

UKRAINE MEMBERSHIP REVISITED: THE CASE FOR NATO'S STRATEGIC ADAPTION

Ukraine's NATO membership has moved over the last decade from unlikely to mission impossible. Thirteen years after the NATO Bucharest Summit promise that Georgia and Ukraine "will join" the Alliance and Russia's subsequent invasion of Georgia, and seven years since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the political willingness of the 30 NATO member states remains insufficient to keep their 2008 promise. Russia's violation of Ukrainian territorial integrity makes Kiev's integration into NATO almost impossible. But the strategic rationale for Ukraine joining NATO remains as compelling as ever. Moreover, the arguments for a revised NATO strategy towards the Black Sea region are multiplying. The current Alliance's Strategic Revision process should be the first step towards a revised NATO policy towards Ukraine.

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Russian revisionism blocked Ukraine's path towards NATO membership from the outset by Moscow's political interference, passportization¹, and its role in separatist conflicts that enabled permanent military deployments impeded the freedom and sovereignty of newly independent countries Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. Among these three countries, Ukraine quickly became the focus of Russian power projection due to its four unique geostrategic characteristics; its size geographically and economically, its geographic location as a key energy transit zone between rich European markets and Moscow, its possession of Soviet nuclear weapons, and its access to a vast Black Sea coastline with unique power projection capacity. At the same time, Ukraine's distinctive strategic position in relation to NATO was established by this very quartet of strategic assets-nuclear weapons, energy transit, and strategic access and capabilities. Today, with most of these capabilities stripped by Russia, what remains of Ukraine's strategic capacity? Thirty years after its independence, Russia stripped Ukraine of most of its strategic advantages. At the same time, because of the same Russian aggression, Ukraine has gained more modern strategic advantages that make it uniquely attractive as a NATO member.

From the outset of its independence in 1991, Moscow directly influenced Ukraine's very statehood and the country's foreign policy orientation towards NATO. The reasoning for Russia's power projection into newly independent Ukraine was highly strategic. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the independence of Ukraine, Kiev retained on its territory strategic assets once owned by Moscow: nuclear weapons, the Sevastopol base housing the former Soviet Black Sea fleet essential for access to the Mediterranean, and the pipelines that ensured most of new Russia's income that comes from Europe. With these developments, Ukraine, unlike Georgia and Moldova became a mid-sized European country, the largest in size out of all European countries, with a significant economic and industrial capacity.

In the first years of Ukrainian independence, Moscow stripped Ukraine of its Black Sea fleet, granted access to the Sevastopol base in Crimea, and started plans to build pipelines circumventing Ukraine to reduce dependence. Most importantly for Ukrainian statehood, however, in 1994 Russia convinced Ukraine to give up its nuclear weapons in exchange for the guarantee of Ukraine's sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity. In this paradoxical exchange of nuclear weapons for something already existing, the United States and the United Kingdom signed the Budapest Memorandum. Ten years later, Moscow annexed Crimea and finalized the three pipelines through the Baltic and the Black Sea to circumvent Ukraine.

¹ Thomas Hoffmann and Andrey Makarychev, "Russia and the EU: Spaces of Interaction," *Routledge*, 30 June 2020.

Looking back, the Budapest Memorandum, which the United States and the United Kingdom signed as co-guarantors of Ukraine's territorial integrity and statehood, is from a realist's perspective the key event that led to the strategic losses Ukraine has suffered ever since. Just a few months before the Memorandum was signed, Cold War statesman and political scientist Zbigniew Brzezinski argued—arguably the loudest and most eloquently—against that Memorandum and for Ukraine's strategic role for NATO.² Most famously, Brzezinski argued in “Premature Partnership” for Foreign Affairs that “It cannot be stressed strongly enough that without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be an empire, but with Ukraine suborned and then subordinated, Russia automatically becomes an empire.”³

