

BRIEF

NATO-UKRAINE: FROM
VILNIUS TO WASHINGTONWASHINGTON SUMMIT SERIES
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At the Washington Summit, NATO may grant Ukraine two unprecedented ‘deliverables’: an upgrade to the Alliance’s own mandate to allow it to coordinate the delivery of lethal aid, and a financial commitment to ensure the predictability of weapons supplies in the years to come. Furthermore, NATO may strengthen its language on Ukraine’s membership prospects. But while its geopolitical status remains unclear, expert recommendations about how to admit Ukraine into the Alliance are likely to nourish false hopes.

The Vilnius Summit in 2023 generated great disappointment in Ukraine because of the lack of NATO support against Russian aggression and because of the summit communiqué’s standoffish language regarding Ukraine’s membership prospects (“when Allies agree and conditions are met”).¹ When NATO leaders meet at the Washington Summit, they will face a growing understanding that the Alliance can no longer be seen to tend only to its own security while Ukraine continues to fight on the battlefield alone against an increasingly capable Russia. NATO’s own deterrent vis-à-vis Russia has many shortcomings to be rectified in the coming years but arguably, the more pertinent issue is to ensure Ukraine’s defence—if NATO is not to confront a stronger and emboldened Russia later.

COORDINATING LETHAL AID

The first likely deliverable in NATO’s support for Ukraine is a mandate upgrade to include the coordination of lethal aid deliveries. Since 2022, NATO has confined itself to a pre-war mandate

of providing only non-lethal aid via trust funds, and advice. Most Allies, fearing escalation with Russia, have believed that NATO should not provide lethal aid. However, growing Russian provocations against NATO itself and the brutality of its attacks against Ukraine have changed the dynamic, although certain countries (notably Hungary and Turkey) continue to caution against initiatives that give the impression of a direct NATO involvement in the war. While remaining firm that that it is not a party to the war, NATO is expected to adopt a supporting role for Ukraine’s defence efforts for the first time at the Washington Summit.²

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NATO’s mandate upgrade is widely perceived as a move by the European Allies to ‘Trump-proof’ lethal aid for Ukraine, which so far has been coordinated under the US-led Ramstein format (the Ukraine Defense Contact Group). NATO will not replace the Ramstein format but will take some coordinating responsibilities as a safeguard against the scenario that the US, in a second Trump term, would abrogate its leadership. NATO will have four roles: coordinating training assistance to match Ukrainian requirements; matching Ukrainian demands and requirements for equipment to donor offers; transferring equipment from donors to logistics hubs on NATO territory; and planning the long-term transformation of Ukraine’s armed forces.³ Coordination does not in itself guarantee a predictable supply of weapons but it carries significant symbolic value

(also vis-à-vis Russia) because the Alliance will have invested some degree of prestige in the success of Ukraine's defence.

FINANCING LETHAL AID

A second and more important deliverable for Ukraine at the Washington Summit derives from a recognition that the Allies will likely need to pool money if they are to sustain their supply of weapons for the coming years. In response to the significant delay in the US Congress in early 2024 to a new aid package for Ukraine, Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg proposed the establishment of a NATO fund worth \$100 billion over five years for the delivery of weapons. NATO is now trying to reach consensus around a commitment of €40 billion annually, which corresponds roughly to the yearly average that Allies have provided Ukraine since 2022, and of which the US would be expected to cover about half (assuming a division according to a GDP or GNI key).⁴ Although the outcome in Washington may not be a NATO fund as such, a specific financial target would create greater predictability and transparency about what Allies can provide, and give the opportunity to apply soft pressure on those who fail to meet their commitment.

It would be natural for the European Allies to commit to a growing portion of the lethal aid

Of course, agreement among heads of state and government in Washington to fund lethal aid to Ukraine does not safeguard against changing political moods in national parliaments, as was evident in the recent delay in US deliveries. Furthermore, the fact that the proposal envisages no increase compared to the time that has passed since 2022 gives some cause for concern. The €40 billion annual figure should be compared to the more than €100 billion that Russia plans to spend on defence in 2024, after it transformed into a war economy.⁵ €40 billion gives reasonable hope that Allies will supply Ukraine sufficiently to hold its defensive lines but falls far short of the approximately €115 billion annually (0.25% of NATO GDP) that the Estonian government estimated is needed to allow Ukraine to resume counteroffensives by

2025.⁶ The NATO investment aims to strengthen Ukraine's defensive capability but seemingly not to allow it to liberate the considerable territory that Russia has occupied.

Moreover, in adapting to a reduced US appetite to invest in European security, it would be natural for the European Allies to commit to a growing portion of the lethal aid. A more equitable responsibility sharing, and thus a more 'Trump-proof' NATO, requires the European Allies to provide the bulk of the conventional military transfer and to align their defence industry with that of Ukraine.

