



## NATO Vilnius Summit Focused on Ukraine, but Still No Invitation

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Ukraine was not invited to join NATO at the Alliance's most recent summit, which was supposed to guarantee its accession to the Alliance after the end of the war with Russia. However, it can count on bilateral long-term security commitments from the G7 countries. NATO, for its part, has taken decisions to ensure long-term practical support for Ukraine and to increase its chances for membership. The main challenge for Ukraine will be to convince the Biden administration that NATO enlargement is less risky and less costly than bilateral security commitments.

During the meeting of NATO leaders in Vilnius on 11-12 July, the Alliance adopted a package of support for Ukraine that consists of three elements. The first is the mechanism of long-term aid, which is intended, among other things, to facilitate the adaptation of the Ukrainian armed forces to the standards of the Alliance. The second is the creation of the NATO-Ukraine Council, which grants Ukraine a special status among the Alliance's partners and ensures the possibility of regular consultations. The third is a political declaration on Ukraine's future NATO membership. The Alliance stated that Ukraine does not need a Membership Action Plan (MAP), a mechanism to facilitate reforms necessary to receive a formal invitation to join NATO. At the same time, he stipulated that Ukraine still has to carry out democratic and security sector reforms, and that the invitation to join the Alliance will be possible when the member states agree to it and the necessary conditions are met. Since Ukraine has no chance for security guarantees within NATO, the G7 countries have announced long-term defence support on a bilateral basis.

**Controversies of an Invitation for Ukraine.** Ukraine decided to use the NATO summit to put pressure on the Alliance about an invitation to join NATO, although the chances of such a decision were slim. Reaching a compromise turned out to be a serious challenge. To avoid an open dispute at the summit, the Alliance agreed on a new declaration at the

last minute without consulting the Ukrainian president who had been invited to the summit.

Dropping the MAP is primarily of political importance. Ukraine obtains a similar status to Sweden and Finland, which were admitted to NATO without this programme. The number of formal decisions that require consensus within NATO before issuing an official invitation to a candidate is reduced. The adoption of such a declaration is intended to symbolically bridge the divisions of the Bucharest summit in 2008, when some countries, especially Germany and France, did not want to grant Ukraine the MAP, fearing provoking Russia. Although the Alliance then assured that Ukraine would become a member, there was no consensus in either Ukraine or NATO on proceeding with accession in the foreseeable future.

The Russian aggression against Ukraine has created a new political situation. With 90% of Ukrainian citizens wanting their country to join NATO, the attitude of some NATO countries to Ukraine's membership, such as France and Italy, has also changed. According to the Ukrainian authorities, about 20 out of 31 members of the Alliance are ready to support its membership. However, the Biden administration did not make a strategic decision on this matter, which is necessary to convince Congress and sceptical allies in NATO. Germany, which is perceived by the current U.S. administration as an indispensable ally of the U.S. in Europe, is also cautious about such prospects.

The agreed declaration does not meet the expectations of the Ukrainian authorities, which fear that the issue of membership will be the subject of negotiations between the Western powers and Russia to end the war. Inviting Ukraine to NATO, even without specifying when its admission could take place, was supposed to reduce the risk of such a scenario. However, some countries pointed out that the creation of mechanisms that would put Ukraine on the path to membership was too risky. In their opinion, it could force the Alliance to accept Ukraine before the end of the war, leading to a direct confrontation between Russia and NATO. There were also arguments that this could induce Russia to prolong the conflict, making it difficult to end the war through negotiations.

**New Support Mechanisms for Ukraine.** Allies within NATO and on a bilateral basis have taken decisions to strengthen the ability to defend Ukraine and deter Russia. The G7 countries announced the start of negotiations with Ukraine on bilateral security assurances, which assume long-term military support and the possibility of its increase in the event of renewed Russian aggression. The priority is to strengthen the Ukrainian air defence systems, artillery and long-range fires capabilities, armoured vehicles and combat aviation. Ukraine could also count on intelligence support and special consultation mechanisms in the event of another attack. According to the British prime minister, such promises of assistance are not meant to be an alternative to NATO membership.

NATO has also created new instruments that are not only to strengthen Ukraine's security but can facilitate its reforms on the road to membership. The NATO-Ukraine Council provides the opportunity for permanent and regular consultations in which Ukraine will participate on the same terms as the members of the Alliance. A meeting of the Council may be convened by the Secretary General of NATO or any member state. This will make it more difficult for Hungary to block Ukraine's political and practical cooperation with NATO. Convening the Council in the event of a sudden threat to Ukraine will facilitate a faster, coordinated, and more decisive reaction of NATO countries. The Council will provide Ukraine with greater opportunities to exert political influence on new forms of cooperation with the Alliance as well as pressure on its admission to NATO.

Due to concerns about drawing the Alliance into conflict with Russia, strengthening Ukraine's defence capabilities through NATO will remain limited to supporting reforms and sending uniforms, fuel, food rations, and medical aid. Supplies of equipment and armaments will continue to be provided on a bilateral basis and coordinated within the U.S.-led Contact Group for the Defence of Ukraine (Ramstein format), which brings together about 50 countries. Some of the allies announced the transfer of new types of weapons during the summit. For example, France will provide long-range SCALP

missiles, and Germany another battery of the Patriot system. A coalition of 11 countries was also formed to prepare Ukrainian pilots for the use of F16 aircraft. Together with the earlier decision of the U.S. to support Ukraine with cluster munitions, which can be more powerful than ordinary shells, may make it easier for Ukraine to conduct a counter-offensive. The prospect of delivering combat aircraft may also be a kind of pressure on Russia to enter into negotiations.

**Conclusions and Recommendations.** Demonstrating readiness and creating mechanisms to support Ukraine in the long term is intended to convince Russia that turning the conflict into a war of attrition, which will undermine Western resolve, will not pay off. However, NATO and G7 member states have problems with increasing the production of equipment and armaments, which may weaken the credibility of such measures. The Russian aggression against Ukraine has also shown that Russia is striving to completely subjugate Ukraine and treats the lack of consensus on NATO enlargement as a weakness and an incentive for military aggression. The lack of decisions clearly indicating readiness to admit Ukraine to NATO even after the end of the war may be considered by Russia as evidence of the effectiveness of its threats, including nuclear ones, against the Alliance. Bilateral promises of assistance to Ukraine that do not include the possibility of sending troops creates the risk that Russia will try to test them in order to undermine the credibility of the United States and, consequently, weaken NATO. Such commitments may also be insufficient to provide Ukraine with the necessary sense of security, to convince millions of refugees to return, private companies to invest in Ukraine's reconstruction and to bring it to the EU.

The main challenge for Ukraine and countries supporting its membership, such as Poland, will be to convince decision-makers in the U.S. and Germany to make a strategic decision on NATO enlargement. The Biden administration may avoid a politically difficult decision to admit Ukraine by pointing to a lack of consensus among European allies. Germany, on the other hand, may avoid such a decision by pointing to a lack of leadership from the U.S. To make the convincing case it should be argued that until Russia changes its strategic goals and socio-political system, its goal will remain to subjugate Ukraine or destroy its statehood. In such a situation, bilateral promises of assistance will be much more costly and risky than covering it with full NATO security guarantees, which effectively deter Russia. At the same time, Ukraine should use the new mechanisms within NATO and on a bilateral basis to carry out the necessary reforms to increase the chances of clarifying the U.S. position before the NATO summit in Washington in 2024. This will be important due to the U.S. presidential election in November 2024 and the possibility of a victory of the candidate from the Republican Party, within which reluctance to help Ukraine is growing.