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Ukraine's NATO Membership Will Strengthen Europe's Security

by Riccardo Alcaro

NATO's refusal to set a clear pathway for Ukraine's membership largely dominated the expert and public debate over the Alliance's summit in Vilnius last week.[1] It also overshadowed its significant, even historic, results.[2]

After all, in Vilnius, NATO all but acquired a new member (barring surprises from Turkey's parliament): not (yet) Ukraine but Sweden. Coming on the heels of Finland's, Sweden's accession solidifies NATO's dominating position in the Baltic basin,[3] which in recent years has been the theatre of much of Russia's destabilising activism,[4] ranging from continual provocations and intimidation by Russian navy and air forces to sabotage (for instance, of undersea cables[5] and perhaps pipelines[6] too).

Sweden got the green light after Turkey (soon followed by the other holdout Hungary) lifted its veto. While there was no official confirmation, it is an open secret that the negotiation was unlocked by US President Joe Biden's promise to allow the sale of F-16 fighter jets to Ankara.[7] Five years after

1 NATO, *Vilnius Summit Communiqué*, 11 July 2023, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_217320.htm.

2 Steven Erlanger, "Despite Successes at NATO Summit, Divisions Remain", in *The New York Times*, 12 July 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/12/world/europe/nato-summit-ukraine-biden.html.

3 Laura Kayali, "Sorry Russia, the Baltic Sea Is NATO's Lake Now", in *Politico*, 13 July 2023, https://www.politico.eu/?p=3330753.

4 Göran Swistek and Michael Paul, "Geopolitics in the Baltic Sea Region", in *SWP Comments*, No. 2023/C 09 (February 2023), https://doi.org/10.18449/2023C09.

5 Warsaw Institute, "Russia Cripples NATO's Undersea Communications", in *Russia Monitor*, 17 January 2022, https://warsawinstitute.org/?p=55763.

6 Nicolas Camut, "Russian Ship Spotted Near Nord Stream Pipelines Days Before Sabotage: Reports", in *Politico*, 28 April 2023, https://www.politico.eu/?p=2979735.

7 Felicia Schwartz and Henry Foy, "US Says It 'Intends to Move Forward' with Transfer of F-16

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the ill-conceived decision to acquire the S-400 air defence system from Russia, which had prompted the United States to downgrade bilateral military cooperation, Turkey has thus made another step bringing it closer to its historical NATO allies.[8]

NATO leaders also endorsed new plans to bolster the Alliance's defence and deterrence capabilities, which now involve greater (and arguably permanent) deployment of military assets to countries closer to Russia's borders, and agreed on more ambitious defence spending and investment schemes.[9]

So all good bar Ukraine? On the contrary, the summit has delivered – and considerably so – also on that front. Most importantly, it has made it clear that Ukraine's future is in the Alliance, a hard but strategically necessary decision.

Assistance today, membership tomorrow

In Vilnius the Allies have re-affirmed their support for Ukraine's defence. The G7 countries have committed to further military supplies, training of Ukrainian troops and more intelligence sharing.[10] While not exactly security guarantees, the G7 pledges amount to a framework for military assistance to Ukraine for years to come. In addition, eleven NATO countries have agreed to have Ukrainian pilots trained for the use of F16s in their airspace,[11] while Germany has promised additional advanced weapons systems, and France has acknowledged that it has been transferring long-range missiles to Kyiv, the second NATO country to do so after the United Kingdom.[12]

Taken together, these measures are expected to augment Ukraine's capacity to push Russian troops back from the current front line. As such, they are arguably much more important than any decision about whether Ukraine should be given a precise timeframe to join the Alliance. On balance, then, Ukraine has come out of the Vilnius summit more integrated with NATO than it was before it. It has also been reassured that, once the invitation to accede is extended, it will not have to go through the lengthy process set by

Jets to Turkey", in *Financial Times*, 11 July 2023, https://www.ft.com/content/cd8e7cc1-30c8-4b53-a605-8524d5815156.

8 International Institute for Strategic Studies, "Turkey, the S-400 and the F-35", in *Strategic Comments*, Vol. 25, No. 22 (August 2019), https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-comments/2019/turkey-the-s400-and-the-f35; Huseyin Hayatsever, Can Sezer and Burcu Karakas, "Turkey Sets New Western Tilt in Foreign Policy as Economy Weighs", in *Reuters*, 11 July 2023, http://reut.rs/3O7kSVg.

9 NATO, *NATO Agrees Strong Package for Ukraine, Boosts Deterrence and Defence*, 11 July 2023, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_217059.htm.

10 G7, *Joint Declaration of Support for Ukraine*, Vilnius, 12 July 2023, http://www.g7.utoronto.ca/summit/2023hiroshima/230712-g7-nato.html.

