

## BRIEF

PROSPECTS FOR UKRAINE'S  
NATO MEMBERSHIP

VILNIUS SUMMIT SERIES, NO. 3

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**At the Vilnius Summit, Allies will focus primarily on their commitments to deter Russian aggression against NATO territory. But NATO seems unable to resolve the bigger strategic issue of how to secure Ukraine. If its own risk-aversion prevents it from giving Ukraine a clearer pathway to membership, NATO may leave Ukraine disillusioned. A deterrence and defence partnership that guarantees the strengthening of Ukraine's military capability for as long as required currently seems to be the most realistic scenario.**

## RISKS AND COSTS

Any assessment of Ukraine's prospective NATO membership must consider the risks and costs that hold a critical number of Allies back. At the fateful Bucharest Summit in 2008, NATO stated that Ukraine (and Georgia) would become members but, afterwards, could not agree how to tackle Russian aggression to realise this promise.<sup>1</sup> The question is now critical for an Alliance re-experiencing an emotional debate

The advocates of the former position include Poland and the Baltic states, which have proposed developing a road map for Ukraine's accession after the war ends. This reflects their longstanding preference for a Ukraine inside the Alliance. After the start of the full-scale invasion, there were calls in some of these states for direct NATO military intervention in the form of a no-fly zone and a peacekeeping operation. They argue that deferring security guarantees will only reinforce Moscow's perception that it should continue its war of aggression because the West lacks endurance or does not consider Ukraine to be worth the risk of a direct war with Russia.

The supporters of the latter position include the US and Germany, which prefer to focus on the delivery of the weapons that Ukraine needs to prevail militarily in the current circumstances. They see no point in making commitments about Ukraine's NATO membership prospects while the war rages and there is no clarity about the country's future.<sup>3</sup>

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about its relationship with Ukraine. Allies' positions in this debate range from giving Ukraine bilateral security guarantees preceding NATO membership, to focusing instead on how to reassure Ukraine of their continued commitment to strengthen its defence capability.<sup>2</sup>

Most other NATO Allies find themselves in between these positions: they do not want a firm commitment to Ukraine's membership, but also believe that something more concrete than a repeat of the Bucharest declaration is needed. France's President Emmanuel Macron, for example, has advocated something between the Israel-style mass supply of weapons and fully fledged NATO membership.<sup>4</sup> UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, meanwhile, has vaguely said that Allies must make sure they put in place the same level of support for Ukraine for the long term as it receives today.<sup>5</sup>

Understanding why so many Allies continue to be hesitant about Ukraine's integration into NATO requires an acknowledgement that the current circumstances are unprecedented for the Alliance. The creation of NATO and all the enlargements both before and after the Cold War aimed to consolidate the geopolitical status quo: the Alliance granted membership to countries to cement their belonging to the transatlantic West.

West Germany's accession in 1955 is often brought up as an example of how the Alliance could proceed with membership for a Ukraine without control of its entire territory, with a view to reintegration at some point in the future. The difference, however, is that the Cold War left no ambiguity about the border that should be defended in the case of Soviet aggression. Finland's accession has also been raised to argue that Ukraine too can be given NATO membership. The difference is—similarly—that Finland was already aligned with the West as a member of the EU and that Russia did not question its right to exist as a state, making accession unlikely to lead to a NATO-Russia war.

But in Ukraine, Russia has been willing to use large-scale military force to annex territory and destroy the country's statehood. Never in its history has NATO had to take a bold decision about whether to create a new geopolitical reality against a nuclear-armed adversary. While Ukraine is at war with Russia and no settlement resembling a new status quo has been reached, there will be no clarity about the territory the Alliance is to defend, and where its nuclear umbrella would apply.

NATO membership is more than a paper guarantee. Membership alone is arguably insufficient to deter Russia and might, in fact, even tempt it to test NATO's resolve (like Russia's war against Georgia in 2008 following the Bucharest declaration). In the approach to the Vilnius Summit, NATO is occupied with discussions about the size and composition of the conventional in-place forces needed to deter Russia from attacking its own territory. Accepting Ukraine as a member would likely require NATO to deploy a much bigger in-place

deterrent force on an expanded border with Russia. The additional cost would not be insurmountable, of course, but these in-place forces would have to be used to repel any future Russian re-aggression.

