

# UKRAINE, NATO, AND RUSSIA

*Ukraine has significantly deepened its relationship with NATO over the past 25 years. Kyiv's interest in joining NATO has especially intensified since Russia's seizure of Crimea and instigation of conflict in the eastern Ukrainian region of Donbas in 2014. Opinion polls now show public support for membership, and many elites regard Alliance membership as critical for Ukraine's security. Russia, on the other hand, portrays further NATO enlargement to the east as a major threat. The ongoing conflict between Ukraine and Russia will affect attitudes within NATO toward Ukraine's membership prospects. For the near term, Kyiv will have to keep its expectations modest and focus on practical cooperation with the Alliance.*

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**S**ince regaining its independence in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse nearly 30 years ago, Ukraine has sought to build links with the West. This includes ties with institutions such as NATO, with which Ukraine has established a distinctive partnership. Kyiv has been keen on deepening those ties. Its interest in becoming a NATO member has continued to grow since 2014, as it views NATO as a means to protect Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity from its aggressive neighbor, Russia.

Although NATO-Ukraine cooperation has intensified, and the Alliance maintains its “open door” policy, NATO members appear reluctant to put Ukraine on a membership track. Despite the fact that Russia continues a low-intensity conflict against Ukraine—and occupies Ukrainian territory—Kyiv can expand its practical cooperation with NATO. However, in the near term, Kyiv will have to keep its expectations about membership modest.

### *Developing the NATO-Ukraine Relationship*

Upon regaining independence in 1991, Ukraine began the process of establishing regular relations with Western countries and institutions, in part to gain greater freedom of maneuver vis-à-vis Russia. At the same time, NATO formally began to engage former members of the now-defunct Warsaw Pact and post-Soviet states. In December 1991, Ukraine became a member of the North Atlantic Cooperation Council, established to foster cooperation between NATO and the former Warsaw Pact and Soviet states. In January 1994, Ukraine became the fourth country to join the Partnership for Peace, which NATO established to develop individual relationships between the Alliance and interested countries aimed at enhancing peace and security in Europe.<sup>1</sup>

In 1994 and 1995, NATO considered the enlargement issue. Former Warsaw Pact states sought membership; thus, anchoring them to institutions such as NATO and the EU seemed a way to underpin and reinforce the democratic and economic reforms they had undertaken. The 1995 Study on NATO Enlargement stated: “With the end of the Cold War, there is a unique opportunity to build an improved security architecture in the whole of the Euro-Atlantic area. The aim of an improved security architecture is to provide increased stability and security for all in the Euro-Atlantic area, without recreating dividing lines.”<sup>2</sup> Enlargement seemed to fit with the objective of building a Europe that is free, unified, and at peace.

<sup>1</sup> NATO, “Relations with Ukraine,” 12 June 2020, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics\\_37750.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_37750.htm)

<sup>2</sup> NATO, “Study on NATO Enlargement,” 3 September 1995, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_24733.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_24733.htm)

As the US and NATO contemplated the possibility of enlargement, Ukrainian officials became concerned about their country's place in the future European security architecture. Kyiv did not want to find itself in a no-man's land between a NATO expanding toward Ukraine's western border and a Russia clearly unhappy at that prospect. The Alliance, which had begun thinking about moving in parallel on enlargement and on building a cooperative relationship with Russia, began considering a third track: a relationship with Ukraine.<sup>3</sup>

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As a result, Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma and NATO Secretary General Javier Solana signed the Charter on a Distinctive Partnership in July 1997. The charter laid out the principles for the partnership, defined issues for consultation and cooperation, and established a NATO-Ukraine Commission as the body to oversee that relationship.<sup>4</sup>

Kyiv surprised many in May 2002 when it announced its intent to join NATO. This came shortly after Vladimir Putin and NATO had agreed to reinvigorate Russia's relationship with the Alliance in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. Analysts perceived a nervousness in Ukraine that it might be left behind.<sup>5</sup> However, Kuchma failed to staunchly follow up, and NATO-Ukraine relations languished.

Following the Orange Revolution, Ukraine in April 2005 became the first partner from the former Soviet Union to launch an “intensified dialogue” with NATO,<sup>6</sup> the first step in an aspiring member's pursuit of membership. President Viktor Yushchenko wanted more, seeking a Membership Action Plan (MAP) in 2006, and might have achieved it—Russia stayed oddly silent on the question—but his prime minister, Viktor Yanukovich, opposed the idea.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Steven Pifer, *The Eagle and the Trident: U.S.-Ukraine Relations in Turbulent Times* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2017), pp. 91-8.