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To arrive at this famous conclusion, Brzezinski built in his article an inventory of Russia's aggressions against Ukraine. These aggressions, aimed at undermining Ukrainian statehood, were visible less than three years into Ukrainian independence. Brzezinski argues, the West ignored in its efforts to engage in a “premature partnership” with Moscow: the “Russian military command asserted its de facto right to intervene in the former Soviet republics if developments there were deemed to violate Russian interests or threaten regional stability”, Russia “focused on progressively stripping the newly independent states of economic autonomy and forestalling the emergence of separate armed forces”, “The Russian military has enforced a partition of Crimea and asserted unilateral control over most of the disputed Black Sea fleet”, “the open assertion of Russian territorial claims to portions of Ukraine,” “economic leverage has been applied [by Russia] through reductions and periodic cutoffs in the delivery of vital energy sources to Ukrainian industry,” “Moscow's use of the Russian settlers as a justification for claiming the right to intervene.”⁴

Regrettably, Brzezinski's article from 1994 had no effect on Ukraine's independence and foreign policy orientation. Ukraine signed the Budapest Memorandum under Western guarantee for something it already had—its independence—and merely

² Zbigniew Brzezinski, “Premature Partnership,” *Foreign Affairs*, 1994, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/1994-03-01/premature-partnership>

³ Zbigniew Brzezinski, “Premature Partnership,” *Foreign Affairs*, 1994, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/1994-03-01/premature-partnership>

⁴ Zbigniew Brzezinski, “Premature Partnership,” *Foreign Affairs*, 1994, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/1994-03-01/premature-partnership>

delayed Russia's invasion and its loss of national sovereignty, territorial integrity, and independence, to the benefit of Moscow's imperialism. Nevertheless, the value of Brzezinski's article stems from the assertion of Ukraine's strategic value under multiple Russian threats. It also highlights that the Ukraine-Russia-NATO nexus has not factually shifted in 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea. Rather, Russia's annexation of Crimea and the intervention in Ukraine's Donbas region constitute a confirmation in what Brzezinski highlights as a continuum of Russia's policy towards Ukraine. It's only the West that shifted its threat perception of Russia from (premature) partner to challenge (but not threat) in 2014.

So what remains of Ukraine's strategic value today, three decades after its independence? Ukraine lost its territory, strategic access, was stripped of what remained of the naval forces, and was further economically crippled after Russia closed the Azov Sea in 2014. Indeed, not much is left of its strategic assets in Brzezinski's Realist view.

But warfare has changed significantly over the last few decades, with "grey zone warfare" and the employment of full-spectrum means becoming increasingly important. In 2021, Ukraine is as strategic to NATO as ever, and has achieved three significant gains that make it uniquely strategic to NATO. First, Ukraine shifted its threat perception after Russia invaded in 2014. Second, since 2014, Ukraine has accumulated seven years of direct combat experience with a regional superpower (and its proxies), which makes it a unique strategic player. Finally, Ukraine has managed to modernize and reform its military despite fighting an ongoing war and has embarked on a complex military modernization process, including replacing the naval forces seized by Russia in 2014.

Containing Russia: Impossible Without Ukraine

Russian aggression has been increasingly affecting all of NATO member states. Ukraine has been subjected to increased Russian aggression in all spheres, not only the military. In that sense, Ukraine has become progressively strategic to NATO as a buffer zone between the Alliance and Russia. Though the political willingness of NATO's 30 member states might not be sufficient to offer Ukraine a membership, the Alliance's understanding of the strategic advantages of an integrated Ukraine should be enhanced.

During the seven years of combat experience Kiev has accumulated since the annexation of Crimea and the onset of the war in the Donbas region, the country has been defending not only its national sovereignty and independence, but also the

entire Eastern flank of NATO. No NATO member state or non-member, for that matter, has extensive combat experience with Russian de facto and proxy forces. As a result of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, NATO's threat perception towards Russia has changed, and Russian aggression against NATO member states has increased. In NATO's efforts towards defense and deterrence, Ukraine's combat experience becomes even more valuable. Since 2014, NATO has struggled to enforce its Eastern flank and build resilience against Russian hybrid warfare, from political interference all the way to a possible Article 5 scenario. The Ukrainian military's experience and knowledge constitute valuable lessons for NATO's defense.

