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June 2025

The Future of NATO

*The 'Only Real Security Guarantee'?
Ukraine and NATO*

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Introduction

Relations with NATO have been a divisive issue in debates among Ukraine's political and academic elites since it regained independence in 1991. These divisions ended in 2022. Russia's renewed invasion made NATO not only a focus of Ukraine's democratic aspirations but also a prerequisite for its survival as an independent state (cf. Lushahina and Sanin 2023). The alliance is now widely seen in Ukraine's strategic community as essential to the country's future with public support for NATO membership reaching 84 per cent by early 2025 (KIIS 2025b).

The environment in which these debates have unfolded has also changed dramatically. While the course toward ultimate NATO accession is now universally accepted, the path to achieving it – and the priorities along the way – are fiercely debated in the relevant quarters. On the other hand, the imposition of martial law and heightened security concerns have significantly constrained the space for open discussion. Ukrainian think tanks, which once operated with relative freedom, now face growing limitations in terms of public transparency and independent oversight. Analysts argue that state monitoring, regulatory restrictions and the imperative to maintain national unity have contributed to an atmosphere of self-censorship, in which dissenting views on security policy carry greater risks (cf. Axyonova and Lozka 2024). The war has also altered the nature of policy discourse itself: while earlier discussions explored a wide range of strategic options, including diplomatic settlements, today's debates centre largely on military resilience, strategic partnerships and ensuring Ukraine's long-term deterrence capabilities.

Despite these constraints, Ukrainian think tanks continue to play a crucial role in shaping NATO-related discourse, adapting to wartime conditions by forming new coalitions and adjusting their advocacy strategies. In the following chapter, the most significant points of contention in these debates within the Ukrainian public intellectual and think tank circles are summarised, highlighting both the policy dilemmas and the structural limitations that now define them.¹

Ukraine's threat perception and deliberations on strategic responses

The three primary strands that have dominated Ukraine's political and intellectual discourse for most of the past three decades can generally be categorised as 'pro-NATO', 'anti-NATO' and 'in-between' (cf. Zhyrun 2023). While the 'anti-NATO' camp largely faded after 2014, some Ukrainian analysts continued to view neutrality as a viable foreign policy strategy ('in-between') (cf. Novoskoltseva 2018). Russia's unprovoked invasion of 2022, however, effectively

eliminated this perspective in the public discourse as well. Since then, Ukraine's strategic community has shifted markedly towards the view that 'there is no alternative' to Euro-Atlantic integration (cf. Chuprii 2022; Maksak and Shelest 2023: 5, 11). As Ukrainian Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiha stated in a letter to NATO counterparts in 2024: 'The only real security guarantee for Ukraine... is full membership of NATO', adding that Ukraine 'will not accept any alternatives, surrogates, or substitutes for Ukraine's full membership of NATO' (Sybiha 2024).

The same shift applies to Ukrainian analysts' perspectives on Kyiv's relations with Moscow. While previously some analysts considered limited cooperation with Russia as a means of stabilising bilateral ties after the annexation of Crimea and occupation of Donbas (cf. Polianskii 2021), the invasion has unified much of Ukraine's intellectual and policy community around the necessity of containing and deterring Russia. Sergiy Gerasymchuk and Hanna Shelest of the Foreign Policy Council 'Ukrainian Prism' assert that Russia has become irreversibly 'the most pressing short- and long-term security threat' to Ukraine, necessitating active military, economic and policy countermeasures (Gerasymchuk and Shelest 2023: 3, 22). Beyond direct military resistance, Anatolii Bobrovytskyi and colleagues from the Centre for Domestic Policy Studies (CDPS) argue that Ukraine must also do everything possible to isolate Russia internationally or, at the very least, to significantly diminish its position in global affairs (cf. Bobrovytskyi et al. 2023).

While some voices, such as Yulia Tishchenko of the NGO National Platform for Resilience and Cohesion, cautiously advocate maintaining some readiness for dialogue with Russia (quoted in Badyuk 2024), most experts remain sceptical that Russia is capable of negotiating an end to the war in good faith. Volodymyr Fesenko of the Penta Analytical Centre, for instance, expresses doubts about Russia's intentions, suggesting that Moscow's involvement in peace negotiations may be no more than a façade for escalating the war. He emphasises that Russia's actions – such as stepping up its attacks on Ukrainian civilian infrastructure – contradict Putin's 'peace' rhetoric, which is intended to mislead the West (Fesenko 2024a). A 2024 survey conducted by the Razumkov Centre think tank, polling 69 experts across Ukraine (Razumkov Centre 2024), revealed that only a few analysts see dialogue as a potential long-term strategy for de-escalating tensions with Moscow, viewing it contingent on strict NATO security guarantees and Russia's accountability for its aggression.