<sup>4</sup> NATO, “Charter on a Distinctive Partnership between the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and Ukraine,” 9 July 1997, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_25457.htm?](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_25457.htm?)

<sup>5</sup> Taras Kuzio, “Ukraine decides to join NATO at last,” *Kyiv Post*, 13 June 2002, <https://www.kyivpost.com/article/opinion/op-ed/ukraine-decides-to-join-nato-at-last-11310.html>

<sup>6</sup> NATO, “NATO launches ‘Intensified Dialogue’ with Ukraine,” 21 April 2005, <https://www.nato.int/docu/update/2005/04-april/e0421b.htm>

<sup>7</sup> Peter Finn, “Ukraine's Yanukovich Halts NATO Entry Talks,” *Washington Post*, 15 September 2006, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/09/14/AR2006091401476.html>

The issue arose again in 2008, when Yushchenko presented NATO with a request for a MAP, this time endorsed by a different prime minister. Moscow, however, came out hard against the idea. Putin threatened to target nuclear-armed missiles at Ukraine,<sup>8</sup> even though a MAP was only the next stage in the process of qualifying for membership and would not have provided any guarantee that Ukraine would ultimately be invited to join the Alliance. The strong Russian opposition had an impact on key allies, including Germany and France, who opposed US President George W. Bush's bid to secure a MAP for Ukraine at NATO's April 2008 summit in Bucharest. The summit declaration nevertheless welcomed Ukraine's (and Georgia's) aspirations to join the Alliance and stated: "We agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO"—a more categorical formulation that caused no small degree of confusion.<sup>9</sup>

The issue became moot when Yanukovich won the presidency in early 2010. He made clear that he had no interest in membership or a MAP, and secured passage of legislation by the Rada (Ukrainian Parliament) declaring the non-bloc status of Ukraine. However, the Maidan Revolution changed all that.

### ***Kyiv's Deepening Interest in Membership***

Following police attacks on the Maidan demonstrators that killed about 100, Yanukovich fled Kyiv on 21 February 2014 (later turning up in Russia).<sup>10</sup> The next day, the Rada appointed an interim president and acting prime minister. They indicated that their top foreign policy priority was to sign an association agreement with the EU (Yanukovich's decision to postpone signing the association agreement the previous November had triggered the Maidan Revolution).

Shortly thereafter, Russian military forces seized Crimea, and Russian proxy forces initiated the conflict in Donbas, a conflict which has continued for more than six years and claimed some 13,000 lives.<sup>11</sup> This galvanized Kyiv into thinking about NATO membership.

In December 2014, the Rada revoked the country's non-bloc status. In June 2017, the Rada passed a law calling for deepening NATO-Ukraine cooperation with the

<sup>8</sup> "Join NATO and We'll Target Missiles at Kiev, Putin Warns Ukraine," *The Guardian*, 12 February 2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/feb/12/russia.ukraine>

<sup>9</sup> James Sherr, "Ukraine and NATO: Destination Unknown," *The World Today*, No.10 (August-September 2008), <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/twt/ukraine-and-nato-destination-unknown>

<sup>10</sup> University of Washington Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies, "Ukraine's Euromaidan Revolution," [https://jsis.washington.edu/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Ukraine\\_Euromaidan\\_CCP\\_ii.pdf](https://jsis.washington.edu/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Ukraine_Euromaidan_CCP_ii.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> "Ukraine conflict: Can peace plan in east finally bring peace?" *BBC*, 10 December 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-49986007>

goal of eventual membership.<sup>12</sup> In February 2019, the Rada approved constitutional amendments that set full membership in NATO (and the EU) as strategic goals for Ukraine.<sup>13</sup>

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Public opinion mirrored the views in the Rada, with polls showing pluralities and, increasingly, majorities favoring NATO membership. For example, a June 2019 survey showed 53 percent supporting membership with 29 percent opposed.<sup>14</sup> By contrast, in the 1990s and early 2000s, support for NATO membership typically garnered no more than 20-25 percent.

