

Ukraine Strategic Futures

This memorandum represents the outcome of the deliberations of a group of some twenty European (British, Estonian, Finnish, French, German, Norwegian, Polish, Swedish, Ukrainian) and American experts in June of this year.

We examined three strategic futures for Ukraine and the European security, exploring in depth the pros and cons of each and concluded that NATO membership is by far the most reliable, least risky and the most cost-efficient outcome for both Ukraine and the West. Alternative options, that is the “fortress Ukraine” and “Ukraine with assurances”, pose risks that are, in the medium to long-term, unacceptably high.

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Preliminary observations.

Russia's consistent and long-term strategic aim is to bring back its global power status, reconstitute its empire and create a security order built on spheres of influence. Increasingly, it appears to aim as well at the elimination of Ukraine as an independent state. The essence of these aims may be found in the ultimatum issued by Russia to the United States and NATO in December 2021, effectively demanding the renunciation of NATO's open-door policy, the withdrawal of Allied military structures from Central and Eastern Europe, as well as the withdrawal of U.S. nuclear arsenal from Europe. Subsequent statements have amplified and extended these objectives. This would be tantamount to creating a zone of insecurity in Central and Eastern Europe to the permanent disadvantage of NATO and the liberal democracies.

Russia will remain a revisionist state for the foreseeable future, yet its imperial self-conception is that of Russian elites at large, and not just Vladimir Putin. Aggression against Ukraine has been a natural outcome of Russia's strategic aim and the nature of its political regime. Consequently, the Russian threat is structural and systemic. We assess that Russia will continue to attempt to retain Ukrainian territory, constrain Ukrainian sovereignty, and, at a moment convenient to itself, resume conflict, even after Putin passes from the scene. Any termination of hostilities will only likely result from a temporary lack of Russian capabilities or for tactical reasons. It would not mean Russia has abandoned its maximalist goal of subjugating Ukraine.

Therefore, Ukraine's security must be predicated on the serious possibility of renewed hostilities with Russia, with all its consequences for security of transatlantic area. It is in this context that the guiding question of our deliberations has been how to manage living alongside an aggressive and antagonistic Russia and doing so for years and probably decades to come. All that led us to focus our deliberations on which option would most likely deter a renewed Russian attack on Ukraine and the West and provide the highest possible level of stability both for Ukraine and the transatlantic area

Option #1: Fortress Ukraine, or "The Israeli Model".

The United States and key allies could commit to supplying Ukraine with equipment and arms at, say, \$20 billion a year for ten years (half from the US, half from other countries). The \$200 billion sum would be double what Israel received in the four decades after the Camp David Accords. Supply would include combat aircraft and long-range missiles, and the allies would also agree to technology transfer and support to expand Ukraine's defence industry.

With such aid, Ukraine could maintain a standing force of nearly half a million, which could be doubled during war. The strengthening of defense potential would be reinforced by Ukraine's move to EU membership and economic support from NATO, EU and G7 countries, and frozen Russian funds.

Option #1: Pros. This policy would not require consensus in NATO and would avoid a divisive debate about Ukrainian into accession to the Alliance. Therefore, it presents itself as a natural follow-on to the existing policy of supplying arms to Ukraine. It would easily elicit bipartisan support in the United States, since it would not entail a direct military commitment. At the same time, it would avoid provoking Russian opposition on the grounds of NATO enlargement. Ukraine would have robust air and missile defenses, as well as long range strike systems that would make a future Russian attack more costly and riskier. This level of aid might also create sufficient security to encourage private investors to put money into Ukraine for the country's reconstruction.

Option #1: Cons. This course of action would not substantially reduce the risk of renewed Russian attack. Systemic change in Russia is, unfortunately, unlikely and cannot in any case be counted on as an element of Ukraine's security strategy. Moreover, Russia will view a substantial military buildup in Ukraine as a threat, and it will continue to attempt to destabilize Ukraine and delay its integration into

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the EU, which it will also oppose. If these attempts are supplemented by coercion or bribery from Moscow, there is a high risk that the coalition supporting Ukraine will suffer defections.

Russia would exploit legal problems of arms and technology transfer for propaganda purposes. A more serious problem is that Western states would attempt to impose constraints on the use of weapons to strike targets within Russia. As a result, Ukrainian deterrence would depend solely on its own capabilities rather than any prospect of direct military support from the West, let alone from Indo-Pacific states and the global South. Meanwhile, the burden on Ukraine of maintaining a vast force under arms would retard its economic recovery and further development.

