danger now is that Mr Putin will try to attach some of his conditions to the proposed ceasefire, by calling for American aid not to restart, an early and divisive election in Ukraine, or international recognition of territory he has seized. It is essential that Mr Trump resists any attempt to do this. If he yields, he risks sabotaging his

own administration's agreement with Ukraine. Marco Rubio, the American secretary of state, and Steve Witkoff, Mr Trump's friend and envoy, have tried to repair some of the damage from the Oval Office disaster, and Ukraine has behaved sensibly, too. Tilting back to Mr Putin's agenda would wreck all that.

Mr Putin may now try to dissipate the momentum that the ceasefire proposal has created, by means of endless procrastination under the guise of seeking clarification. The Americans must be firm about that, too. A halt in the destruction and slaughter that have marked the past three years would be an achievement for Mr Trump, even if it is only temporary. He has put unconscionable—and harmful—pressure on Ukraine, which was the easy part. Now it is time to put some pressure on Mr Putin. Does he dare? ■