Ukraine-NATO partnership in a time of crisis

Sandwiched between Russia to the east and an expanding NATO to the west, Ukraine's relations with NATO are closely interlinked with the country's ties to Russia – and Russia's relations with NATO. Ukraine's NATO aspirations remain a key sticking point in this tense geopolitical situation.

Overview: Ukraine, NATO and Russia – an unsteady security triangle

Ever since NATO and Ukraine formed initial relations following Ukraine's independence in the context of the 1991 Soviet collapse, their cooperation has been part of a larger geopolitical puzzle, with Russia as a key strategic player. Dynamics in this complex security constellation have been shaped by the fact that NATO was founded in response to the Soviet threat, that Russia inherited the status of NATO's great opposing power, with tensions continuing to brew under the surface. Ukraine became a symptom of the wider conflict between Russia and the West; a barometer for Russia's 'unsatisfied' power aspirations in the face of NATO's expansion. Russia's March 2014 annexation of Crimea and its hybrid war against Ukraine marked a turning point in Europe's security order and pushed Kyiv further towards the Alliance.

History: Cornerstones in the Ukraine-NATO relationship

Ukraine's 1991 declaration of independence limited Russia's access to the Black Sea as the Kremlin lost control of a former Soviet territory of 603 560 square kilometres. It took six years of negotiations before Ukraine and Russia formally recognised each other's borders. Russian President Boris Yeltsin and Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma signed the Russian-Ukrainian Friendship Treaty on 31 May 1997. By that time, however, Ukraine-NATO ties had continued to strengthen and Moscow's reluctance to recognise Ukraine's borders had contributed to cementing Ukraine's ties with the West.

NATO-Ukraine key dates

1992: Four months after Ukraine's declaration of independence, NATO invited Ukrainian officials to an extraordinary North Atlantic Cooperation meeting, bringing together NATO and former Warsaw Pact states.

1994: Ukraine joined the Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme – launched to revamp ties between NATO Allies and participating states – and deployed troops to the NATO-led peacekeeping mission in Bosnia.

1997: NATO and Ukraine signed a charter on a Distinctive Partnership, establishing the NATO-Ukraine Commission to boost cooperation. NATO established trust funds to assist Kyiv in key areas and advised Ukraine on reform and democratic oversight of defence and security forces. Ukraine sent troops to the NATO-led missions in Afghanistan and Kosovo.

2008: The Allies agreed that Georgia and Ukraine would become members of NATO in future under the 'open door policy'. However, President Victor Yanukovych then halted the process through a 2010 law on non-bloc status in order to improve relations with Russia.

2014: As the Ukraine crisis peaked, in April NATO condemned Russia's illegal military intervention in Ukraine and the violation of Ukraine's territorial integrity, suspending all civilian and military cooperation with Russia. The 2008 open door policy was not mentioned. In December, Ukraine's parliament abolished the country's non-bloc status in a constitutional vote, paving the way for a potential application to join NATO.

NATO support for Ukraine – words and actions

The 2014 NATO Wales Summit declaration stated that 'Russia's aggressive actions against Ukraine have fundamentally challenged our vision of a Europe whole, free, and at peace, [with] long-term consequences'. Among NATO's steps to reassure allies and partners in central and eastern Europe and to deter Russian aggression is the Readiness Action Plan, including tripling the Response Force, creating a Very High Readiness

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Joint Task Force and boosting presence in eastern Europe. NATO has continually stressed Russia's 'significant responsibility' to implement the 2015 Minsk peace agreements (negotiated by Ukraine, Russia, France and Germany). Following the April 2016 NATO-Russia Council, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg stated that all Council members agreed on the need for a 'full and rapid implementation' of the agreements, including full access for international monitors. Pointing to recent ceasefire violations and impediments to the work of OSCE observers, on 15 June 2016, Stoltenberg urged Russia 'to stop supporting the militants, and withdraw its forces and military equipment from Ukrainian territory'. While Russia released Ukrainian military pilot Nadiya Savchenko in a long-awaited prisoner swap on 25 May 2016, in line with the Minsk accords, Moscow maintains its tough stance on Crimea. President Vladimir Putin has refused to 'conduct any discussions with anyone' on the question, which Moscow considers 'closed forever'. NATO, on the other hand, has underlined that it 'will never accept Russia's military occupation of Crimea'.

