

# The American Conservative

## Ukraine Can't Join NATO

*Washington should pop Zelensky's latest trial balloon and make peace the priority.*

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The United States is the world's most powerful nation. It also is a member of more military alliances and has more allies than any other country.

Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky is campaigning to add his nation to that long list at the upcoming NATO summit, which he said would "be a timely signal." The country's bid is supported by other hapless and helpless U.S. dependents, such as Estonia, whose president, Alar Karis, reportedly declared: "There is no alternative at the moment." Estonian defense official Tuuli Duneton urged the alliance to tell Ukrainians "that after all the suffering they have endured, their place belongs [in] NATO, and they are more than welcome to join." Baltic neighbor Lithuania's foreign minister, Gabrielius Landsbergis, previously argued that NATO membership for Ukraine is "basically unavoidable," that "NATO will have to have a way to accept Ukraine."

Actually, the transatlantic alliance doesn't have to. Ukraine should remain outside of NATO, at least until Estonia is prepared to take over the country's defense. Alas, that might take a while, since Tallinn ranked 25th of thirty-one members in spending and deployed just 6,800 military personnel in 2021.

Unfortunately, military spending has become one of America's largest welfare programs. The U.S. treats allies like Facebook friends, accumulating as many as possible, irrespective of their value. A few years ago Washington celebrated the addition of Montenegro and North Macedonia—the first a movie-set country and the second crippled for years by a national name dispute—which ranked 31st and 30th, respectively, in alliance military expenditures. Next up to enter NATO is the Duchy of Grand Fenwick.

Supporters of Washington's many defense commitments, often acting as advocates of governments seeking protection, contend that alliances inflate American power. However, the relationship usually is the reverse. Extraordinary U.S. power attracts allies, especially weaklings seeking a cheap ride. Most nations would like a security guarantee from nuclear-armed Uncle Sam in order to offload responsibility for their own defense.

Europeans and Japanese became American military dependents at the close of World War II. South Korea gained its coveted "mutual" defense treaty in 1953. Other states won official or sometimes informal allied status in later years.

Shielding important war-ravaged states from potential Soviet and related aggression until they had recovered economically made sense during the early years of the Cold War. However, the

U.S. troop presence was supposed to be temporary. Historian James McAllister observed that “American policymakers from Franklin Delano Roosevelt to Dwight Eisenhower strenuously tried to avoid having the future of Europe dependent on a permanent U.S. military presence on the continent.” Eisenhower emphasized empowering those being defended: “We cannot be a modern Rome guarding the far frontiers with our legions if for no other reason than that these are not, politically, our frontiers.”

Yet today most of Europe barely bothers to field a military, at least ones capable of conducting serious armed operations. Germany twice took on much of the industrialized world at enormous odds. But in recent years, Berlin’s procurement and readiness have been national embarrassments. It is not clear that Germany would win a straight-up contest with Estonia, though Montenegro still might succumb to it. Yet despite last year’s clarion call for action, the government, led by the Social Democratic Party, has backed away from its promises of serious rearmament.

Nothing will change as long as the U.S. “reassures” Europe that no matter how little it does, Americans are prepared to die for countries whose own people are reluctant to do the same. They, like the infamous Dick Cheney, obviously have “other priorities.” Nothing will change as long as Uncle Sam insists on playing Uncle Sucker, albeit accompanied by endless whining and whinging.

Being taken advantage of frankly doesn’t matter much when it comes to the likes of Montenegro, which isn’t worth conquering. Russia has no interest in launching World War III to occupy Podgorica, whether to film an actual spy movie or for another reason.

That isn’t the case with Ukraine. That country is no more important than Montenegro for U.S. security, but it is an existential interest for Moscow, and not just Russian President Vladimir Putin.

The reckless Dubya administration, having already destroyed Iraq, forced a promise at NATO’s 2008 Bucharest meeting to eventually include Ukraine. However, subsequent administrations as well as other alliance members refused to make good on the commitment, rightly deciding that Kiev, though ill-treated by Russia, was not worth defending.

Alas, refusing to forthrightly repudiate their commitment to Ukraine despite warnings of likely ill consequences set the stage for Moscow’s invasion last year. That, as well as refusing to implement the Minsk 2 agreement, which would have granted greater autonomy to the largely Russian-speaking east. Indeed, last December former German Chancellor Angela Merkel admitted that the commitment was a ploy to gain time for Kiev. Although Putin is responsible for starting the war, the allies share blame for the resulting bloodshed and destruction.

Yet promising without delivering continues to be the allied policy. Last fall, appropriately enough in Bucharest again, NATO members proclaimed: “We firmly stand behind our commitment to the Alliance’s Open Door policy. We reaffirm the decisions we took at the 2008 Bucharest Summit and all subsequent decisions with respect to Georgia and Ukraine.” However, as before, the promise was empty. When asked about the issue, national security advisor Jake Sullivan responded that “the process in Brussels should be taken up at a different time.” Presumably also in a different dimension and universe.

NATO members are divided about Ukraine as the July meeting approaches, with the U.S. and Germany, among others, rejecting demands for instant action. The Eastern Europeans, ever ready to sacrifice U.S. blood and treasure, are pushing back, “intent on lobbying Washington to change its course ahead of the summit.”

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said that he hoped to “help Ukraine move towards NATO membership” and expected “that we will agree [sic] a multi-year program, where we will work on how to help Ukraine transition from Soviet-era standards, doctrines and equipment to NATO standards and doctrines and equipment, and become fully interoperable with NATO.” This would prolong the fiction for Kiev while continuing to inflame Russian security fears.

If Ukraine was worth fighting for, now would be the time to do so. The conflict’s outcome remains in doubt. Even the country’s professed friends worry that it lacks sufficient manpower and weaponry to achieve outright victory.

While a Russian win also seems unlikely, despite Moscow’s larger resource and economic base, stalemate is no friend of Ukraine. Tens of thousands are dead and wounded, millions are displaced, cities are wrecked, the economy is on foreign life support, and the future is on hold. Indeed, the allies risk doing just enough to keep Kiev in the fight, but not enough to yield a decisive result, which looks an awful lot like a strategy to bleed Russia by fighting it to the last Ukrainian.

U.S. policymakers might believe that “the price is worth it,” as the late Madeleine Albright once pronounced about the sanctions-induced starvation of Iraqi children. However, despite the Europeans’ fevered rhetorical and varying materiel commitments to Ukraine’s defense, no one else has joined the conflict. Although Poland and the Baltics have pressed for ever-more-provocative allied backing for Kiev, they dare not actively intervene without U.S. backing. Indeed, Warsaw appeared to be as relieved as everyone else in NATO when the missile that struck its territory was determined to be Ukrainian rather than Russian.

Thankfully, thus far the Biden administration appears determined to avoid triggering a global conflagration with Moscow that could devastate America as well as Ukraine. The costs and risks of an ever-longer conflict, with Russia growing more antagonistic and/or desperate, would be great, especially for a financially strapped and politically unstable America.

President Biden should respond to Ukraine’s not so subtle attempt to manipulate the U.S. and Europeans into offering NATO membership and ultimately joining the war. In fact, last March, when there was still hope of a negotiated settlement, Zelensky dismissed the option: “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.” A mix of domestic political pressure, surprising battlefield success, and fulsome foreign support appears to have inflated his geopolitical ambitions. Washington should pop Zelensky’s latest trial balloon and make peace the priority.

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