

## Making Ukraine A NATO Member In All But Name

Despite the protests of allies such as France and Germany, the U.S. is pursuing an arrogant, unwise, and potentially very dangerous policy.

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A festering disagreement between the United States and several European allies, especially France and Germany, about whether to make Ukraine a member of NATO is yet another issue producing a chill in transatlantic relations. The disagreement is long-standing, and Washington's behavior exemplifies its barely concealed contempt for even the most significant NATO partners. Even though opposition from Paris and Berlin (as well as some other European capitals) continues to thwart Kiev's bid for formal membership, U.S. policy has made NATO's relationship with Ukraine functionally equivalent to a security guarantee under Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. The United States is pursuing an arrogant, unwise, and potentially very dangerous policy.

The split between Washington and both Paris and Berlin about admitting Ukraine to NATO emerged clearly in 2008 when President George W. Bush lobbied ferociously for extending such an invitation. French and German leaders firmly opposed that step at the NATO summit. In her memoir, former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice recalled that German Chancellor Angela Merkel was especially outspoken, dismissing Ukraine as a "corrupt mess" and warning that a membership offer would dangerously provoke Russia. The allied opposition held, and the best that Bush could come away with was a summit declaration affirming that "someday" Ukraine would become a NATO member. However, there was no timetable, and even more important, the summit did not approve a Membership Action Plan (MAP) that would lead to such a timetable.

U.S. leaders did not give up, however, nor did Kiev. Barack Obama's administration continued a campaign to admit Ukraine to the alliance, and although Donald Trump displayed less overt enthusiasm for that step, his administration remained officially committed to the position. Kiev's lobbying effort continued as well. In 2018, then-President Petro Poroshenko pressed NATO to approve a MAP promptly.

Since Joe Biden became president, the efforts by Ukraine and its admirers in the United States to secure membership have increased. In February, the slavishly pro-Ukraine Atlantic Council of the United States highlighted Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy's plaintive question: "Why is Ukraine still not in NATO?" The Council featured an article by Ukraine's foreign minister, Dmytro Kuleba, making the case that correcting that situation was long overdue. In September, Zelenskiy pressed Biden to increase his efforts to secure NATO membership for his country. "If we are talking about NATO and the MAP, I would really like to get (from Biden) specifics – yes or no," Zelenskiy said. "We must get clear dates and the likelihood of this for Ukraine."

As did his two immediate predecessors, Biden has tried to dodge the issue of Ukraine's formal membership in the Alliance. One of his reasons is the same one that Merkel cited 13 years ago: Ukraine is still a corrupt mess. Indeed, not only is corruption in Ukraine at least as bad as it was at that time, but the current regime in Kiev exhibits numerous signs of rising authoritarianism. Those problems would make Ukraine a rather awkward partner for France, Germany, and other members.

In recent years, however, U.S. *actions* have increasingly made the issue of formal membership a distinction without a difference. Washington simply has ignored French and German reluctance about extending a NATO security commitment to Ukraine. Instead, U.S. leaders treat Kiev as a de facto NATO member and a crucial U.S. military ally. Trump's administration approved multiple weapons shipments to Kiev, sales that included javelin anti-tank missiles that Russia considers especially destabilizing. Such transactions have intensified since Biden entered the White House. Ukraine's enthusiastic backers in Congress want to escalate that support significantly. An amendment to the 2022 defense bill would provide Ukraine with sophisticated air defense missiles, likely culminating in an "iron dome" system that U.S. Army personnel would operate. There is a very good chance that the final version of the legislation will include that provision, thus placing American troops on the front lines of the volatile, ongoing confrontation between Ukraine and Russia.

Washington's existing security relationship with Kiev goes far beyond arms sales. Over the past five years, U.S. forces have conducted multiple joint exercises (war games) with Ukrainian units. Washington also has successfully pressed its NATO allies to include Ukraine in the Alliance's war games. Indeed, Ukraine is hosting and leading the latest version, Rapid Trident 21. It is no secret that such exercises are directed against only one country: Russia. In early April 2021, Biden assured Zelenskiy of Washington's "unwavering support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity in the face of Russia's ongoing aggression."

Adopting such policies despite the more restrained posture that Paris and Berlin have advocated consistently for well over a decade suggests a U.S. devotion to Ukraine's security that borders on an obsession. Washington's single-minded determination is all the more surprising since already fragile U.S. relations with Germany and France are deteriorating for other reasons. The ultimately unsuccessful efforts by the Trump and Biden administrations to halt completion of the Nord Stream 2 natural gas pipeline, providing a direct link between Russia and Germany, mightily irritated Berlin. Even though Biden and Merkel eventually resolved the issue with an awkward compromise agreement, scars remain.

The more recent spat between the United States and France over the sale of U.S. nuclear submarines to Australia may have created even more severe and lasting damage to Washington's relations with that country. It's never a good development when a major ally accuses the United States of "lying" to steal a lucrative military contract and then recalls its ambassador from Washington (albeit temporarily).

The last thing the Biden administration should do is risk creating additional tensions with Berlin and Paris over making Ukraine a NATO security obligation. There are no indications that French and German leaders believe that the problem of corruption in Ukraine has diminished or that giving Kiev NATO membership would be any less of a provocation to Russia than it would have been in 2008. The latter concern remains especially prominent, as even Ukrainian officials recognize. Quiet but firm resistance from France, Germany (and apparently other members) again deterred the 2021 NATO summit from approving a MAP.

French and German leaders were correct in 2008, and their resistance is correct now. Washington should listen to them and back away from the dangerous folly of treating Ukraine as a de facto NATO ally.

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