**Putin’s land grab**

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 “Our citizens forever.” These words were spoken by Russian President Vladimir Putin when he signed annexation documents in the St George’s Hall of the Kremlin on September 30.

These three words highlight the entire story of the Russian-Ukraine conflict. With this official annexation ceremony which was held to annex four Russian-occupied Ukrainian regions – Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhia – Putin has completed the first phase of his Ukraine agenda. His Western opponents believe that he has done all of this in desperation to project himself as “still-a-well-entrenched” leader” to cover-up his misadventure in Ukraine.

In the last week of February, when Russian tanks rolled into Ukraine, many Western capitals – including Washington – did not expect a prolonged war because of three main assumptions. One, operational deficiencies and logistical weaknesses of the Russian army were too crumbly to sustain a long war. Two, Putin’s impatient nature would compel him to keep his ‘special military operation’ short and brief. Three, the stringent economic sanctions would not allow the feeble Russian economy to withstand the conflict beyond a few weeks. However, all these calculations have so far proven to be wrong.

While the recent Kharkov episode where the Ukrainian army was able to cause a big dent to the Russian army by recapturing a sizable chunk of the lost territory has shaken Russia a little, such short-term gains and losses are part of every prolonged war. Western leaders have also overestimated Putin’s call for ‘mobilization’, which was followed by the Kharkov rout, as a sign of his weakness and assumed that Putin is badly trapped in the Ukraine imbroglio, trying to find ways for a face-saving equation.

The inability of Western leaders to ascertain the prime strategic objective of Putin’s Ukraine doctrine has been visible since day one. The only reason behind Russian assault on Kyiv in the early stage of the war was to push the panic button in Western capitals. By attacking Kyiv, Putin sent shockwaves across Europe. He simply created panic by sending Nato and the EU into hysterical despondency when Russian jets started targeting Kyiv in the initial days of the war.

Within a few weeks and after its massive and blistering attack on Ukraine, Putin ‘abandoned’ the plan to ensnare Kyiv and shifted his focus from the Ukrainian capital to the Donbas, especially the eastern regions of Luhansk and Donetsk. This tactical shift in the Russian military’s operations was part of a planned strategy. Capturing Kyiv was never part of his basic plan. Putin knew well that the invasion of Kyiv would create massive logistical problems for Russia. A destroyed capital, with completely collapsed infrastructure, would not be manageable by Russia at all.

Putin wanted to engineer the geographical disintegration of Ukraine in such a way that facilitated his much-desired ‘thicker’ buffer zone against Nato’s proposed expansion. Even though a majority of Western military analysts are claiming that Putin has faced setbacks in the first phase of the war due to which he has pulled back his troops from Kyiv and diverted them to the eastern and southern fronts of the war, this analysis seems to be far from reality.

Putin is a clever strategist. He is aware of the fact that the Russian army does not have sufficient logistical capabilities to capture Kyiv – which is located deep inside Ukraine – and sustain it for more than a few weeks. It would have been a major political disaster and sheer embarrassment for Putin to capture and then lose Kyiv to the Ukrainian forces after a few days. In the absence of any rail and road networks for the movement of troops and the smooth supply of materials (including ammunition, spare parts, fuel and other weaponry), Russia’s ground forces would have been in an extremely vulnerable position in areas around Kyiv.

There is no possibility for Russian forces to ensure a quick and safe supply chain of the required material to forward-deployed units in Kyiv – a prerequisite for any invading army to ensure its control over an occupied territory. It was clear that Putin wanted to capture the eastern and southern regions of Ukraine to repeat the same old sham vote drama, which played out in Crimea in 2014. He has now integrated almost 18 per cent of Ukraine into Russia and successfully achieved this objective by signing the annexation documents on September 30.

Putin might have waited a few more months to consolidate his grip on the occupied regions before announcing the formal annexation, but the Kharkov failure and the subsequent Western propaganda about the Russian army as an “ill-disciplined and poorly equipped war machinery with low morale” pushed him to expedite the process of the formal integration of these regions. The haste with which Putin arranged phony referendums in the Russian-held Ukrainian territory is certainly a reflection of some sort of nervousness in the Putin camp.

Putin’s announcement regarding ‘partial mobilization’ was taken by the world as a symptom of the growing lethargy of the Russian army, and it was considered to be a major positive twist in favour of the Ukrainian army. At home, Putin desperately needed something tangible to muffle the growing discontentment and rising anti-war sentiments of Russians. The annexation drama conducted with pomp and circumstance – including a celebratory concert – is a clever ploy by Putin to counter political pressure from his critics inside Russia, who are trying to mobilize an antiwar theme against the paralytic halt in the Donbas.

Ever since Putin ordered Russian troops to enter Ukraine, he has known that the Russian army cannot win this war and that eventually he will have to sit at the negotiating table to further manoeuvre the outcome as per his prime objectives. He has achieved his prime objective by annexing the four key areas that will create a buffer between Russia and Nato’s eastwards extension. Now he will not go back from this area. He has deliberately used the words “our citizens forever” in his annexation speech to send a clear message to Kyiv and its Western backers that they should forget about these territories and that now Russia will negotiate only the timeline of ‘ceasefire’.

The Ukraine war has blatantly exposed the limitations of the much-hyped Russian military prowess, and Putin does not want his military strength to be further tested and eroded. Putin is quite confident that despite the obvious weaknesses of the Russian military capabilities, Russia is in a position to maintain the status quo in the occupied regions for a long time and he is waiting for exhaustion in the Western camp, which is already feeling the pressure of a cost-of-living crisis.

Putin has no plans to further move inside Ukraine at all. He can’t. He is waiting for Turkey, China, France and India to start playing the role of mediators to further legalize his annexation at the negotiating table. Putin has faced many setbacks in Ukraine in the last eight months, but he seems to be quite confident about a favourable equation in the end.

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