11 Stuart Lau, "NATO Countries Pledge F-16 Training for Ukraine", in *Politico*, 11 July 2023, https://www.politico.eu/?p=3329745.

12 "Berlin Finalises 700 Million-Euro Military Aid Package for Ukraine", in *Reuters*, 11 July 2023, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/berlin-finalises-700-mln-euro-military-aid-package-ukraine-2023-07-11; John Irish, "France to Supply Ukraine with Long-range Cruise Missiles", in *Reuters*, 11 July 2023, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/france-send-long-range-missiles-ukraine-macron-2023-07-11.

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the Membership Action Plan (MAP), the conditionality-filled document that since 1999 has defined the conditions for aspirant members to join.[13]

The benefit of NATO's refusal to define now the conditions for Ukraine's accession is that the Allies can pick one amongst several options in the future. The downside is that the hard debate about the time and modality of Kyiv's accession will have to be addressed in challenging circumstances: will Ukraine join right after the end of the war or at a point further in the future? Will it do so only if all or just part of the territory currently occupied by Russia is liberated?

These are hard questions that NATO leaders – as well as experts – will have to engage with extensively in the future. For the time being, however, dwelling further on the wisdom of making Ukraine NATO's 33rd member is an important, indeed unavoidable, exercise in strategic reflection and contribution to the public debate.

Western responsibilities, Russian fault

Ukraine's integration into the EU was long a disputed proposition, which is now largely accepted as a necessary step to strengthening Kyiv's economic and democratic resilience. Ukraine's membership in NATO was even more controversial. It should no longer be it. To explain why, a look into the recent past is in order.

The Vilnius summit is not the first time that Ukraine has been promised NATO membership. Convening in Bucharest in April 2008, NATO leaders – upon US insistence – agreed to give Ukraine and Georgia a vague prospect for future membership.[14] The following summer, Putin ordered planes and tanks into Georgia.[15] Thereafter, NATO's enlargement to former Soviet republics ended up accumulating dust on a shelf in NATO's headquarters for years.

Many argue that Ukraine is paying for NATO's mistake of not putting it on the path to membership at the time.[16] They contend that Russia would have neither attacked Georgia in 2008 nor invaded Ukraine in 2014, when it forcibly took Crimea and fomented the war in Donbas, or in 2022.

These are valid but not entirely persuasive arguments. Russia could have attacked Georgia (or Ukraine) while the accession process was still ongoing, thus confronting NATO with the daunting choice of whether to intervene in defence of a candidate country not yet covered by the Article 5 mutual defence clause. The US and European governments (perhaps with the exception of the Baltics and Poland) would have had a hard time indeed in justifying the risk of a Third World War

[13] NATO, *Membership Action Plan (MAP)*, last updated 19 April 2023, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_37356.htm.

[14] NATO, *Bucharest Summit Declaration*, 3 April 2008, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_8443.htm.

[15] Michael Kofman, "The August War, Ten Years On: A Retrospective on the Russo-Georgian War", in *War on the Rocks*, 17 August 2018, https://warontherocks.com/?p=18021.

[16] Peter Dickinson, "The 2008 Russo-Georgian War: Putin's Green Light", in *UkraineAlert*, 7 August 2021, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/?p=421821.

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to a public opinion for which Georgia and Ukraine were peripheral concerns at best.

Besides, in 2008, the hope of establishing an integrated security space in Europe extended to Russia had not waned entirely, although worrying signs of confrontation were multiplying.[17] In 2007 and 2008, West-Russia clashes had become both starker and fiercer – first on the US plan to deploy ballistic defences to Eastern Europe, which President Vladimir Putin compared to the 1962 Cuba missile crisis;[18] then on Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence, which Moscow staunchly opposed;[19] and finally on NATO's Bucharest summit.

The accumulation of tensions, culminated in the Georgia war of August 2008, persuaded many in the West that it was time to cool things down in the attempt to reset relations with the Kremlin along less confrontational lines.[20] Neither the US nor Western European countries perceived Russia as a threat but rather as a difficult but often necessary interlocutor to address such issues as arms control, Iran and North Korea's nuclear plans, the fight against Islamist terrorism and logistics support to NATO's mission in Afghanistan. A dialogue with Russia over Eastern Europe based on increased cooperation on these files was then a legitimate proposition.