Such an approach poses two other large problems. It implies a *de facto* retreat from the Bucharest commitments made in 2008 that Ukraine would eventually join NATO. More troubling yet, a logical consequence of such a policy would be Ukrainian acquisition of nuclear weapons. The “Israeli option” worked, indeed, largely because Israel had own nuclear arsenal – acquired in the absence of a binding guarantee of direct military support. In a similar case Ukraine will surely explore the acquisition of such weapons. In fact, the logic of its strategic position would make such a choice both probable and, in many ways, appropriate. Such a decision would create further, possibly catastrophic possibilities for conflict in Eastern Europe.

Option #1: Fortress Ukraine: our judgment. We find that Fortress Ukraine is a superficially attractive option because of its relatively low short-term political costs. But we assess that it would be unstable, engender a high risk of future conflict, expose fissures within the West, and create opportunities for Russia to explore the uncertainties (grey zone activities) and weaken the current coalition. Most dangerous of all, it would likely lead to Ukraine’s acquisition of nuclear weapons, a development that would be both logical and risky for all concerned, since not only would it put severe strain on the European security order, but it would also undermine the global non-proliferation regime. Refusal to embed Ukraine into the transatlantic community would therefore create uncertainties for all the parties – the West, Ukraine, but also Russia – about future of European security architecture.

Option #2: Bilateral or multilateral security assurances.

The United States and some allies would provide Ukraine with political and possibly legally binding security assurances, in parallel with the supply of arms and ammunition. In the case of the United States, Ukraine would be designated a major non-NATO ally (MNNA), like Australia or Japan, and an arrangement like the mutual defense treaty with South Korea or the provisions of the Taiwan Relations Act with that country would be put in place. Key European countries (e.g., Poland, Germany, France, the UK) would make similar commitments. Among the provisions of such agreements would be a promise of large scale supply of advanced, long-range weapons in the event of war with Russia, and possibly, the commitment of foreign forces to support Ukraine in such an eventuality.

Option #2: Pros. Such assurances do not require NATO membership of Ukraine. Deterrence could be strengthened by a policy of ambiguity, i.e., by forcing Russia to take into account the possibility that a renewed invasion of Ukraine would likely bring about a larger war with the major Western powers, including nuclear ones. Such arrangements would also include provisions for regular joint exercises on Ukrainian soil, and possibly even regular presence of forces in Ukraine, thus further enhancing deterrence. Other creative possibilities – e.g. the integration of Ukraine’s air and missile defenses with that of neighboring Western states – would also be possible. By reassuring Ukraine, this policy would reduce the likelihood of her seeking nuclear weapons. At the same time, this option could be more acceptable to Western publics than Ukraine’s NATO membership, since it would essentially build upon July 2023 G7 declaration of support for Ukraine, and, for this reason, be somewhat less of a red flag for Russia and China as well.

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Option #2: Cons. Ukraine would still have to maintain very large forces, and the signal such an option would send is that NATO membership for Ukraine may be deferred indefinitely. Because of the commitments made at Bucharest in 2008, Russia would likely see such a decision as a reversal or even nullification of those agreements to bring Ukraine into NATO. Moreover, hybrid or marginal Russian attacks on Ukraine would constantly probe Western resolve. Attempts to deter those, e.g. by creating quasi-automatic commitments to deploy or use force, would, in effect, make Ukraine a member of NATO without the prewar benefits of planning and integration across the Alliance, while still risking blurring or devaluing the NATO article 5.

Option #2: Bilateral or multilateral assurances: our judgment. While security assurances may be politically attractive to some decision-makers hoping to avoid admitting Ukraine into NATO, the sense of security and stability that would be created would be illusory. It would be a standing invitation to Russia to test the will and resolve of the West, which would be reduced to a coalition of the willing rather than having the full force of NATO arrayed to deter an attack. For this reason, this option is, in fact, a recipe for instability.

Option #3: NATO membership.

This would occur after an accelerated accession process and likely with a clearly defined geographical scope of Ukraine covered by the Article 5 guarantees, but would still require security assurances/arrangements and the like during an interim period, as well as commitment to build up Ukraine's defenses. It is in NATO's best interest to have what is now one of Europe's strongest and most combat-experienced armies integrated into the Alliance and firmly anchored to Western structures.