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Furthermore, despite territorial losses and sacrifices associated with seven years of conflict, Ukraine remains a major European power both geopolitically, as well as militarily. Its military industry places Kiev in the top military exporters worldwide.⁵ Its military force has been undergoing deep reforms and modernization during ongoing conflict. Ukraine's modernizing and investing in its military while also fighting a conflict makes it unique to NATO on a strategic level.

From a political perspective, Ukraine has paid the highest price for its public's Western orientation and wish to integrate into NATO and the European Union. But Russian aggression in 2014 has also sparked a radical political shift in Ukraine itself. Before the illegal annexation of Crimea, Ukrainian public opinion was divided between the Western and Eastern orientation-between those wanting to integrate into NATO and the EU and those who wanted closer ties to Russia.⁶ Today, a majority of public opinion in favor of joining NATO. This was not the case before 2014, when disinformation led to the belief that Romania, not Russia was a threat to Ukraine's national security.⁷ It is ironic that Russia's invasion of Ukraine caused Ukrainians to adopt a realistic threat perception. Russia has involuntarily shifted Ukrainian public opinion towards the West, with no return. Since 2014, Ukraine's public support has

⁵ Pieter D. Wezeman, Alexandra Kuimova and Siemon T. Wezeman, “Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2020,” *SIPRI Fact Sheet*, 2021, https://sipri.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/fs_2103_at_2020.pdf

⁶ Kathleen Holzward Sprehe, “Ukraine Says ‘No’ to NATO,” *Pew Research*, 2010, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2010/03/29/ukraine-says-no-to-nato/>

⁷ Sergiy Solodky and Ileana Racheru, “Foreign Policy Audit: Ukraine-Romania,” *Discussion paper*, 2016, http://neweurope.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Aud_Ukr_Rom_eng_net.pdf

been increasing, from 34 percent in 2007 to 53 percent in 2019.⁸ This constitutes another major strategic advantage for the Alliance in the long run.

In other words, the Alliance remains protected from Russia's revanchism as long as Ukraine remains close to NATO and resists Russian aggression. By contrast, if Ukraine were to yield to Russian demands and be de facto absorbed into Russia, similar to Belarus, NATO would be significantly challenged. Recent history of Russian regional hybrid aggression against both NATO and non-NATO member states demonstrates a continued focus on the extended Black Sea region, with the invasion of Georgia in 2008, Ukraine in 2014, Syria in 2014, the closing of the Azov Sea in 2018, and the Russian deployment of peacekeeping troops in Nagorno Karabakh. If history and geography are to be lessons, then NATO's weak spot is the Black Sea region that Ukraine is a key part of.

NATO's Need of Strategic Adaptation: The Black Sea Region

It is imperative that both Ukraine and NATO maintain and develop their resilience against Russian aggression until a political will for Ukraine's NATO integration is developed across all member states. For Kiev, that means becoming militarily more prepared, continuing its military modernization and democratic reforms, and bolstering its national defense with the support of its allies. For NATO, this means expanding and developing its military and political cooperation with Ukraine.