Since 2022, NATO Allies have increasingly been ready to discuss the feasibility of extending security guarantees to Ukraine on the common understanding (except for Hungary and perhaps Turkey) that Russian aggression stems not from 'too much' but rather from 'not enough' deterrence.<sup>6</sup> But most Allies also see a risk that moving Ukraine closer to NATO membership would move them closer to a direct armed confrontation with Russia. All depends on political will: whether foreign-policy decision makers believe the costs outstrip the benefits or vice-versa, and the domestic constraints they face in considering this trade-off.

## ALL POLITICS IS LOCAL

NATO's ability or willingness to extend defence guarantees to Ukraine depends crucially on its biggest and leading power, the US. Washington was the first to put Ukraine's prospective NATO membership on the agenda in 2008 and would be militarily indispensable if it were to become reality today. But Joe Biden ran for office in 2020 promising a more restrained foreign policy to win over voters who felt that the US had overextended its foreign commitments.<sup>7</sup>

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President Biden and the Democratic Party will continue to compete for undecided voters inclined to share the (Trumpist) perception of Allies freeriding on the American taxpayer while the US domestic economy decays. The rise of China puts additional economic and military pressure on the US not to risk a direct war with Russia. Although the US sees Russia as a challenger to the 'liberal order' it underwrites, it is hard to imagine that a US President could table Ukrainian NATO membership for ratification in the Senate any time soon.

Germany has, since the question first came up, been the most sceptical country regarding Ukraine's NATO integration. Until the full-scale invasion in 2022, it pursued Nord Stream II with Russia and pressurised Ukraine to grant the Donbas region a special status under the Minsk process. The *Zeitenwende* promises incremental steps forward in Germany's support for Ukraine. Germany has pledged a considerable financial boost for Ukraine's defence but remains wary of committing military resources to an actual combat situation, as shown by its slow decision to deliver Leopard battle tanks despite considerable Allied pressure. While it has now promised a permanent brigade-sized deployment to Lithuania, it remains hard to imagine—because of the enhanced risk of direct conflict—a German contribution to the forces in Ukraine that would be required to back a potential NATO collective defence guarantee. It is equally hard to imagine a German chancellor or the Bundestag greenlighting Ukrainian NATO membership in the foreseeable future.

The US and Germany are the most cautious of the Allies, but the defence of a new NATO border, so long and so far to the east, can hardly be achieved without their backing and active

*An explicit NATO commitment to weapons deliveries to Ukraine for as long as required offers an alternative to collective defence guarantees*

participation. Other Allies have more agnostic views of the risk of a NATO-Russia confrontation, but the fact is that they cannot agree to supply Ukraine with enough weapons to ensure the expulsion of Russian forces from its internationally recognised territory. They have not even been able to agree to a formal NATO role in the coordination or delivery of lethal assistance to Ukraine, which is instead undertaken by willing individual allies under the US-led Ramstein format.

## A DEFENCE AND DETERRENCE PARTNERSHIP

Policy analysis requires the acknowledgement of the realities of the domestic politics of the most cautious allies before jumping to recommendations about the need to swiftly

integrate Ukraine into NATO. The Alliance currently seems most united in its search for alternative options to secure Ukraine and restore stability to the European security system.

An explicit NATO commitment to weapons deliveries to Ukraine for as long as required offers an alternative to collective defence guarantees. This would signal to Russia that NATO is in the fight for the long haul and that Russia cannot outcompete Ukraine in the military-industrial domain over time. It would also be close to the position of the states inclined towards giving Ukraine a reassurance that they will provide the necessary weapons, ammunition, logistical support, and training to defend itself for the long haul—but with the important qualification that this would be a formal NATO commitment.