It is worth noting, however, that these expert perspectives contrast sharply with public sentiment. For example, a November 2024 Gallup study found that 52 per cent of Ukrainians favoured a quick, albeit negotiated, peace over continued fighting, a dramatic increase from 27 per cent in February 2022 (Vigers 2024). Similarly, a survey by the Kyiv

¹ Quote in the title of the publication: This is how Ukraine's Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiha (2024) referred to NATO in December 2024.

International Institute of Sociology in late 2024 indicated that the percentage of Ukrainians willing to make territorial concessions for peace had risen to 38 per cent, a major increase from just 19 per cent a year earlier (KIIIS 2025a).

Compounding the situation is the scepticism persisting among the Ukrainian expert community regarding the basis of Russia's foreign policy stance. Like much of Ukraine's intellectual community, Ivan Koval and Lesya Kyslyak of the Odesa Law Academy argue that Russia's actions are deeply 'rooted in its imperialistic past', asserting that Moscow is unlikely to abandon its territorial ambitions because it has a deeply ingrained vision of Russia as an empire, with Ukraine (and Belarus) as integral parts (Koval and Kyslyak 2023). Russia's international actions are widely regarded as revisionist, and Ukraine's fight against Russian aggression is often framed as part of a broader post-colonial struggle against imperialism.

Valeriy Smolii and Oleksiy Yas of the Institute of Ukraine's History at the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences contend that the 'contemporary Russo-Ukrainian war is caused by the "imperial syndrome of present-day Russia", and Moscow is attempting to 'enslave Ukraine and readjust a Soviet-like state political project to the 21st century' (Smolii and Yas 2022). They further argue that Russia's imperial ambitions are unlikely to stop at Ukraine's borders, given their 'revanchist and anti-globalist character', as the country seeks to reestablish dominance over the post-Soviet space (*ibid*).

Ukrainian cultural historian Tetyana Filevska of the Ukrainian Institute also draws historical parallels, comparing recent developments with the Ukrainian-Soviet War (1919–1922), in which the international isolation of the Soviet Union led to the looting and sale of Ukrainian cultural treasures. Filevska notes that during that period, as the Soviet government established relations with Washington in the wake of the Great Depression, Moscow pursued economic strategies that laid waste to Ukraine: 'In order to be able to trade with the world, the government in Moscow took grain away from Ukrainian farmers and starved them en masse, which in 1932–1933 cost between three and seven million people their lives.' She further warns that present-day policies echo this dark legacy, arguing that 'they want to take away our past and our future. This is nothing new. We've been through this before.' Filevska is unequivocal in her assessment: 'They want to occupy and liquidate Ukraine' (quoted in Schocher 2025).

Against this backdrop, Ukrainian analysts warn that even if the West manages to strike a deal with Moscow – akin to past agreements such as the Minsk Accords of 2014/15 or the Budapest Memorandum of 1994 – Russia's revisionist foreign policy, driven by messianic cultural myths such

as 'Moscow as the Third Rome' and 'Russkiy Mir' (Russian world), are likely to lead to renewed aggression, posing a long-term challenge to European and Ukrainian security (cf. Cashman 2023).

Geopolitical perspectives on the war, while less prominent and more controversial, are also voiced within Ukrainian strategic circles. Ihor Polishchuk and Vladislav Pankov of the Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University highlights Ukraine's precarious position as a 'de facto buffer state between Russia and the West'. This is a historical reality that has repeatedly made Ukraine a battleground for great powers, and the 2022 invasion fits a larger geopolitical pattern of European politics (Polishchuk and Pankov 2022). Gerasymchuk and Shelest, although not directly employing geopolitical terminology, similarly argue that Russia's aggression against Ukraine's sovereignty stems from its 'broader ambition' to disrupt the European and global order, noting that Russia's attack in Ukraine serves as a preliminary step in a bigger plan to overthrow the perceived dominance of the West in world affairs (Gerasymchuk and Shelest 2023: 22). Mykhailo Pashkov of the Razumkov Centre reinforces this perspective, portraying Russia as an aggressive, revisionist power with ambitions that extend well beyond Ukraine, and targeting the broader transatlantic security architecture (Pashkov 2024). Reflecting on these strategic challenges, Mykola Kapitonenko of Kyiv National Taras Shevchenko University contends that Ukraine is at the epicentre of these changes, emphasising that its security is not – and in principle cannot be – guaranteed (Kapitonenko 2025). He further argues that the survival and fate of smaller states in the emerging international order depend on their ability to correctly assess the balance of power, adapt to existing contradictions and seek alliances with stronger states (*ibid*).