NATO-Ukraine cooperation has become regularized. Ukraine and the allies use annual national programs to lay out areas of cooperation and reforms that Ukraine will implement to align with NATO standards, the same mechanism that Ukraine would use if it were granted a MAP. Five working groups, on issues such as defense reform and civil emergency planning, operate under the NATO-Ukraine Commission. The Alliance has established trust funds to support Ukraine’s defense in areas such as cyber defense and command, control, communications, and computers.<sup>15</sup> These programs aim to assist military reforms and improve interoperability between Ukrainian and NATO military forces.

While receiving assistance from the Alliance, Kyiv has contributed to a variety of NATO-led operations, beginning with peace-support operations in the mid-1990s in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Since then, Ukraine has been among the most active partners, contributing military personnel to serve under NATO command in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Operation Active Endeavor (maritime counter-terrorism operations in the Mediterranean Sea), among others. Ukraine became the first NATO

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<sup>12</sup> “Rada restores course for NATO membership as foreign policy priority,” *Interfax-Ukraine*, 8 June 2017, <https://en.interfax.com.ua/news/general/427216.html>

<sup>13</sup> “Ukraine’s parliament backs changes to Constitution confirming Ukraine’s path toward EU, NATO,” *Unian*, 7 February 2019, <https://www.unian.info/politics/10437570-ukraine-s-parliament-backs-changes-to-constitution-confirming-ukraine-s-path-toward-eu-nato.html>

<sup>14</sup> Oksana Grytsenko, “Poll: NATO support grows in Ukraine, reaches 53 percent,” *Kyiv Post*, 9 July 2019, <https://www.kyivpost.com/ukraine-politics/poll-nato-support-grows-in-ukraine-reaches-53-percent.html>

<sup>15</sup> Mission of Ukraine to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, “Distinctive partnership between Ukraine and NATO,” 16 December 2019, <https://nato.mfa.gov.ua/en/about-ukraine/euroatlantic-cooperation/distinctive-partnership-between-ukraine-and-nato>

partner to take part in NATO's standing rapid reaction force, the NATO Response Force. Kyiv currently contributes strategic airlift to that force.<sup>16</sup>

Under President Volodymyr Zelensky, who took office in May 2019, Kyiv sought to become the sixth participant in the Alliance's Enhanced Opportunities Partnership program. It achieved that in June 2020. The program aims to deepen cooperation with selected partners who have taken part in NATO-led missions in the past and wish to enhance their interoperability with Alliance forces.<sup>17</sup> Ukrainian officials seem to have set aside discussion of a possible MAP for now, apparently recognizing that the concerns that prevented consensus on a MAP at the 2008 Bucharest summit linger.

Zelensky used his first overseas trip as president in June 2019 to affirm his support for integration into European and Euro-Atlantic institutions, traveling to Brussels to meet with the leaders of the EU and NATO. Some have questioned the depth of that commitment, noting Zelensky's call for a referendum at some point on NATO membership, which they fear could derail the country's membership bid (though recent polls suggest that it would not). Zelensky's defenders asserted that the referendum would secure public endorsement for NATO integration, which would prove difficult for any future administration to change.<sup>18</sup>

Ukraine's political elites appear committed to drawing closer to NATO. The Kremlin's aggression in Crimea and Donbas has hardened this view in Kyiv. Indeed, nothing has done more to push Ukraine toward NATO and the West, and away from Russia, than Moscow's policy of the past six years. Many Ukrainians regard full integration into European and Euro-Atlantic institutions as the only reliable guarantee for their country's security.

### *Considerations in NATO*

Ukraine's membership aspirations pose a difficult question for NATO. In July 1997, when inviting Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary to join the Alliance, the leaders of NATO member states affirmed the "open door" policy, based on Article 10 of the North Atlantic Treaty. It states in part: "The Parties may, by unanimous agreement, invite any other European State in a position to further the principles of

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<sup>16</sup> NATO, "Relations with Ukraine."

<sup>17</sup> NATO, "NATO recognizes Ukraine as Enhanced Opportunities Partner," 12 June 2020, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_176327.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_176327.htm)

<sup>18</sup> Steven Pifer, "One month into the Zelensky presidency and Ukraine's still here," *Brookings*, 17 June 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/06/17/one-month-into-the-zelenskiy-presidency-and-ukraines-still-here/>

this Treaty and to contribute to the security of the North Atlantic area to accede to this Treaty.”<sup>19</sup>

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In terms of the kinds of democratic, economic, and defense reforms that NATO asks of aspirant countries, Ukraine in 2008 compared favorably with countries such as Bulgaria and Romania that received MAPs in 1999 and became Alliance members in 2004. Moreover, Kyiv has demonstrated that it could contribute serious military capabilities, as it did in NATO-led operations in the Balkans and as the fourth largest contributor to the US-led coalition force in Iraq from 2003 to 2005.