If formulated, for instance, as a NATO-Ukraine defence and deterrence partnership, it would put the Alliance's prestige on the line and make its support for Ukraine's defence a credibility issue.<sup>8</sup> The elements of such a partnership might include: increased deliveries of advanced and heavy weapons; the integration of the Ukrainian armed forces into NATO defence supply chains; and a commitment to ammunition production equalling or surpassing that of Russia. To strengthen Ukraine's deterrence, NATO Allies so far have focused on building its capacity for *denial* of Russia

because this has been thought to hold a lesser risk of escalation against a nuclear-armed adversary.<sup>9</sup> They may wish to preserve this principle but with the understanding that denial need not be confined to Ukrainian territory. In this case, they have the option of providing long-range capabilities such as the Army Tactical Missile System, or more generally of greenlighting Ukrainian attacks against military targets on Russian territory before these can join the battle.

For NATO, a formal defence and deterrence partnership would cement the understanding that arming Ukraine against Russia is preferable to the possibility of a NATO-Russia war, especially as weapon deliveries to Ukraine are paying off with such high dividends. For Ukraine, a NATO defence and deterrence partnership

with NATO is preferable to the idea of a security pact guaranteed by individual Allies, but with no formal NATO backing.<sup>10</sup> It would be a significant step forward for NATO to additionally assume the responsibility of turning Ukraine into a 'porcupine' that would make it unattractive for a resumption of Russian attacks in the longer term.

## WAR AS A PROCESS

The war is an evolving process, in which NATO Allies have built Ukraine's military capability step-by-step, in turn testing Russia's will and ability to continue its aggression. With no NATO consensus on the horizon about the extension of collective defence guarantees to Ukraine, Allies might instead focus on the next-best scenario: a formal NATO commitment to the supply of weapons with fewer caveats on their use. The defence and deterrence partnership should not be formulated as a substitute for eventual

membership. Further, Allies could perhaps agree to link it explicitly to the 2008 Bucharest declaration (but probably, because of the lack of consensus, not to a roadmap).

Ukraine may eventually join NATO if the cautious Allies can be convinced that this would consolidate a new geopolitical status quo, rather than bring them into brinkmanship with Russia. Expert discussions about NATO membership cannot be separated from the political realities in Allied capitals if they are not to nourish false illusions or only preach moralism. While NATO is considering dropping the requirement for Ukraine to join through the Membership Action Plan, it cannot forget what is required from a prospective Ally.<sup>11</sup> Ukraine must adopt NATO interoperability standards and reform its security sectors, pending since 2014. Such reforms could almost certainly only take place in a post-war setting.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> NATO, "[Bucharest Summit Declaration](#)," press release (2008) 049, 3 April 2008, para. 23.

<sup>2</sup> Lili Bayer, "[The West isn't ready to give Ukraine the security pledges it wants](#)," *Politico*, 8 June 2023.

<sup>3</sup> Henry Foy and Felicia Schwartz, "[US opposes offering Ukraine a road map to NATO membership](#)," *Financial Times*, 6 April 2023.

<sup>4</sup> Leila Abboud, Raphael Minder and Henry Foy, "[Emmanuel Macron backs Nato membership 'path' for Ukraine](#)," *Financial Times*, 31 May 2023.

<sup>5</sup> Cristina Gallardo, "[Ukraine's 'rightful place' is in NATO, says Rishi Sunak](#)," *Politico*, 1 June 2023.

<sup>6</sup> Bruno Tertrais, "[What security guarantees for Ukraine?](#)" Fondation pour la recherche stratégique, Note no. 14 (2023).

<sup>7</sup> Joseph R. Biden, "[Why America Must Lead Again. Rescuing U.S. Foreign Policy After Trump](#)," *Foreign Affairs*, 23 January 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Ian Brzezinski and Alexander Vershbow, "[Memo to NATO Leaders](#)," *Atlantic Council*, 2023.

<sup>9</sup> Janice Gross Stein, "[Escalation Management in Ukraine: 'Learning by Doing' in Response to the 'Threat that Leaves Something to Chance'](#)," *Texas National Security Review*, 6: 3 (2023).

<sup>10</sup> Liam Fix, "The Future Is Now: Security Guarantees for Ukraine," *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, 65: 3 (2023), 70-71.

<sup>11</sup> Alexander Ward and Paul McLeary, "[Biden 'open' to plan that eases Ukraine's path to NATO membership](#)," *Politico*, 15 June 2023.

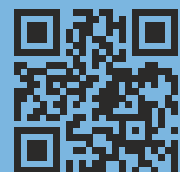
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