Overall, Ukrainian analysts are convinced that Russia represents a long-term threat to both Ukraine and the broader European security order. They frequently argue that even if the current war reaches a stalemate, Russia is likely to continue its provocations, shifting its focus once again to hybrid tactics, as seen during 2014–2022. While the Kremlin is unlikely to wage a direct war with NATO in the foreseeable future, Ukrainian discourse highlights that Moscow will probably intensify economic coercion (for example, energy-related extortion), disinformation campaigns and historical distortions aimed at driving wedges between Ukraine and its NATO partners (cf. Maksymets and Vivsiana 2023).

Hanna Shelest of Ukrainian Prism notes that since 2022 Russia has recruited new personnel, established additional attack groups, and doubled the operational tempo of its cyber operations against Ukraine and the West.² She warns that Moscow is likely to escalate efforts in this domain in the

² According to reports from Ukraine, Russian intelligence services carried out 2,544 cyber operations against Ukrainian networks in 2023 (the number of undetected attacks is probably higher). This is about three times more than before the war and does not include the presumably thousands of attacks by Russian non-state hackers. This is driven in particular by improved automation, reorganisation and 'artificial intelligence'. While Ukraine had no offensive cyber capabilities in 2022, the Ukrainian intelligence service is now carrying out its own cyber-attacks, some of them against Russian infrastructure, some of them non-military in nature (for more see: State Service of Special Communications and Information Protection of Ukraine 2024).

foreseeable future, targeting NATO countries' critical infrastructure, such as power grids, as in Ukraine (Shelest 2023: 8–9). Yuriy Yakymenko and colleagues from the Razumkov Centre add that Ukraine, having gained extensive experience in countering Russian cyberattacks, can play a pivotal role in strengthening NATO's cyber resilience. They highlight Ukraine's accession to NATO's Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence (CCDCOE) in 2023 as a significant step toward improving intelligence sharing and bolstering cybersecurity across the transatlantic community (ibid.: 27).

While many Ukrainian experts believe that NATO has acknowledged these threats, questions persist about the efficacy and prioritisation of its responses in the current geostrategic environment. Kapitonenko, for instance, argues that Russia's continued investments in conventional military capabilities and nuclear modernisation – which far surpass its cyber warfare investments – highlight the Kremlin's primary focus on kinetic warfare. He contends that the line between conventional and hybrid warfighting is blurred and emphasises that, for now, fighting a physical war should remain the top priority in countering Russian aggression, with cyber capabilities treated as a secondary concern (Kapitonenko 2024).

In sum, Ukraine's strategic debates reveal that the 2022 invasion has solidified Russia as the most pressing security threat for the foreseeable future, while consolidating Ukraine's intellectual community around the indispensability of NATO as the guarantor of its survival. While the consensus on NATO accession is overwhelming, Ukrainian think tanks actively debate the strategies, methods and resources needed to maximise Ukraine's chances of joining the alliance in the near future. This is covered in more detail in the following section.

'Without the Ukrainian army, Europe no longer stands a chance against Russia'³

Ukrainian think tank experts widely view Russia's war of aggression as a transformative conflict poised to redefine the European security order and the roles of both Russia and Ukraine within it. In this context, Mykhailo Pashkov argues that Russia's invasion has exposed critical vulnerabilities in and the obsolescence of the European security architecture (Pashkov 2022: 1–3). Similarly, Gerasymchuk and Shelest describe the invasion as a wake-up call for the EU and NATO, emphasising the urgent need for reforms of the European security architecture that directly address the threat posed by Russia (Gerasymchuk and Shelest 2023: 3, 12). Ukraine's Ambassador to Germany, Oleksii Makeiev, succinctly captured Ukraine's stance by criticising the new American administration's approach. He argued that the future of European security hinges not on striking a deal

with Russia, but on developing a deep understanding of how to manage the challenges it poses (Makeiev 2024).