Bringing Ukraine into NATO arguably would advance Alliance interests. It would underpin Kyiv’s democratic and economic reforms (as with others who have joined over the past 23 years). It would give the Alliance additional military capabilities (Ukrainian forces have improved considerably since 2014). It would broaden the zone of security and stability that NATO provides in Europe, in particular bolstering NATO’s presence in the Black Sea region. Baltic and Central European allies would enthusiastically welcome Ukrainian membership and Ukraine’s military contribution to the Alliance.

One problem persists: Russia. Ukraine in 2008 merited a MAP, but it did not receive one at the Bucharest summit, as some allied leaders were clearly wary of extending a binding security guarantee to Ukraine in the face of Moscow’s opposition.

The Alliance is no more likely now to find consensus on putting Ukraine on a membership course. Russia has seized and illegally annexed Crimea, and Russian and Russian proxy forces continue to occupy part of Donbas. Ukraine’s admission to NATO under current circumstances would immediately raise an Article 5 question. Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty states: “The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all and... [each ally] will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force....”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> NATO, “The North Atlantic Treaty,” 4 April 1949, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official\\_texts\\_17120.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_17120.htm)

<sup>20</sup> NATO, “North Atlantic Treaty.”

Alliance members considered this issue in the 1995 enlargement study. Paragraph 6 reads: “States which have ethnic disputes or external territorial disputes, including irredentist claims, or internal jurisdictional disputes must settle those disputes by peaceful means in accordance with OSCE principles.” Although not an absolute requirement, NATO said: “Resolution of such disputes would be a factor in determining whether to invite a state to join the Alliance.”<sup>21</sup>

Allies indicated a reluctance to take in a country which had a territorial dispute, in large part because NATO did not immediately want to confront an Article 5 contingency. The Kremlin undoubtedly realizes that, which explains in part the occupation by Russian and/or Russian proxy forces of parts of Ukraine as well as parts of Georgia (Abkhazia and South Ossetia) and Moldova (Transnistria). While all NATO members express support for Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, the reality is that few are prepared to go to war with Russia to secure that.

The other concern regarding a MAP for Ukraine is that Moscow might take the MAP as a provocation, but a MAP by itself would extend Kyiv no security benefit. Russia enthusiastically engaged in a brief war with Georgia in August 2008, in part to demonstrate its unhappiness with Tbilisi’s bid for a MAP. NATO needs to answer the question of what the Alliance does when it extends a MAP to a country and that country becomes the object of another country’s aggression. That answer has to be better than the one in 2008, which was essentially nothing.

Finally, a number of allies will be concerned that, as long as the conflict with Russia continues, it will be difficult for Ukraine to be a net security provider for the Alliance. That will be a key factor in any consideration of membership.

### *Moscow’s Opposition*

Moscow passed up opportunities to develop its own cooperative relationship with NATO. While acquiescing in the first two rounds of NATO enlargement in 1999 and 2004, including the admission of the three Baltic states, it has for more than a decade made plain its opposition to any further NATO enlargement. The Kremlin will actively resist any move by a post-Soviet state to join, even though under international law this is a matter that only NATO and the aspirant country can decide. No matter how firmly NATO insists that Russia has no veto, Russia will make its position known. Senior Russian officials are plainly dissatisfied with how Europe’s security architecture has evolved over the past three decades, particularly the enlargement of NATO and the EU. They regard these developments as inimical to Russian interests and seek to reverse them if possible.

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<sup>21</sup> NATO, “Study on NATO Enlargement.”

The Kremlin now portrays NATO enlargement as a military threat, ignoring the huge reduction in US and allied military forces since the end of the Cold War and the steps that the Alliance took specifically to assuage potential Russian concerns in this regard. In 1997, NATO stated that it had “no intention, no plan and no reason to deploy nuclear weapons on the territory of new members.” It also stated it would carry out its collective defense missions without “the additional permanent stationing of substantial combat forces” on the territory of new members.<sup>22</sup> Only in 2014, after Russia began its conflict with Ukraine, did NATO begin to deploy multinational battalions in each of the Baltic states and Poland (the US also began persistent deployment of elements of an armored brigade combat team in Poland). Notably, these deployments are not permanent and do not cross the threshold of “substantial”. Of course, from Moscow’s perspective, the addition of Ukraine’s military to NATO’s integrated military structure would further alter the NATO-Russia balance to Russia’s detriment.

