



Ukraine Wants Security Guarantees to Stop Fighting: If Americans and Europeans Won't Battle for Kyiv Today, Why Would They Do So Tomorrow?

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The ultimate peace settlement between Ukraine and Russia will depend heavily upon battlefield outcomes. No one knows how the war is going to turn out.

Even most of Kyiv's friends expected Moscow to quickly overwhelm its neighbor. Instead, Ukraine rebuffed Russia's overconfident, mismanaged opening offensive. Soon Kyiv and its allies began imagining victory, even recovering territory lost in 2014. However, Moscow's offensive in Ukraine's east now is making serious if costly gains.

What happens next is anyone's guess. Both sides claim a long-term advantage, but no one really knows. More likely than a decisive outcome may be another frozen conflict, only with new battle lines. The prospect of both countries facing violent and costly uncertainty for months or years provides the best hope for a negotiated peace settlement.

Talk of a diplomatic end has raised questions about security guarantees. In March, when Kyiv and Moscow were meeting, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky acknowledged that NATO membership appeared to be out of reach: "It is clear that Ukraine is not a member of NATO; we understand this. ... For years we heard about the apparently open door but have already also heard that we will not enter there, and these are truths and must be acknowledged."

Yet Ukraine's interlocutors, though indicating a willingness to consider neutrality, insisted that would require security guarantees similar to those contained in NATO's Article 5 and by a number of countries, including the permanent members of the Security Council – which includes the US, of course – and a curious mix of others, including Canada, Germany, Israel, Italy, Poland, and Turkey.

Although those discussions ended without result, the issue continues to dampen prospects of a negotiated settlement. Earlier this month German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said what many other European leaders were thinking, that any commitments "won't correspond to Article 5 of the NATO Treaty." However, what he envisioned is unclear. He said guarantees "must be tailored"

to Kyiv's "specific situation," but "this is all a process that is far from being complete and therefore cannot yet be concretized."

Last month French officials were no more specific. NATO and European Union officials apparently discussed security options for Ukraine. An unnamed French presidential adviser told *Politico*: "Our country is ready to give security guarantees." At least sort of. Paris wanted to provide "guarantees that would involve us in the sense that if Ukraine were attacked, we could assess the means of assisting it, and of enabling it to re-establish its sovereignty and its territorial integrity," whatever that means. Notably, NATO membership was not viewed as an alternative: "These are security guarantees which, in a way, are similar to those which exist in the European Union Treaty, but which are basically different from the NATO model."

Which leaves Ukrainians and everyone else equally in the dark.

Outsider analysts have done no better in plotting the future. PONARS Eurasia asked several for their ideas. Most imagine that Moscow must be defeated and the US must add Kyiv as a defense dependent. But as noted earlier, Ukraine's early success doesn't guarantee ultimate victory. Moreover, if Washington won't fight for Ukraine now, why would it promise to defend Ukraine in the future? The first order of peacemaking between Russia and Ukraine is a realistic assessment of the parties and conflict.

For instance, Petro Burkovskiy of the Democratic Initiatives Foundation and Olexiy Haran of the National University of Kyiv Mohyla Academy argued that "only the moment when Ukrainian troops approach the administrative border of occupied Crimea will the Russian government make a choice in favor of substantive peace talks. For Ukraine, this would be difficult because it would have to choose between the desired liberation of Crimea and a complete ceasefire. It will also mean that the punishment of Russian war criminals may be delayed indefinitely. Achieving and explaining this kind of compromise with the aggressor must be facilitated by strong guarantees that Ukraine shall not suffer from a future invasion."

What would such guarantees involve? The authors contended: "To prevent Ukraine's and Europe's failure in what appears to be a long-term struggle with Russia, it is necessary to recognize and accept the necessity of real security guarantees (unlike the Budapest-type 1990s 'security assurances'). One option may be a non-bloc variant with real security guarantees provided by the US, the UK, France, and perhaps Turkey, Poland, and others. It should include immediate military support, including troops on the ground if Russia attacks Ukraine." Also necessary, argued Burkovskiy and Haran, would be a no-fly zone and missile defense.

But this isn't all. They said that this possibility "does not mean that Kyiv should refuse to move to NATO membership. This crucial condition can keep aggressive Russian plans at bay. As in the case of Finland and Sweden's highly likely quick accession to NATO at the Madrid summit, Ukraine must have the same possibility to join NATO to counterbalance Russian threats of another war in the future."

McGill University's Maria Popova and Tufts University's Oxana Shevel focused on the latter option. They contended that "Ukraine's long-term security rests on three pillars: Russia's full

military defeat in the war, the Western realization there can be no return to cooperation or interdependence with autocratic and imperialist Russia, and Ukrainian integration into the EU and then into NATO."

The first is desirable but cannot be guaranteed. Popova and Shevel downplayed the Western commitment required: "Ukraine is not asking Western democracies to fight for it but is asking for heavy weapons to enable its army to liberate territories seized by Russia." However, weapons alone will not guarantee victory over Kyiv's larger opponent, and the authors conveniently dismissed the potential for escalation, even though the conflict remains far more important to Moscow than the West.

The second objective is dubious in theory and difficult in practice. Although Europe's future relationship with Moscow will and should change, including less reliance on Russian energy, isolation would not make a safer world. Imagine turning Russia into a giant North Korea, only more tightly linked to China, Iran, and the real North Korea, and building new relationships throughout the Global South. Desirable is settling on a stable peace rather than a state of constant near-war.