Very little – if anything – of this reasoning is still valid today. Putin's hostility towards the US and Europe has only grown in intensity and bitterness in the last fifteen years, most notably since the 2011–12 anti-government protests in Moscow and St. Petersburg that he pinned on US agents provocateurs.[21]

Russia has demolished any hope for a peaceful co-existence on terms NATO or the EU could find acceptable. It has attacked its neighbours thrice; used indiscriminate violence against civilians in Syria;[22] employed the Wagner mercenaries to bolster regimes and seek control of natural resources in Libya, Mali and the Central African Republic (all the while undermining European policies in those countries);[23] resorted to energy blackmail;[24]

[17] Riccardo Alcaro and Emiliano Alessandri, "Engaging Russia: Prospects for a Long-Term European Security Compact", in *European Foreign Affairs Review*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (2010), p. 191-207.

[18] Oleg Shchedrov, "Putin Compares U.S. Missile Shield to Cuban Crisis", in *Reuters*, 27 October 2007, https://www.reuters.com/article/idINIndia-30181920071027.

[19] Oksana Antonenko, "Russia and the Deadlock over Kosovo", in *Russie.Nei.Vision*, No. 21 (July 2007), https://www.ifri.org/en/node/3464.

[20] Ruth Deyermond, "Assessing the Reset: Successes and Failures in the Obama Administration's Russia Policy, 2009–2012", in *European Security*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (2013), p. 500-523, DOI 10.1080/09662839.2013.777704.

[21] Miriam Elder, "Vladimir Putin Accuses Hillary Clinton of Encouraging Russian Protests", in *The Guardian*, 8 December 2011, https://www.theguardian.com/p/34xv9.

[22] Julian Borger, "Russia Committed War Crimes in Syria, Finds UN Report", in *The Guardian*, 2 March 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/p/dckbj.

[23] David Pilling et al., "Wagner's Future in Africa in Question After Russian Mutiny", in *Financial Times*, 28 June 2023, https://www.ft.com/content/93381925-9b2e-4c57-b669-7c592536cffc.

[24] Margarita Balmaceda et al., "Europe's Gas Crisis and Russian Energy Politics: Experts

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assassinated dissidents, including on NATO's soil;[25] violated arms control treaties;[26] and promoted propaganda and disinformation to exacerbate political divisions in Europe and America.[27]

Europe will stay divided for years to come

Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 destroyed whatever was left of Europe's post-Cold War security system. The idea that a new one could now be built in agreement with a Russia led by Putin or someone who holds the same worldview is utterly unrealistic. European security will have to be built in defence from and not in partnership with Russia for years, perhaps decades, to come.

Keeping Ukraine out of NATO in a fractured European security landscape entails the risk of turning it into a perpetual source of instability, because Russia would face lower costs if it were to attack it again or carry out destabilising activities. This would in turn make the prospect of an escalation a more concrete possibility because NATO countries (most, if not all) would not sit idly by as Russia continues to rage on Ukraine.

But why not go for bilateral security guarantees by the US and a few other European countries instead of NATO membership? While this alternative could still provide Ukraine with effective protection, the NATO option presents more advantages.

One reason is that NATO's mutual defence clause is a more formidable deterrent than bilateral guarantees, if only because it would entail an automatic response by a 31-strong organisation. Another is that integration into NATO's political-military structures would compel Ukrainian leaders to coordinate with their allies and reduce the chance that the bilateral US-Ukraine relationship (the so-called "Israel model") exerts massive influence over NATO's own choices. A final reason is that NATO's membership is a stronger and longer-term guarantee of anchoring Ukraine in the political-normative framework of the Alliance, with a positive effect on the state of democracy in the country.

The time for defining the timeframe of Ukraine's NATO accession may not be ripe. Nevertheless, and however the war will end, the Allies will need to devise a way to let Kyiv join NATO. The starting point towards retracing the path towards a Europe whole and free is the recognition that Europe's division cannot be healed anytime soon and that a defence and deterrence architecture, with Ukraine as the cornerstone, is

Respond", in *TCUP Commentaries*, 1 November 2021, https://huri.harvard.edu/node/1420474.

25 Jeremy Wilson and Taylor Ardrey, "Here's a List of People Putin Is Suspected of Having Killed", in *Insider*, 27 June 2023, https://www.businessinsider.com/list-of-people-putin-is-suspected-of-assassinating-2016-3.

26 Daryl Kimball, "The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty at a Glance", in *ACA Fact Sheets*, last reviewed August 2019, https://www.armscontrol.org/node/2559.

27 Erik Brattberg and Tim Maurer, "Russian Election Interference. Europe's Counter to Fake News and Cyber Attacks", in *Carnegie Papers*, May 2018, p. 5-28, https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/76435; Abigail Abrams, "Here's What We Know So Far About Russia's 2016 Meddling", in *Time*, 18 April 2019, https://time.com/5565991/russia-influence-2016-election.

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more effective than dialogue to prevent the gap from widening.

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