

Regardless of How the War Ends, How Can Ukraine's Long-Term Security Realistically be Guaranteed?

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June 2022

While it is impossible to predict how or when the current war will end, it is important to begin thinking now about how Ukraine's security can be provided for in the long term. The war has demonstrated that Russia is determined to control Ukraine, is willing to pay a high price to do so, and is unconstrained by international norms or opinion. Perhaps changes within Russia will reduce its threat to its neighbors over time, but Ukraine and the West cannot bet on that happening. Ukraine's security will rely on its clear ability to defeat a Russian attack, either alone or with allies. A robust second-strike Ukrainian nuclear capability would be a powerful deterrent, but that is not a realistic option. Absent that, Ukraine's security will likely be met by a mix of building up the Ukrainian military (with help from the West) and commitments from the West to help Ukraine repel a future Russian attack. Crucially, domestic political and economic reform, long delayed in Ukraine, will have to be part of the strategy.

Ukraine's future security will depend in large part on commitments by outside actors. It will rely on Russia's adherence to the terms of a future peace agreement and on the West's commitment to helping enforce such a deal. As sizable literature in the international security literature shows, solving commitment problems is essential if peace agreements are to hold in the long term but is often difficult in practice.

Peace agreements rely on promises about future behavior. Even if those promises are made in good faith, changes in the distribution of power can make it irrational to do in the present what one promised to do in the past. And if promises are not made in good faith but simply to bide time, the problem is even worse. For Ukraine, Russia's violation of its commitments under the Russia-Ukraine Friendship Treaty of 1997 and the Budapest Memorandum of 1994 highlight the danger. The failure of the Minsk process to bring the conflict to an end shows how peace deals based on unenforceable commitments can unravel.

Steps and Guarantees

The first way that the West can enhance Ukraine's post-war security is to avoid pressuring Ukraine to sign an agreement that relies on promises for future steps such as plebiscites, troop withdrawals, and free elections in Russia-controlled areas. Similarly, future commitments by Ukraine to do things it opposes (like adopting a federal system) should be avoided. If such steps are to be taken, they should be taken at the time of the agreement rather than deferred to the future. Commitments like those in Minsk II help combatants reach agreement in the short term because they allow for competing interpretations and kick the difficult steps down the road, but as the failure of Minsk II shows, they do not necessarily promote security in the long term. Peace will be more robust to the extent that borders and Ukraine's alliance status can be settled in a peace agreement rather than deferred.

Besides avoiding a peace agreement that relies on unenforceable commitments, Ukraine's security can be directly addressed in two ways, corresponding to Kenneth Waltz's distinction between internal and external balancing. Internally, Ukraine must build and maintain a peacetime army sufficiently powerful to deter and defeat a Russian attack if needed. Externally, the West must find ways to make its security commitments to Ukraine as credible as possible, even though credibility, by definition, limits the West's future room for maneuver.

Ukraine has so far proved itself capable of surviving a Russian attack, but this has entailed the loss of many lives and much territory and has depended on significant support from the West. Given the size of Ukraine's economy, building Ukraine's military capacity to defeat a future Russian attack will require weapons provided by the West and paid for largely by the West. Moreover, far more of those weapons (along with the required training) will need to be provided in order to avoid uncertainty over whether the West would actually supply Ukraine during a war, especially if Russia rattles a nuclear saber. To the extent Russia can hope that the West will drag its feet on supplying Ukraine, it will not be deterred. One wonders whether Russia would have attacked earlier this year had it known the degree to which the West would aid Ukraine. Therefore, the more weapons and training that can be provided in advance, the better.

If the West helps Ukraine to balance internally by building up its military, is it necessary to balance externally through alliance commitments? The recent policies of Germany, Sweden, and Finland, all of which are pursuing a "both/and" approach, are suggestive. Germany is one of the most powerful states in Europe, does not share a border with Russia, and is a member of NATO. Yet it recently announced that it was embarking on a significant rearmament program. Finland has a substantial army, and Sweden, which has

a smaller army, has a very substantial domestic weapons industry. Both Finland and Sweden have begun accelerated processes to abandon their neutrality and join NATO. These states clearly believe that neither the NATO guarantee nor an independently strong military provides sufficient security. They seek both. Recognizing that the period when a state is planning to join an alliance but has not yet done so must be especially tempting to a potential aggressor, the UK hastened to provide security guarantees to Finland and Sweden. Ukrainians must be deeply chagrined that the commitment Ukraine so desperately needs is being given to states that are in much less danger, but this simply reinforces the point that threats are easiest to make when they are least likely to have to be carried out.