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Russia’s concern about NATO enlargement is also political. As part of its self-image as a great power, the Kremlin believes Russia should have a sphere of influence—or a “sphere of privileged interests” as President Dmitry Medvedev put it in 2008—in the post-Soviet space.<sup>23</sup> Russian actions of the past six years, however, make it virtually impossible that Kyiv would turn away from Europe and accept a place in Moscow’s orbit, even if one were to accept the discredited 19th century notion of spheres of influence.

The Russian objective now seems to be to keep Ukraine from succeeding as a stable, Western-oriented democracy. The Kremlin fears that Ukraine’s success could inspire a popular push for greater democracy in Russia itself, posing an existential threat to Putin’s authoritarian system. The conflict in Donbas serves as a mechanism to pressure, destabilize, and distract Kyiv in order to make it harder for the Ukrainian government to get on with domestic reforms and other actions to draw closer to Europe. The conflict also is in part about where Ukraine will fit in Europe’s security architecture, an architecture that Moscow seeks to upend.

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<sup>22</sup> NATO, “Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation signed in Paris, France,” 27 May 1997, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_25468.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_25468.htm)

<sup>23</sup> Andrew E. Kramer, “Russia Claims Its Sphere of Influence in the World,” *New York Times*, 31 August 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/01/world/europe/01russia.html>

### *Where to?*

Ukraine's path to membership in NATO appears blocked for now. Kyiv and NATO member states believe that Ukraine, as a sovereign state, should have the right to decide its own foreign policy course and alignments, including treaties of alliance. Moscow has formally agreed to this in the past, for example, in the 1975 Helsinki Final Act.<sup>24</sup> Today, however, Russia has been resorting to a variety of means, including military force, to hinder Ukraine's path. That is the dilemma facing senior policymakers in Kyiv and Ukraine's friends in NATO.

So, what can Kyiv do? First of all, it should insist that NATO maintain its "open door" policy, which is grounded in a key article of the treaty that established the Alliance. Fortunately, NATO has, to date, protected the policy and the official position that membership is an issue between the Alliance and the country in question. Kyiv can quietly ask key friends within NATO, such as the United States, Britain, Poland, Canada, and Lithuania, to hold the Alliance to this position.

Second, Ukraine needs to play a long game. Circumstances in the near term likely will remain such that NATO could find no consensus for an invitation to Ukraine to join or even to give Kyiv a MAP. There is little value in asking a question when one knows the answer will be negative. Kyiv should not obsess on the title governing its relationship with NATO—it is possible to put a MAP's worth of content in an annual national program—but, as addressed below, Ukrainian officials should focus on practical action.

Third, to the extent that Ukraine and Russia may have to find agreed language on the question of Ukraine's relationship with NATO as part of the solution to the conflict in Donbas, Kyiv should offer the formulation "not now but not never" as regards to ultimate membership. By saying "not now", Ukraine would give up nothing—membership will not happen anytime soon. But preserving "not never" would keep the option alive for some future time.

Fourth, Ukraine should focus on practical actions to deepen cooperation with NATO. These include continuing reforms of the Ukrainian military to make it interoperable with NATO military forces and participating in NATO operations and exercises. When Kyiv sets an annual national program with NATO, it should do everything it can to deliver on the particulars of that program. Too often in the past, Kyiv's performance has lagged in this regard. Full implementation would signal seriousness of commitment, and position Ukraine to move forward with NATO when the possibility opens.

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<sup>24</sup> OSCE, "Helsinki Final Act," 1 August 1975, <https://www.osce.org/helsinki-final-act>

Finally, Ukraine should redouble its broader reform efforts. NATO is not just a defensive alliance; it is a community of democratic, law-ruled societies. The more Kyiv does to consolidate democracy and rule of law, including curbing corruption, reforming the judicial branch as well as completing the reforms of the Ministry of Defense and of the security sector, the more strongly it can make the case that Ukraine merits membership in institutions such as NATO.