

Opinion **War in Ukraine**

Putin has once again overplayed his hand in Ukraine

The Russian leader's reckless moves have one goal: to turn the tables in a war he is losing

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Two weeks after Russian president Vladimir Putin launched his invasion of Ukraine last February, he [assured](#) the women of Russia that neither conscripts nor reservists would be sent to the front. Only professional military personnel would be fighting, he promised.

This week, however, he announced a mobilisation that could send up to 1mn Russian men to the battlefields in Ukraine in coming months. The Kremlin has also announced sham referendums in the Ukrainian territory occupied by Moscow that may result in those areas being annexed to Russia next week, and Putin has threatened to use nuclear weapons to defend them. The Russian leader's reckless moves have one goal: to turn the tables in a war that he is losing. These actions are unlikely to deliver victory, but they do increase the risk of a potential collision between Russia and Nato.

Putin's original plan — to take Kyiv in three days — was thwarted by the fierce resistance of the Ukrainians and by western support for Kyiv. Now we are seeing plan B, formed in response to developments on the ground. During the summer, Russia

concentrated its forces and firepower in the Donbas, in eastern Ukraine. Annexing this region and other occupied territory in the south will allow Putin to claim he can now use all means necessary — including nuclear weapons — to protect these new regions of Russia, should Kyiv try to retake them.

The Kremlin hopes that this combination of annexation and nuclear blackmail will make the US and European leaders rein in their military support for Ukraine, and that the west will advise Kyiv to abort its counteroffensive. If no peaceful negotiation can be reached which legalises Russia's occupation, the Kremlin won't be sorry: it can continue to attack random targets in Ukraine with the single goal of preventing the country's reconstruction. Western interest in the conflict, it is hoped, will soon dwindle because of the energy war unleashed by Russia, and the US could give up on Ukraine altogether should Donald Trump or someone like him win the White House in 2024. A broken and dysfunctional Ukraine would ensure Putin's victory.

The spectacular success of the Ukrainian counteroffensive in early September has prompted the Russian president to fast-track his plan: even the complete occupation of the Donbas looks unattainable with the resources currently available to the Kremlin. Since the annexed territories will be declared Russian as of next week, the Kremlin will be able to send conscripts to the front lines to fill the gap while the mobilised force is being equipped and trained, which could take four to six months.

Now the choice facing many Russian men is to go to prison for refusing to fight or to enter the fray — with a high chance of getting killed. Protests against the mobilisation have broken out across the country but, for now, the scale of resistance is too small to present a real danger to Putin.

A far bigger challenge for the Russian president's plan B is Ukraine itself. The Kremlin believes the Kyiv government is controlled by the west, and that pragmatic leaders in the US and Europe could avoid escalation and the risk of a collision between Nato and Russia, if they so wished, by halting the Ukrainian advance and pushing president Volodymyr Zelensky to accept Putin's terms. The reality, however, is that Ukraine has both agency as a highly-motivated fighting force and nearly unlimited moral capital in the west. Not only will the Ukrainian army not vacate the territories annexed by Moscow, it is very likely to redouble its efforts to liberate more territory before the Russian reinforcements arrive.

Putin has boxed himself in, and will have no option but to keep going. While the manpower may not be available right now, he could ramp up air power and missiles to bombard Ukraine's critical infrastructure. If that doesn't stop Kyiv, he could threaten the use of tactical nuclear weapons.

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Given the Russian president's impulsive manner and how much he believes is at stake for his regime and his legacy, any decisions are unlikely to be a result of dispassionate discussions in the Kremlin. Also worrying is that the communication channels between Russia and the west are broken, including between senior military leaders. As we enter the most frightening chapter of this crisis yet, Nato leaders face difficult choices.

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