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Trump Is Offering Putin Another Munich

By Robert Kagan

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Hitler regretted the deal he made with Neville Chamberlain at Munich in 1938. What he actually wanted was war—his goal was to conquer all of Czechoslovakia by force as a first step toward the conquest of all of Europe.

He didn't imagine that the British and French governments would be so craven as to give him everything he publicly asked for, including the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia and the occupation of the Sudetenland by the German army. When they did, Hitler found himself trapped into accepting, but he was unhappy. Within five months he ordered the military occupation of all Czechoslovakia, in violation of the Munich Agreement, and six months after that, he invaded Poland.

No security guarantee; no independent, sovereign Ukraine; perhaps not even a cease-fire. Putin's goal, as it has been from the beginning, is the incorporation of Ukraine into Russia and the complete erasure of the Ukrainian nation, language, and culture. He will gladly accept Ukraine's surrender whenever Kyiv is ready to concede, but short of that he is going to keep the war going until he takes everything.

Let's start with security guarantees. Putin has never agreed to them for Ukraine—in *any form*. Putin and his spokesmen have stated repeatedly that Moscow will never accept European troops on Ukrainian soil as part of a peace deal. To accept European troops in Ukraine is no different in Putin's mind than to accept NATO—as Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said as recently as last week.

Nor is Putin's refusal hard to understand. Any deal that put Western troops on Ukrainian soil would leave Russia in an objectively worse strategic situation than before the invasion. After three years of conflict, as many as 1 million casualties, and widespread economic suffering, Putin would have succeeded only in tightening the circle of containment around Russia, including the admission to NATO of Sweden and Finland; bringing hostile forces closer to Russia's border; and substantially increasing even peacetime defense requirements. His broader ambitions in Europe would be blocked, perhaps forever. If Trump could see past the aura of his own dealmaking genius, he would see that for Putin to end the war with European troops on Ukrainian soil for any purpose would be a colossal strategic failure.

Putin has also rejected the idea of an international guarantee of Ukraine's security even without troops on the ground. Early negotiations in 2022 broke down precisely over that

point. Ukraine wanted an international commitment to come to Ukraine's aid in the event that Russia launched another attack—something equivalent to the Article 5 guarantee in the NATO treaty. This would not have meant foreign troops on Ukrainian soil—or even any official relationship between Ukraine and NATO—but rather a commitment by signatory states to come to a “neutral” Ukraine's aid if it was invaded. Putin rejected this, insisting on a Russian veto over any such action.

Putin has even insisted that Ukraine should not be permitted to maintain a military capable of resisting another Russian invasion. He has demanded strict limits on the number of Ukrainian forces and rejected any notion of allowing the U.S. or Europe to continue providing weapons to help Ukraine defend itself against future attack. In short, Putin's unwavering demand in any peace settlement has been to leave Ukraine essentially defenseless.

Further, Putin has from the beginning demanded an end to the government of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky as a prior condition before any agreement. That he ever expected this demand to be met is doubtful: What nation agrees to the toppling of its government as the price for peace, except as terms of surrender? Yet he's sticking to this demand. According to reports, Trump officials are right now working to force Zelensky from power and replace him with someone presumably friendlier to Moscow. Judging by the reaction of most Ukrainians to the ambush of their president in the Oval Office, this effort will not succeed. But the fact that Trump officials are trying shows that Putin has not budged an inch in response to Trump's many concessions.

He has also not budged from his broader demand for “de-Nazification,” by which he means the suppression of Ukrainian as the official language of Ukraine, to be replaced by Russian, and of Ukrainian culture and nationalism, which Putin sees as tantamount to resistance to Moscow's domination. If anyone wants to know what Putin hopes to do with Ukraine once he has control, they have only to look at what he is already doing in the territories Russia occupies, where Ukrainians are being forced to become Russian citizens, and any resistance leads to imprisonment, torture, and execution.

Everyone in the West seems to agree that there will be a cease-fire in Ukraine at some point. But one person who never talks about a cease-fire is Vladimir Putin. He does not talk about a cease-fire with his own people. He has at no time offered a cease-fire to the Ukrainians or the Americans. People assume he wants a cease-fire because his losses are staggering and his economy is suffering. But, as I and others have argued, Putin has to believe only that Ukraine is closer to collapse than he is, and that though he is suffering, the Ukrainians are suffering more. Trump's latest moves to paralyze Ukraine's defenses against missile and drone attacks by denying vital U.S. intelligence sharing can only bolster that assessment.

Putin might be tempted to strike a Munich-like deal with Trump just to strengthen an American president who seems determined to give Putin what he may never have imagined possible—a complete American capitulation in the global struggle, the destruction of the NATO alliance, the isolation of a weak Europe, and an open field for further actions to fulfill Putin’s overarching goal, which is the reconstitution of the Soviet Union and its empire in Eastern and Central Europe. This is where the Munich analogy breaks down, because whatever else Chamberlain’s appeasement was, it did not include changing sides in the ongoing European crisis and joining Hitler to carve up the continent.

Yet Putin may calculate that he is getting that for free already. The damage Trump has done to NATO is probably irreparable. The alliance relied on an American guarantee that is no longer reliable, to say the least. But Trump is mercurial and could reverse course, at least partially, at any time. That’s a reason for Putin to seek victory as quickly as possible. He may never have a chance as good as this one to complete the task he set out to achieve when he launched his invasion three years ago.

One thing is certain: Trump is no poker player. Thanks to his actions so far, Putin hasn’t had to reveal any of his cards. Trump claims to know what Putin wants, but his own actions show that he actually has no clue. One day Trump says Russia wants peace for reasons “only I know.” The next, he warns Putin that he’ll impose more sanctions. Putin must be laughing up his sleeve. He’s weathered American sanctions for the better part of three years now; more of the same is not much of a threat. If that’s the only card Trump intends to play, Putin will soon be cashing in, and Ukraine will soon be doomed. Neville Chamberlain believed that Hitler wouldn’t violate the Munich deal because Hitler respected him. Trump shares that delusion about Putin. We may all pay the price.

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