Beyond mere cooperation development, NATO is bound to raise its common understanding of Russia as an aggressor. This was confirmed by this year's NATO summit, when the Alliance and its member states named Russia as the first threat.⁹ With continued and increased Russian aggression against NATO territory over the last few years, more and more NATO members reluctant to acknowledge the threat to adjust their perception of it. The Skripal poisoning case in the United Kingdom, the espionage cases in Italy and Bulgaria, the Navalny poisoning and political imprisonment case, and the sabotage case in the Czech Republic all have contributed to NATO's increased defense. The 2021 NATO summit mirrored some of this momentum in the change in language vis-a-vis Russia and the onset of a revised NATO strategy to be adopted in 2022. According to the NATO Summit Communique, "Russia has also intensified its hybrid actions against NATO Allies and partners, including through proxies. This includes attempted interference in Allied elections and democratic processes; political and economic pressure and intimidation; widespread disinformation campaigns; malicious cyber activities [...] and illegal and

⁸ Sergiy Solodkyy and Ileana Racheru, "Foreign Policy Audit: Ukraine-Romania," *Discussion paper*, 2016, http://neweurope.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Aud_Ukr_Rom_eng_net.pdf

⁹ NATO Summit Communique, 2021, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_185000.htm

destructive activities by Russian Intelligence Services on Allied territory, some of which have claimed lives of citizens and caused widespread material damage.”¹⁰

Nevertheless, the next step in the Alliance’s strategy, recognizing Ukraine’s crucial role in Eastern European defense, as well as the fact that the Black Sea region suffers from concentrated Russian aggression, has not yet been taken. Though momentum has been building for a revised NATO strategy toward the east, this year’s summit did not address concrete measures for deterrence in the region or the role of Ukraine for the Alliance. Yet, The 2021 NATO Summit announced the process for a new Strategic Concept of the Alliance, to be adopted in 2022.¹¹ This creates the ripe context for a regional NATO Black Sea strategy that addresses the role of Georgia and Ukraine for the Alliance.

The Black Sea region is and will remain the transatlantic community’s weak spot. With three NATO member states bordering the Sea, multiple U.S. bases and capabilities in Romania and Turkey, and Ukraine and Georgia as the frontlines of defense against Russian aggression, the Alliance urgently needs to develop a regional strategy that addresses the imbalance between its Northern and Southern parts of the flank. The lack of a common threat perception toward Russia has hampered NATO deterrence in the Black Sea, as opposed to the Baltic Sea where countries share a threat assessment and ample cooperation mechanisms, and where NATO’s Enhanced Forward Presence provides multinational tripwire forces on the ground. NATO needs to urgently address this capability and deterrence gap in the Black Sea and hence prevent further Russian aggression. Ukraine ought to play a crucial role in this strategy.

NATO’s strategic adaptation to Russian aggression in the Black Sea should first and foremost focus on addressing the increasingly offensive military buildup in the Black Sea. Following the illegal annexation of Crimea, Russia deployed and developed a multitude of advanced conventional and non-conventional air, maritime and land capabilities in the Black Sea that constitute a threat to NATO’s Eastern flank and beyond. With the Azov Sea closure and the Kerch Bridge in 2018 Russia has essentially impeded free navigation in the Black Sea. Furthermore, the February-April 2021 Russian military buildup in the Black Sea has added further offensive military capabilities to the region. With this, Russia has magnified the imbalance of power in the Black Sea, and further impeded free navigation in the Azov and Black Sea. The only instruments NATO has at its disposal to contain Russian power and prevent further aggression in the region and towards the Alliance is to increase the cost of

¹⁰ NATO Summit Communique, 2021, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_185000.htm

¹¹ NATO Summit Communique, 2021, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_185000.htm

Russian aggression itself. Proportional deterrence mechanisms and the deployment of NATO troops and capabilities to increase the cost of future Russian aggression should be the core of NATO's Black Sea strategy.

At the same time, NATO's Black Sea strategy needs to develop cooperation mechanisms between the Alliance and non-NATO members Georgia and Ukraine. While the political environment is not yet ripe for Georgia and Ukraine to join, their security should gradually become integrated with Alliance structures. Unlike the strategic environment of the Baltic Sea, where NATO members form a common ground, the Black Sea cannot be secured without Georgia or Ukraine. To prevent further aggression, the Alliance's Black Sea strategy should establish shared monitoring and deterrence integrated mechanisms, allowing Georgia and Ukraine access to shared regional defense.

