

How to win the war and join NATO? The key role of Ukraine's partnership with the Alliance

Robert Pszczel

Ukraine's defensive war is a struggle for high stakes: the existence of the Ukrainian state and the security of the entire Western world. The upcoming NATO summit in Washington, like the previous one in Vilnius, will not bring any breakthroughs regarding how quickly Ukraine joins the Alliance, or whether Kyiv receives a formal invitation. However, NATO is ready to increase its support for Ukraine significantly. The assistance package which has been prepared may prove to be an added value binding Ukraine more closely with the Alliance. This will create an opportunity for two goals to be achieved simultaneously: strategically strengthening Ukraine's military potential in its war against Russia, and preparing it for the requirements of future membership.

The most significant change to be approved at the July summit is NATO's taking over of the long-term coordination of the programme for training Ukrainian soldiers and the delivery of equipment & ammunition to Kyiv. The implementation of the expected aid package will require the full engagement of both NATO and Ukraine. The experiences of cooperation that began back in 1991 may prove very useful. Each stage of this partnership had its own specifics, and each yielded important lessons that are worth drawing upon today.

Difficult beginnings

The rapid establishment of relations with NATO after Ukraine declared independence in 1991 was part of a broader effort by the young state to gain recognition of its sovereignty. Kyiv sought to be active in the UN and the OSCE. In December 1991, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, it joined the North Atlantic Cooperation Council, the cooperation forum offered by the Alliance to former Warsaw Pact countries, and then became the first country from the former Soviet republics to join the Partnership for Peace (PfP) cooperation programme in 1994.

These steps were part of the so-called multi-vector policy of Ukraine at the time, aiming for close ties with Western institutions while trying to maintain good relations with the Russian Federation. One reason for this approach was the intensive contacts between the political, economic, and military elites of both countries.



For many allies (including the US), Ukraine was initially quite an exotic country when viewed through the lens of relations with Russia, which were treated as a priority. NATO expected Kyiv not to create any problems, and to strive to develop friendly relations with its neighbours. One notable illustration of this attitude was a 1995 speech given in Washington by the then NATO Secretary General Willy Claes. Although largely dedicated to relations with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, Ukraine was not mentioned by name even once.¹

At that time, NATO treated the issue of the security of nuclear warheads on the territory of the former USSR as very important, hence the enormous pressure on

” The comprehensive political dialogue with NATO in the framework of the Commission proved very useful for Ukraine, which was able to use it to convince the allies of its arguments.

Ukraine (along with Belarus and Kazakhstan) to renounce the stockpiles of these weapons they had inherited from the USSR. It was a significant arsenal, second only to the US and Russia. The pressure from the Alliance was strong; the further development of relations was made conditional on Ukraine's consent.

Ukraine had no technical capabilities for the operational use of nuclear warheads anyway (for example, it did not have the relevant access codes), and its bargaining position was very weak. Ukraine's attempts to negotiate – while it was struggling for a legal settlement of its borders with Russia and was already in dispute over the division of the Black Sea Fleet – resulted in the signing of the so-called Budapest Memorandum in 1994. Under this declaration, which was not legally binding, Kyiv received assurances from three nuclear states (Russia, the United Kingdom, and the US, later joined by China and France) that its sovereignty and the inviolability of its borders would be respected. As we know, these assurances did not prevent Putin's Moscow from aggression, although suggestions today that Kyiv could have retained its nuclear arsenal in the early 1990s indicate a lack of realism.

Ukraine as a privileged partner: dialogue and cooperation

For many years, successive Ukrainian governments sought to obtain special status in their relations with NATO. In 1997 they succeeded, with the signature of the Charter on a Distinctive Partnership² as a political counterbalance to the NATO–Russia Founding Act, and the invitation of three countries from the Central & Eastern European region to join NATO. The NATO–Ukraine Commission was established to deepen political dialogue and cooperation with NATO in areas such as defence reform, civil defence, democratic standards, planning, and budgeting. The NATO Information and Documentation Center was opened in Kyiv, followed by the NATO Liaison Office, currently operating under the single banner of the NATO Representation to Ukraine.