Option #3: Pros. NATO has an excellent record of deterring serious Russian attacks on its members. It is clear that Russia fears the military involvement of NATO and, despite its rhetoric, has so far avoided any attack on NATO or individual member states (e.g. supply lines to Ukraine through Poland and other countries). NATO membership might include, but would perhaps not require, the permanent stationing of Western forces there (see Finland). Moreover, it would not even require the final resolution of the current conflict (see Germany, which joined despite its division and legally unresolved borders in the 1950's), but would be possible by Ukraine – similarly to West Germany – renouncing the option of regaining full control of its territory by force, leaving it for peaceful unification in future.

While it is important for NATO to make good its commitments to expand defense spending, this policy would likely not require major new outlays as the burden of integrating Ukraine into NATO and assuring it of the support and solidarity of the whole Alliance would be shared between all 32 Allies. The extended nuclear deterrence provided by the U.S. would remove incentives for Ukraine to acquire nuclear weapons, but would also be essential, if not a precondition, for, Ukraine's integration into the EU, thus creating stable security environment needed for Ukraine's reconstruction. It is because the EU has its own mutual defense clause that obliges the Member States to support one another in the event of an armed attack, yet they would currently not be able to come to Ukraine's help without the US capabilities, though.

Russia, on the other hand, would receive an unmistakable signal that its attempts to recreate a Russian empire or reincorporate Ukraine into the Russian state had failed for good. This would lead to strategic stability in Central and Eastern Europe, given that Russia's success in Ukraine would only further strengthen Moscow's conviction that foreign policy interests can be achieved by military force. Paradoxically, Ukraine's NATO membership would therefore make a resumption of rational Western relations with Russia easier.

Option #3: Cons. Ukrainian membership remains highly controversial in a number of NATO countries on both sides of the Atlantic as we have seen in the lead-up to the Vilnius summit. Moreover, Ukraine

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still needs to implement reforms, including those that would ensure full interoperability with Allied forces, reinforce civilian control of the military and counteract corruption. NATO membership for Ukraine could infuriate Russia, and consolidate a hostile relationship for decades to come – or, conceivably, provoke Russia to lash out. The interim period between inviting Ukraine up to the full membership would be particularly prone to Russia's efforts to derail the accession process. Against this background, SACEUR would need to significantly adjust and expand his plans for the defense of Europe, and it would be important for most European NATO Allies to improve their capabilities, readiness and responsiveness.

Option #3: NATO membership: our judgment. It is vital to look at NATO membership for Ukraine not as a gift or act of compassion, but as ensuring the security and stability of Europe. We believe that it would consolidate a European security order based on globally shared security norms as well as Western interests and values. This, in turn, would benefit international security beyond Europe and the United States. In particular, we believe that it would have a deterrent effect on a China contemplating an invasion of Taiwan.

Prospects and recommendations.

Fully cognizant of the risks entailed, we strongly urge a detailed plan, including timelines, for Ukrainian NATO membership be created and announced at NATO's 75th anniversary celebrations.

Either "Fortress Ukraine" or solely bilateral/multilateral security assurances will only create incentives for Russia to continue its imperial and confrontational policies towards Ukraine and NATO, and leave Ukraine in a grey security zone. No NATO membership for Ukraine would also mark a major step back from the Bucharest 2008 pledge. It is speedy admission of Ukraine to NATO, with interim policies combining Option #1 and #2, based on July 2023 G7 security commitments, which stands out as the best guarantor of European security and stability, and of a relatively safe and prosperous future for Ukraine, including its post-war reconstruction and economic recovery.

On top of being the only effective stabilizing option, Ukraine's NATO membership would be the least costly, allowing the West to focus more resources on other challenges, like China. There would also be positive ripple effects – for example, in guaranteeing a future free flow of Ukrainian agricultural products to the Global South. We understand the risks posed by Russian revanchism, but believe that they are less than those associated with a retreat from the position adopted at Bucharest in 2008.

Finally, we believe that NATO's 75th anniversary, to be celebrated in Washington in 2024, would be an excellent moment to invite Ukraine to join the Alliance, thus marking a crucial step towards bringing lasting peace and security to the European democracies.