Some elements of NATO's regional security strategy have already been in place. NATO supports Ukraine with a Comprehensive Assistance Package of programs designed to increase Ukrainian interoperability and support the military modernization process. The Alliance's Tailored Forward Presence creates the basis for NATO Black Sea defense. NATO Air policing assists member states Romania and Bulgaria in ensuring a minimum of territorial defense. Over the last few years, NATO exercises in the region have grown in frequency and amplitude. All of these elements should constitute the basis for a comprehensive NATO strategy for the region, anchored in NATO territorial defense, as well as in an enhanced and deepened cooperation and capability sharing mechanisms for NATO partners Georgia and Ukraine. With these two key components, enhanced territorial defense and deeper military cooperation with Georgia and Ukraine, a NATO regional strategy against Russian aggression is essential for addressing the insecurity in the region and for securing the Alliance.

Finally, NATO's strategic adaptation towards Russia has been slowed due to a lack of a common threat perception across member states. Although momentum has been gained and will undoubtedly continue to increase, given the extent of Russian aggression, the Alliance's most effective deterrence tool is a stronger regional military cooperation around the Black Sea strategy. The region's track record demonstrates that the majority of the building blocks of Western defense already in place have bilateral and multilateral regional cooperation mechanisms. Most prominently, the United States security assistance to Black Sea allies and partners occurs along with bilateral strategic partnerships that Washington has in place with Romania, Georgia and Ukraine. Strategic partnerships and cooperation between Ukraine and Turkey and Ukraine and the United Kingdom constitute important recent steps for the consolidation of frontline states across Europe's Eastern flank. Multilateral cooperation mechanisms like the Poland-Romania-Turkey trilateral and the recent

Georgia-Moldova-Ukraine cooperation are adding new dimensions to regional Black Sea security.

NATO should adopt its Black Sea strategy by forming coalitions with willing NATO members and partners. In addition to avoiding spoilers of the Alliance's defense, coalitions and groups of countries may be able to create shared capabilities across the Black Sea aimed at monitoring and early warning, as well as deterring future Russian aggression. Furthermore, groupings of countries contribute to building the political support for the Alliance's consensus on Russia and Ukraine in the future.

Conclusion

Looking back, Ukraine's strategic value to the Alliance has significantly changed since its independence. Indeed, Zbigniew Brzezinski's assessment of Ukraine under threat by Russia due to its strategic value remains the same. His warning on the Budapest Memorandum as endangering Ukrainian independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity also remains valid. Since then, however, Russia has focused its power projection on undermining Ukraine's path towards NATO membership. Moscow also managed to chip away significant parts of Ukraine's material assets: first its nuclear weapons, then the Crimean peninsula, and then its quality as a transit hub for Russian gas to European markets. In normative terms, Russian aggression against Ukraine has had the opposite effect, amplifying Ukraine's strategic value for the Alliance: Ukrainian support for NATO has been increasing, Ukraine has accumulated unique combat experience against a regional superpower, and has gone through ample military modernization at the same time. These modern strategic assets make Ukraine unique to NATO. As confirmed by the NATO 2021 Summit, member states are unanimously aware of the growing threat from Russia not only against Ukraine, but also against the Alliance. And though momentum for more NATO deterrence against Russian aggression is constantly building, the 2021 NATO summit has shown that its member states have not reached the consensual understanding that Ukraine has been defending not just itself for the past seven years, but also the Alliance.

Looking ahead, the Alliance has launched a year-long process in defining its new Strategic Concept, to be adopted next year. With a consensual assessment of Russia as the Alliance's most important threat, increased NATO deterrence on its Eastern flank is unavoidable. For the Alliance to strategically adapt to this threat, it must develop a regional Black Sea strategy to increase deterrence. The paths Georgia and Ukraine are taking towards NATO membership should play a crucial role in such a Black Sea strategy.