The comprehensive political dialogue with NATO in the framework of the Commission proved very useful for Ukraine, which was able to use it to convince the allies of its arguments, such as its successive disputes with Russia: on the adaptation of the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (host-nation consent for the stationing of foreign troops), the status of the base in Sevastopol, and consultations on Russian energy blackmail. After the annexation of Crimea and the start of the invasion in the Donbas in 2014, Kyiv was already able to count on NATO's political and practical support in an open conflict with Moscow, and lobbied for the suspension of cooperation within the NATO-Russia Council (NRC). The Commission's forum also served as a platform to present its views to all the allies

¹ NATO, 'Speech By Nato Secretary General Willy Claes To The National Press Club Washington D.C.', NATO, 4 October 1995, nato.int.

² NATO, 'Charter on a Distinctive Partnership between the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and Ukraine', 7 July 1997, nato.int.

on the Normandy process. Today, this political role is being played by the NATO–Ukraine Council, which replaced the Commission in 2023. A significant difference is that one country can no longer block the convening of Council meetings (as Hungary previously did).

Kyiv came to understand that Ukraine had to earn its reputation as a useful and reliable NATO partner. This pushed it to make the maximum efforts to demonstrate its activism in practical coopera-

” The lack of deep reforms had negative consequences for Ukraine’s security. This was confirmed in 2014 when the armed forces and the entire security apparatus proved unprepared for the Russian operation in Crimea and (initially) in the Donbas.

tion. Initially, there was even an element of competition with Russia as a partner for NATO. To this end, political and working visits were multiplied, and Ukrainian representatives volunteered for all possible meetings and projects (including as diplomats, military personnel, experts and scientists). Ukraine willingly offered its training grounds for training and military exercises within the PfP framework. From that period, for example, dates the presence of military experts in Yavoriv near Lviv, where the International Peacekeeping and Security Center operated until the missile attack on 12 March 2022. The most noticeable and appreciated contribution to the partnership with NATO was Ukraine’s participation in almost all the Alliance’s operations and missions, starting with missions in the Balkans (SFOR, KFOR) and then in Afghanistan and maritime counter-terrorism operations.

For many years, Ukraine’s ambitions for cooperation with the Alliance were hampered by staff shortages and language skill issues, as well as unfamiliarity with NATO procedures and customs. In this regard Poland has been a strong supporter of Ukraine from the beginning. One example was the creation of the Polish-Ukrainian Peacekeeping Battalion (POLUKRBAT) formed in 1998 (it existed until 2010), whose soldiers formed a joint contingent in KFOR in Kosovo and then participated in the ISAF mission. 2014 saw the creation of the Lithuanian-Polish-Ukrainian Brigade, with its headquarters in Lublin, which participates in NATO field and staff exercises.

Generally, Poland has been the strongest advocate for opening NATO to Ukraine since the beginning of the development of Ukraine’s relations with NATO, alongside Canada and, after their accession, the Baltic states. POLUKRBAT was the only bilateral initiative mentioned in the 1997 Charter as deserving NATO support.

Ukraine also needed a helping hand from NATO due to its difficult internal situation, which was threatening to undermine the allies’ trust. The political scene was highly polarised and was shaken by various scandals (such as the murder of the investigative journalist Georgiy Gongadze), and constitutional disputes were frequent. There were attempts to foment separatism in Crimea; corruption persisted; and one-third of parliamentarians constantly voiced opposition to cooperation with NATO. In 2002, the reputation of the government was so toxic (President Kuchma was accused of allowing the violation of the international arms embargo to Iraq) that during the NATO summit in Prague the alphabetical order of delegations was changed (from English to French) just so Kuchma would not have to sit next to the US President.

Ukraine’s aspirations to membership against the background of problems implementing the partnership

The idea of NATO membership appeared in discussions in Ukraine 20 years ago, but did not enjoy significant support in the country’s divided society. Nonetheless, it became the official goal of state policy after the Orange Revolution and the election of Viktor Yushchenko as president of Ukraine in 2005. Paradoxically, the 2008 NATO summit decision in Bucharest about the Alliance’s political will to admit Ukraine (without setting a date) in some respects weakened Kyiv’s enthusiasm for the arduous

work of modernisation and reforms. Ukrainians focused on lobbying for the granting of Membership Action Plan (MAP) status, a necessary condition for progress towards membership. In the light of the clear lack of consensus within NATO, Kyiv's loud demands only irritated most of the allies, making it harder for Ukraine's supporters. Thus, the abandonment of membership aspirations after Viktor Yanukovych came to power in 2010 was even received with some relief in various NATO countries.