NATO Trust Funds for Ukraine and support for strategic communication

The Russia-Ukraine crisis significantly increased cooperation between Ukraine and NATO, sparking a number of NATO programmes and activities, as well as bilateral non-lethal aid to support Ukraine. At the April 2014 Foreign Ministers' meeting, Allies decided to support defence reforms through capacity-building and capability-development programmes, as well as strengthening civilian control over the armed forces and related security sectors. At the September 2014 Wales Summit, Allies agreed to set up a series of measures, including five trust funds to help Ukraine improve its security situation, for example regarding command and control, as well as cyber threats. In 2015, a sixth trust fund to counter explosive devices was set up. NATO Defence Ministers on 15 June 2016 agreed to further boost support for Ukraine with a Comprehensive Package of Assistance. Amid Russia's 'war of words' against Ukraine, an area in which NATO and the EU in 2015 agreed to intensify cooperation, NATO supported the Ukraine Crisis Media Centre and Ukrainian media, trained government officials and civil society activists in communications, and the Allies sent national communications experts to the Kyiv NATO Liaison Office. Ukrainian media report that a new 'Centre for Research of Experience of Hybrid War with Russia' may be on the July 2016 NATO Summit agenda.

Outlook: NATO membership – mission impossible?

Following Ukraine's 1991 independence, public support for NATO membership remained low for years, but increased significantly due to the conflict. In March 2015, 43.3% of Ukrainians said they were in favour of joining the alliance, up from 15% in 2004, while 31.6% were against, down from 60% in 2005 (a June 2016 poll suggested that 44% favour joining the Alliance, while 38% oppose it). In this light, and following the abolition of Ukraine's non-bloc status (in theory, Kyiv's green light to apply for NATO membership), Ukraine's National Security and Defence Council presented a new five-year security doctrine in April 2015. Oleksander Turchynov, head of the body, called NATO membership 'the only reliable external guarantee' of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity vis-à-vis Russia's aggression as a 'long-standing factor'. However, Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev clearly warned that an application to join NATO would 'turn Ukraine into a potential military opponent for Russia', which would have 'very negative consequences'.

Russia's perception of Ukraine's potential NATO membership has been compared with the way the USA viewed the deployment of Soviet missiles to Cuba in 1962, which almost sparked a nuclear war. Many NATO member countries have been wary of keeping the door open to Ukrainian membership, and alleged conflicting NATO messages to Ukraine regarding its possible membership status have sparked calls to clarify future Ukraine-NATO ties. The Allies will meet with Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko in the NATO-Ukraine Commission at the Warsaw Summit, amid calls on Ukraine to contribute to an enhanced NATO presence in central Europe. However, membership seems to remain a distant prospect for Ukraine, which along with Georgia – according to media reports – could be offered a newly devised 'Associate Partner'-status, as well as closer cooperation in the Black Sea (the so-called '28+2' cooperation, a formula tested with non-allied partners Finland and Sweden). In April 2016, NATO Deputy Secretary-General Alexander Vershbow (USA), mentioned the plan, arguing that Georgia's and Ukraine's inclusion would further isolate Russia in the Black Sea and counterbalance Moscow's potential plans to station nuclear weapons in the Black Sea region.

In its resolutions, the European Parliament recalls that Russia has 'territorially crippled' Ukraine and Georgia, 'making them ineligible for NATO membership' and considers that – despite not being able to defend them directly – NATO has a 'moral obligation' to support both countries' ability to defend themselves' (June 2015). The EP welcomed NATO's Wales Summit efforts to 'enhance Ukraine's ability to provide for its own security', but 'strongly underlines' that there is no military solution to the crisis (September 2014).