Whether Ukrainian membership in NATO will be “on the table” is yet to be determined. That option could be bargained away in a peace treaty, or NATO could refuse to admit Ukraine, or, less likely, Ukraine could decline to seek membership. But any commitments made by the Western states are much less credible if they are not backed by NATO membership for Ukraine, and it is important to specify why this is so. It is not because the Article 5 guarantee is impossible to break but because of how it aligns the interests of members. The Article 5 guarantee only protects the members as long as it is considered “airtight.” While defending an alliance member in a future conflict might carry a high price, *not* defending it would also carry a high price for the security of the others. If the alliance was shown to be toothless, each state would have to provide for its own security, not only from Russia but from each other. Article 5 is so powerful because of what happens to the security of NATO members if it becomes meaningless. Without Article 5, members can take much more cautious positions on Ukraine without weakening the alliance. Russia can aim to sow dissent among them. The possibility that no one will come to Ukraine’s defense will encourage renewed attack. **Mariya Omelicheva** captures the essence of the problem when she says: “There will always be a mismatch between Moscow’s vital interests in Kyiv and the European countries’ major concerns with sovereignty and independence of Ukraine,” but the Article 5 guarantee dramatically narrows that mismatch, which is why it deters an attack on the Baltics, which are militarily more vulnerable than Ukraine.

To the extent Ukraine does not receive the protection of an Article 5 guarantee, Ukraine’s internal military buildup will have to be more robust. This will give Ukraine more agency, as **Omelicheva** points out, but whether this is a good thing depends on where one stands. If Ukraine gains the ability to fight Russia without NATO’s help, it might also be able to renew the war to regain lost territory over NATO’s objections. Paradoxically, Ukrainian membership in NATO would likely make Russia safer because NATO members would have a powerful incentive to ensure that Ukraine followed all elements of a peace treaty and avoided provoking Russia. One cannot expect Russia to accept Ukraine’s NATO

membership on these grounds, but the point is that the more Ukraine is empowered but not enmeshed in institutions, the more dangerous will be the situation.

Thus, the NATO states encounter something of a trilemma: If they avoid admitting Ukraine to NATO but arm it to defend itself, their control over Ukraine's policies ebbs. If they avoid admitting Ukraine to NATO and try to maintain more control by limiting arms supplies to Ukraine, they make it more likely that Russia will attack again (and win). If they admit Ukraine to NATO, they risk further angering Russia. They then have to make certain that the threat is credible. Alliance and rearmament are complements, not alternatives. The actions that have the most robust deterrent effect (NATO membership plus a robust rearmament program) are also most likely to alienate Russia. That concern may be receding in importance as it increasingly appears that Russia will remain deeply hostile to the West as long as the West opposes Russia's westward expansion.

There is some disagreement among our four responses about the likelihood of Ukraine joining NATO and about the compromises that should be entertained as a price for a peace agreement. These topics are closely connected. As **Petro Burkovskyi** and **Olexiy Haran** state, Ukraine is more likely to accept concessions to the extent its future security is guaranteed through NATO membership. Conversely, Omelicheva points out that NATO is less likely to offer membership if Ukraine has unresolved territorial disputes with Russia. **Maria Popova** and **Oxana Shevel** point out that the pursuit of military victory for Ukraine may have to stop short of aiming to retake Crimea. Can Ukraine join NATO with the status of Crimea unresolved? Perhaps a commitment to a plebiscite far in the future would finesse the issue, but it is hard to imagine that even a democratic Russian government would entertain relinquishing Crimea. As long as Ukraine retains its completely justified claim to Crimea, membership in NATO will be much harder to attain. Increasingly, it looks like the same will be true of Kherson oblast, which is far more significant geostrategically than those parts of the Donbas that do not control access to the Black Sea. If Ukraine cannot regain this territory on the battlefield, peacemaking dilemmas become still harder.

Conclusion

So far, this discussion has considered only the military side of the security equation. But from the moment of Ukraine's independence in 1991, the weakness of Ukraine's economy and the corruption of the Ukrainian state has corroded Ukraine's ability to endure Russian pressure. Ukraine's resistance to reform and its enduring corruption led to "Ukraine fatigue" in the West, hatching the unfortunate saying, "Ukraine never misses an opportunity to miss an opportunity." Reform is essential to preserve liberal democracy in Ukraine, build a state that resists Russian subterfuge, provide the economic and administrative basis for a powerful military, and retain the confidence of the West. In the

past, Ukraine's leaders have pursued just enough reform to keep the aid coming, and no more, and there is no guarantee this will change. The more important Ukraine is to the security of the West, the harder it will be for the West to credibly threaten to cut aid if Ukraine drags its feet on reform.

The EU can address this challenge. For many years, Ukraine and the EU talked past each other. The EU was content to point to Ukraine's corruption as a reason not to get more deeply involved. In contrast, Ukrainian leaders pointed to the absence of a membership prospect as the reason they could not muster the domestic support for painful reforms. Both had a point, but the results were disastrous. While still insufficient, important progress has been made since the signing of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement in 2014. An EU membership perspective would transform the prospects for reform in Ukraine, and the track record of EU reform promotion in central Europe is excellent. Such a domestic political transformation would be decisive in ensuring that the Ukrainian state and society can both play their parts in building a reliable bulwark against Russian aggression.