The lack of deep reforms had negative consequences for Ukraine's security. This was confirmed in 2014 when the armed forces and the entire security apparatus proved unprepared for the Russian operation in Crimea and (initially) in the Donbas.³ Participation in NATO cooperation projects – aimed at raising standards in areas such as interoperability, reform of the security sector, modernisation of armaments and military equipment, and of the defence industry, improving the quality of the justice system, budget transparency, and fighting corruption – were only to a small extent translated into real internal changes within Ukraine.⁴

Another lesson from the partnership stage up to 2014 was the apparent lack of understanding of the importance of feedback which linked the debate within

” **The year 2014 was a turning point for NATO's relations with Kyiv. After the annexation of Crimea, NATO not only sided with Ukraine politically but decided to provide concrete assistance.**

NATO with the member states' assessment of the partner. For example, in Kyiv, the significance of the implementation reports submitted by Ukraine under the Annual National Programmes (with detailed tasks jointly agreed upon by Brussels and Kyiv) was somewhat underestimated, even though NATO attached great importance to this issue, and the reports themselves are read with close attention in all the allied capitals.

NATO's cooperation offer for Ukraine under the special partnership expanded both in content and form. Initially, the allies proposed a set of cooperation topics similar to those available to other partners but with the addition of special dialogue formats. These included the immediate consultation procedure in the event of a crisis, which was used for example in 2018 during the Russian blockade of the Kerch Strait, and the establishment of separate working structures: especially valuable were the Joint Working Group on Defence Reform (JWGDR) and the parallel one on Defence Technical Cooperation (JWGDTCC). The area of cooperation was also systematically expanded due to the 2008 decisions, which gave Ukraine the status of an aspirant country with guaranteed assistance from NATO in meeting the Alliance's standards.⁵ In Brussels, the suspension of the membership application between 2010–14 was not contested. The integration path was resumed after a change of policy by Kyiv. After the Ukrainian parliament adopted a law defining membership as Ukraine's strategic goal in 2017, and then made the necessary amendments to the Constitution in 2019, this process was accelerated.

Numerous tangible benefits resulted from the programmes helping Ukraine reform its educational system and security apparatus structures, including control mechanisms. This was a matter of great importance, considering the scale of the challenge: the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) alone numbered about 30,000 people in 2014. The cooperation in the military sphere also proved invaluable; thousands of Ukrainian officers acquired new skills and improved their qualifications through

³ The report for the NATO Parliamentary Assembly from 2019 suggested that in 2014 Ukraine was only able to field one combat-ready brigade out of 150,000 armed forces, while the Russian forces' advances in the Donbas were mainly stopped by units of Ukrainian volunteers. See J. Cordy, 'Ukraine: Five Years After the Revolution of Dignity', page 9, 13 October 2019, nato-pa.int.

⁴ The gap between declarations and practical implementation of partnership goals was well described by a former head of the NATO Liaison Office in Kyiv. For more see J. Greene, 'NATO-Ukraine Distinctive Partnership turns twenty: lessons to take forward', NATO Review, 4 July 2017, nato.int.

⁵ 'Relations with Ukraine', 10 May 2024, nato.int.

participation in missions, exercises, and various cooperation projects. For illustration, the current Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, Gen. Oleksandr Syrski, spent many months in NATO Headquarters in 2013, and Gen. Oleksandr Pavliuk, who commanded the defence of Kyiv in the spring of 2022, was the commander of the Ukrainian contingent in KFOR.

An important example of the practical implementation of the high democratic standards promoted by the Alliance was the long-term effort encouraging Ukraine to ensure civilian control over the armed forces and provide a solid education for the military in respecting democratic institutions. This paid dividends during the Orange Revolution in 2004 when individual commanders with experience in the Partnership for Peace programme refused to suppress the civil protests against the rigged elections. Also in 2014, during the Revolution of Dignity, the armed forces remained politically neutral and loyal to constitutional principles.

NATO's historic decisions in 2014 and their consequences today

The year 2014 was a turning point for NATO's relations with Kyiv. After the annexation of Crimea, NATO not only sided with Ukraine politically but decided to provide concrete assistance. The most important priorities were defined as the urgent transformation of the armed forces to withstand Russian aggression, raising the level of interoperability with NATO, and allowing Ukraine to participate in more NATO exercises. Importantly, it was agreed that this assistance would be provided both collectively and by individual allies.⁶

The allies started an intensive training programme for Ukrainian armed forces in Ukraine and beyond, which increased the availability of combat-ready units manifold by 2022. Special forces were trained practically from scratch. In 2016 the Comprehensive Assistance Package (CAP) for Ukraine was initiated. This laid the framework for the implementation of many modernisation projects, reinforced by on-site advice provided by the NATO Representation in Kyiv, among others. Several Trust Funds (funded through voluntary contributions) were established, focusing on areas where NATO assistance provided the greatest added value. These include modernising the command-and-control system (C2), medical rehabilitation, and professional training for civilians working for the military. After 2014 NATO and the allies intensively helped strengthen Ukraine's defence capabilities, especially in cybersecurity, critical infrastructure protection, and expanding Ukraine's access to intelligence. Without this assistance, Ukraine might not have withstood the Russian attack in February 2022.