MEMBERSHIP LANGUAGE

A third possible deliverable at the Washington Summit is the strengthening of NATO's language regarding membership. Ukraine might achieve stronger wording, such as a stressing of the irreversibility of its membership prospects instead of (the usual) mere repetition of the language of the 2008 Bucharest Summit, which stated that Ukraine "will become" a member.⁷ Ukraine may take some encouragement from such a linguistic upgrade, but in practical terms it would amount to a cosmetic change that does not bring it closer to the NATO defence guarantees it seeks in its existential struggle against Russia.

In fact, little has changed since the Vilnius Summit in the positions of key Allies regarding Ukraine's accession to NATO. US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken and US Ambassador to NATO Julianne Smith have called NATO's increased support for Ukraine a "bridge" to its eventual membership, but have not made clear what that might mean in practical terms.⁸ President Biden, meanwhile, recently reiterated that he does not support the "NATOization" of Ukraine and that the focus should be on supplying the weapons necessary to deny Russian aggression.⁹ Germany, the biggest European contributor of military assistance, remains firm that the Russia-Ukraine war should not spiral into a NATO-Russia war. Other weighty countries such as France and the UK say they support Ukrainian NATO membership in principle but remain vague about their practical commitment. The Baltic states and Poland seem to be the only Allies that support granting concrete steps toward

membership, but they are too small a faction within the Alliance to tip the balance.

ADVOCACY AND ILLUSIONS

This political reality contrasts with the pro-Ukraine advocacy that recommends NATO to pledge a speedy Ukrainian accession at the Washington Summit. The political consultancy firm Rasmussen Global, for example, has proposed an invitation with specific conditions that Ukraine would have to meet to achieve NATO membership no later than July 2028.¹⁰ A group of national security leaders affiliated with the Atlantic Council has asserted that the summit should serve as a platform to boldly advance Ukraine's NATO integration, starting with an invitation to begin accession talks, while leaving open the timing of a subsequent decision about its admission.¹¹ Developing the speculations about a bridge to membership, Ian Brzezinski has proposed three steps: (1) acknowledge that Ukraine meets the requirement for membership; (2) invite Ukraine to assign civilian and military personnel to take up positions in the NATO bureaucracy and command structure; and (3) grant Ukraine an observer seat at the North Atlantic Council.¹²

New ideas may again nourish false hopes about NATO's willingness to guarantee Ukraine's security

The pro-Ukraine advocacy may be credited for its role in persuading NATO to commit long-term lethal support after more than two years' aversion. Conversely, new ideas that try to circumvent the fact that Allies remain unwilling to die for Ukraine may again nourish false hopes about NATO's willingness to guarantee the country's security. The fact that Allies remain unready to take a defensive role against Russian air attacks against Ukraine (as highlighted in recent discussions about whether NATO Allies should help Ukraine's defence against Russia after Israel's partners helped it to defeat Iran's missile and drone attack) shows how unrealistic it is to expect NATO to take steps closer to Ukraine's membership while the country is at war.

President Macron's intention to build a coalition of nations willing to send troops to Ukraine for training is a step forward, but so far, no Ally is

ready to propose a combat role for their forces. It is also worth noting the (extreme) caution that NATO Allies have shown about allowing Ukraine to use their weapons against targets on Russian territory, hardly an indication that NATO is willing to go to the brink over Ukraine or that Allies are willing to put their own armed forces at risk in the country. This reality cannot be denied if the objective is to offer policy recommendations with realistic prospects of implementation.

CONCLUSION

The history of NATO enlargement during and after the Cold War suggests that the Alliance admits new members only to consolidate existing geopolitical orders, not to actively create new ones. NATO recently admitted Sweden and Finland to consolidate their belonging to the western community, a situation currently not comparable to Ukraine.¹³ Ukraine may be digestible to the alliance in the case of a peace agreement with Russia with clearly demarcated (new) borders. However, this is not the only imaginable scenario that could reassure NATO of geopolitical stability. A solid armistice similar to the North-South Korea one would give Ukraine a status approximate to the conditions under which West Germany became a NATO member in 1955—a clear border with no doubt about what would constitute a transgression of its territory and thus trigger Article 5. Of course, nothing guarantees that NATO will have the courage to admit Ukraine even in improved geopolitical circumstances.

The most accurate indicator of how strong an interest NATO Allies really take in guaranteeing Ukraine's security (despite their rhetoric) is perhaps the level of their commitment to military support. Assuring the continuation of Ukraine's defence is vital to NATO's own security. Meanwhile, the optics of the Alliance standing idly by as Russia continues its war of aggression unabated are increasingly negative; this is a key difference between the contexts for the Vilnius and Washington Summits.

It is telling, then, for the stakes the Allies perceive in Ukraine, that they remain unwilling to make the (after all) moderate investment

required to outcompete Russia militarily on the battlefield. At home, they have not started in earnest to rearm to match Russia. More urgently, NATO's proposed financial package will not allow Ukraine to resume the offensives required to reach its military objectives. If the Allies are not ready to fully supply Ukraine with the weaponry it needs today, it is hard to see

their support and solidarity as a genuine commitment to its NATO membership tomorrow.

ENDNOTES

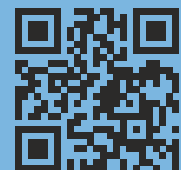
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