The third picks up where Burkovskiy and Haran leave off. Wrote Popova and Shevel: "Long-term security for Ukraine can only be achieved through NATO membership, not through alternatives to NATO membership. If Ukraine is not in NATO, NATO will not give Article-5 like guarantees to Ukraine. Security guarantees that, in practice, do not offer collective defense in case of future aggression would be insufficient as they would leave Ukraine vulnerable if Russia were to attack again."

Paul D'Anieri of the University of California (Riverside) also emphasized the role of other states: "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." Since he believes that a nuclear deterrent is not realistic, he wrote: "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."

He wants no allied pressure on Kyiv to make a deal with Russia. He also insisted that: "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." One aspect would be continuing to provide weapons and training to Ukraine. More significantly, he desires NATO membership as well, though he acknowledged that it remains uncertain: "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."

Most realistic was Mariya Omelicheva, of the National War College. She wrote: "Washington has already signaled an unwillingness to offer Kyiv the kind of legally binding protections it has requested. So has the UK, which announced that the country was not ready to become a

guarantor of Ukraine's independence when the latter floated a peace deal with the Kremlin. While it is not impossible to extend NATO's membership to a country at war, the foreign occupation of Ukrainian territories would be a big practical obstacle to Kyiv's admission to the Alliance." Moreover, she worried that "A prolonged admission process makes NATO aspirants particularly vulnerable to Russia's gray zone and even kinetic attacks."

Thus, Omelicheva searched for an alternative. She suggested the Israel model: "While thinking of Ukraine's future in terms of 'a big Israel with its own face' may be unusual and even extreme, centering Ukraine's security on the principle of self-defense is a better alternative than banking on collective security that comes with eventual membership in NATO. By maintaining close defense partnerships with the US and European countries for modernizing and equipping its military and bolstering its air defense and drawing on assistance from other partners willing to share technology, training, and intelligence, Ukraine can tailor its security posture to its unique situation and security needs."

Understandably, Kyiv is concerned about securing the peace once its battle with Russia ends. However, the Zelensky government is not served by harboring unrealistic expectations. What happens if victory proves unattainable, at least in the short-term? What happens if the West refuses to underwrite Kyiv's ambitions, such as recovering not just territory lost since Moscow's February 24 invasion but also the lands detached from Ukraine in 2014?

Most important, what if the allies prove no more willing to go to war for Ukraine tomorrow than they are today? There is a reason that the allies spent 14 years lying to Kyiv about its prospects of joining NATO. The likelihood of an ad hoc group of states agreeing to defend Ukraine is even smaller. Turkey? Canada? *Israel*?

No one wants to go to war on Ukraine's behalf.

Only President George W. Bush, architect of the disastrous Iraq invasion and head of America's most reckless US administration in recent memory, was prepared to make such a counterproductive commitment, but the Europeans said no. The result was the promise of eventual membership at NATO's 2008 meeting in Bucharest, followed by years of shameless dissembling. Even as war approached earlier this year allied officials waxed eloquent about how they looked forward to welcoming Kyiv (and Tbilisi) into the transatlantic alliance while doing nothing to make it happen.

NATO's members all realized that including Ukraine would bring along Kyiv's conflict with Russia. Which meant an allied war with Moscow would be possible, and perhaps likely. None of them were prepared to fight on Kyiv's behalf. None believed that Ukraine's defense was worth a war with Russia. Indeed, it should surprise no one that governments too cowardly to admit the truth to Kyiv would not take up arms on behalf of the same country.

That includes the US. Although America proved to be the world's most militaristic country after the Cold War ended, Washington primarily beat up poor developing states with wretched governments, militaries, and economies. Like Haiti, Panama, Somalia, Serbia, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and Syria. The world's top military seeds these were not. And even then the US record

was astonishingly poor. To their credit, Washington policymakers recognized the risks involved in confronting nuclear-armed Russia and so far have said no. The refusal of NATO to enter the ongoing war also reflects this judgment.

There is strong popular sentiment to assist Ukraine, but neither Americans nor Europeans are besieging military recruiting offices to sign up for a war to liberate the Donbass from Moscow. There are no mass demonstrations or petition campaigns for war. Those who shout loudest for tougher military action are conveniently far from the front line. People on both sides of the Atlantic recognize that the war is murderous and unjust, but they also don't believe the cause warrants *their* participation in the war.

This attitude isn't likely to change in the future. When the war finally, mercifully, ends, no one in America or Europe will be any more inclined to go to war for Ukraine. That is evident from the positions of France and Germany, hoping to devise a "security guarantee" which does *not* actually require them to go to war. Similarly, the European Union agreed to make Kyiv a candidate to join, but only reluctantly, with no guarantee that the latter will ever meet the EU's tough membership criteria.

Despite fevered support for Ukraine by Washington's foreign policy establishment, there are few voices urging Ukraine's membership in NATO. Even the warhawks most willing to bomb, invade, and occupy hapless Third World states are not willing to risk nuclear Armageddon with Russia. With the US in the lead, allied governments should level with Ukrainians, and indicate that the West is no more likely to defend Kyiv in the future than in the past.

It always has been easier to start than stop wars. Ukraine is no different. However the Russo-Ukraine war ends, the Ukrainian people will remain in a bad neighborhood and largely on their own. They need to take that reality into account as they look into a future likely to be both uncertain and dangerous.

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