The aid formula described above is still in force. Although NATO refused to involve itself directly in military aid until recently, the scope of support is consistently

” However, NATO, as the keystone of the West's collective defence, has the most to offer (and to lose) in this matter.

expanding to new areas and categories. After the 2022 invasion NATO began organising the supply of non-lethal equipment and other *matériel*. Various NATO structures are involved in organising assistance to Ukraine, collecting funds, needs analysis, and concluding contracts on behalf of the participants of a given project within the CAP Fund. The list of items being provided is long and significant, including food rations, fuel, demining equipment, portable bridges, or drone countermeasures. The 2023 Vilnius Summit transformed the CAP programme into a long-term project with stronger financial backing. Joint arms procurement through NATO agencies helps allies replenish their stocks, which they can use to support Kyiv.⁷

⁶ A.F. Rasmussen, 'A strong NATO in a changed world', 21 March 2014, nato.int.

⁷ 'NATO concludes contracts for another \$1.2 billion in artillery ammunition', 23 January 2024, nato.int.

NATO's role in supporting Ukraine

NATO's role in supporting Ukraine's self-defence during the ongoing war is special. Of course, the burden of assistance rests primarily on individual states (NATO and its partner countries). They are the ones resourcing funds and equipment, and deciding on how to deploy their military and civilian personnel to train Ukrainians. Other organisations perform exceptional work in supporting Kyiv on various levels: it suffices to mention the fundamental importance of various funds and the military training mission under the EU banner and the perspective of EU membership for Ukraine, or the role of the G7 in coordinating sanctions and effectively appealing for bilateral security cooperation agreements with Ukraine. However, NATO, as the keystone of the West's collective defence, has the most to offer (and to lose) in this matter.

The chances for lasting peace and reconstruction will be decided on the battlefield, and equipping Ukraine with the necessary means and military capabilities is a funda-

” The Alliance intends to take over the tasks of planning and implementing arms and ammunition deliveries developed within the framework of the US-led Ukraine Defense Contact Group.

mental precondition for them. Potentially, NATO has the best instruments, knowledge and structures, as well as the unique ability to combine the efforts of the US, Canada, and European members. So far, these assets have not been utilised for political reasons. The US and many European countries have applied a very broad interpretation of the existing decision not to involve NATO directly in operational engagements, in order to avoid open conflict with Russia. Fear of escalation has blocked the delivery of systems that Kyiv could use to strike targets on Russian territory. Although the allies are currently providing almost 100% of Ukraine's military assistance, NATO as an organisation has been excluded from its coordination.

Today, Ukraine is defending NATO's eastern flank from Russia, and tying up and exhausting Russia's offensive potential. If it loses, it will lose part of its territory and possibly its sovereignty; all the burdens and risks borne by allies in connection with assistance to Ukraine will then seem insignificant compared to the real threat of Russian aggression against a NATO country. Moreover, Russia would then control all of Ukraine's resources. The entire intricate strategy of strengthening Ukraine without the direct combat involvement of NATO in its defence would collapse.⁸

Given the above-mentioned illusions of security created by the Budapest Memorandum, it is worth exercising caution when evaluating the merits of the current security agreements initiated by the G7 which will be signed this year between Ukraine and individual allies (recently with the US⁹). These can certainly help mobilise assistance in individual capitals and add value in the short term (especially as they will only be implemented with guaranteed funding until the end of this year),¹⁰ but they cannot match the significance of long-term support from NATO as a whole.

The new plan for the NATO summit in Washington – and what then?

The growing understanding of the need to streamline the process of supporting Ukraine's defence effort has positively influenced the allies' discussions in recent months, and allowed for the shape of NATO's new role in this process to crystallise. After the NATO defence ministers' meeting on 13–14 June this

⁸ An excellent set of arguments can be found in P. Ames, 'Ukraine: cost of inaction – What's at stake for our economies, politics and democracies', Friends of Europe, 28 May 2024, friendsofeurope.org.

⁹ 'Bilateral security agreement between Ukraine and the United States of America', 13 June 2024, president.gov.ua.

¹⁰ J. Gotkowska, K. Nieczypor, J. Graca, 'The West and Ukraine: agreements on security cooperation', OSW, 19 January 2024, osw.waw.pl; W. Lorenz, 'Bilateral security agreements with Ukraine. Present opportunities and challenges', PISM, 26 February 2024, pism.pl.

year, most elements of this support plan (called NATO Security Assistance and Training for Ukraine), which is to be approved at the NATO summit in Washington, are already known.

The Alliance intends to take over the tasks of planning and implementing arms and ammunition deliveries developed within the framework of the US-led Ukraine Defense Contact Group (the so-called Ramstein Group). So far these activities have been coordinated by the Americans through the Security Assistance Group-Ukraine (SAG-U), which is subordinate to the US Army Europe Command in Wiesbaden.¹¹ The work has been overseen by Gen. Christopher G. Cavoli as commander of US forces in Europe, not as Supreme Allied Commander-Europe (SACEUR). After the NATO summit in Washington, the direct leadership of SAG-U will pass to a three-star NATO general, and the group is to be transformed into a NATO command to which logistical elements on the eastern flank (the most important of which is today the logistics hub in Rzeszów, Poland) will be subordinated. Subordination to NATO must also mean taking responsibility for the protection of these hubs and the financing of all the relevant costs. The new action plan will also include NATO logistics tasks concerning the coordination of transport, and even the repair of delivered equipment.

Another element of NATO's new support role for Ukraine will be the work of the Joint NATO-Ukraine Training and Education Analysis Center based in Bydgoszcz, Poland. This is another area where the exchange of experiences and lessons from the battlefield will take place. In this field Ukraine has much to share. Its innovative use of its own and received weaponry, for example, has significantly limited the operational capabilities of the Russian Black Sea Fleet, and demonstrated the ability to use unmanned vehicles effectively to destroy critical infrastructure deep within Russia, and to destroy S-300 air defence systems despite the glaring disparity of its forces compared to Russia's potential, which has only partially been offset by Western aid.

At the time of writing, it has not been possible to agree on a separate financial support plan for Ukraine's military assistance, which is being promoted by the Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg. The allies are supposed to declare readiness to allocate US\$40 billion annually for such assistance (based on a cost-sharing scale according to GDP), which would mean the US committing to providing half of this amount. The details of such a declaration (for which the members would have to take accountability within NATO) are still being contested, and Hungary has already announced that it will not participate in the fund with either money or personnel. However, the chances for finalising such a financial declaration – even in a less ambitious form – are still high.

The adoption of this decision package will be the best news from the summit for Kyiv. It will cross another Rubicon of NATO's commitment to Ukraine's security. It will help address the problem of the overproliferation of various initiatives, streamline the process of matching Ukraine's needs and available resources, and make it more transparent. Politically and institutionally, it will bind NATO to Ukraine in the long run, facilitating the task for those members who need to convince others to start the process of Ukraine's accession.

This is particularly important as recent statements from President Biden¹² have made it clear that there is no chance of accelerating the decision to invite Ukraine to NATO, let alone setting a timeframe for the path to membership at the summit. Before the end of the war, Washington – and other capitals led by Berlin – will prefer to offer long-term assistance as being sufficient for the needs of the situation and less risky for the interests of the organisation. The actions currently being undertaken,

¹¹ US Army Europe and Africa, 'US Department of Defense establishes Security Assistance Group-Ukraine in Wiesbaden', 16 November 2022, europeafrica.army.mil.

¹² 'President Joe Biden 2024 TIME Interview Transcript', Time, 5 June 2024, [time.com](https://www.time.com).

if implemented well by the allies and Ukraine itself, will not only help to conduct the war effectively now, but could also serve as a catalyst in a quest for Ukraine's future membership in NATO.

A move to involve NATO directly in operational actions against Russia, especially if it were to be forced by providing Ukraine with Article 5 guarantees before the end of the war, could not count on consensus within NATO. Therefore, although the new mandate will not be a panacea for all problems, there is no better alternative to it at present. NATO is not ready to go to war with Russia, but it is ready to use its assets as an organisation to improve the effectiveness and coordination of existing national programmes and those implemented under the banner of other institutions. Utilising all the available instruments of assistance within the current partnership formula will be the most realistic path to success.