In this context, Ukrainian analysts argue that Ukraine's role has become central to addressing these vulnerabilities, making it an indispensable partner for NATO operations, particularly on the Eastern Flank and in the Black Sea region, even without formal membership (Kapitonenko et al. 2024: 15). Many Ukrainian experts emphasise that by directly confronting Russia – the primary destabilising force on the continent – Ukraine and its nearly one-million-strong army have become one of the most significant contributors to NATO's defence (cf. Lakishyk 2023). Reflecting this view, Volodymyr Zelenskyy stated in an interview to Polish media: 'Without the Ukrainian army, Europe no longer stands a chance against Russia' (Zelenskyy 2025).

Adding to these perspectives, the former Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces and current Ukrainian ambassador to the United Kingdom, Valerii Zaluzhnyi, has warned that 'the old world order has been destroyed' and argues that a 'new European security architecture is impossible without Ukraine' (Zaluzhnyi 2025). He notes that changes on the margins of the Russo-Ukrainian war have led to a 'global crisis in operational art and NATO doctrines', emphasising the necessity for Ukraine to continue to assert its security interests and territorial integrity (ibid.).

Several experts thus argue that Ukraine's battlefield achievements merit bypassing the traditional NATO accession process, including the NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP). Proponents of this expedited approach, such as Oksana Kruchinina of Lviv Polytechnic National University, describe the MAP process as unnecessarily lengthy and uncertain, advocating instead that Ukraine follow the fast-track accession models of Finland and Sweden (Kruchinina 2023). Similarly, Yuri Romanyuk, head of the NGO 'Ukraine in NATO', asserts that Ukraine's military capabilities already surpass those of two-thirds of NATO members and thus that NATO should prioritise Ukraine's strategic importance for transatlantic security over adherence to rigid accession criteria (Romanyuk 2023). Reflecting these arguments, during the July 2023 Vilnius Summit, NATO leaders reaffirmed their commitment to Ukraine's future membership. They acknowledged Ukraine's notable progress in defence reforms and improved interoperability with NATO forces. In an effort to expedite the accession process, the Alliance decided to waive the standard MAP requirement. Nevertheless, NATO stressed that any formal invitation would depend on unanimous agreement among member states and the fulfilment of additional conditions, emphasising the need for further reforms in Ukraine (NATO 2023).

As a result, many Ukrainian analysts and policymakers are increasingly calling for a more cautious and realistic ap-

³ In an interview with Polish media outlets Onet, Rzeczpospolita, TVN24 and Krytyka Polityczna on 15 January 2025 President Zelenskyy asserted that 'Europe without the Ukrainian army will not cope with the Russian army, because it is larger in terms of numbers. Russia has more weapons, more people and is more cruel than the Europeans' (Zelenskyy 2025).

proach vis-à-vis NATO. Analysts such as Yuriy Yakymenko and his colleagues from the Razumkov Centre (2023: 13, 27) underscore that, regardless of its NATO accession prospects, Ukraine requires significant reforms, particularly in governance and economic restructuring. Similarly, Ihor Polishchuk and Vladislav Pankov argue that Ukraine must first transition from ‘an oligarchic economy to a more equitable “people’s capitalism” model’ before it has a realistic chance of joining the alliance (Polishchuk and Pankov 2022). Additionally, many analysts contend that, despite Ukraine’s appeal as a resource-rich trade hub, governance reforms – particularly in anti-corruption measures, democratic accountability and the rule of law – remain critical. In this context of both promise and caution, NATO members further deliberated on Ukraine’s future during the Washington Summit in summer 2024. At that time, discussions centred on establishing a ‘bridge to membership’ for Ukraine. At the same time, the Alliance remained divided on setting a clear timeline for Ukraine’s accession; some members favour taking immediate steps, while others urge caution, pointing to ongoing hostilities and the risks of further escalating the conflict with Russia (cf. Golden 2024).

In a dramatic shift from this policy, the Trump administration has radically changed the tone and effectively halted Ukraine’s aspirations for NATO membership. In February 2025 President Trump declared that Ukraine can ‘forget about’ NATO membership, later asserting that Ukraine is ‘never going to be a member of NATO’ (quoted in Zadorozhnyy 2025). This pronouncement came as a shock to many Ukrainian analysts, who characterised America’s change of position as due to the influence on the US president of Russian disinformation campaigns (cf. Oleshchuk, 2025).

On a more optimistic note, Olena Ptaschenko of West Ukrainian National University asserts that even if Ukraine does not achieve full NATO membership, striving to meet ‘NATO standards in defence and democratic control over the military’ will nonetheless strengthen Ukraine’s ‘resilience against any future [Russian] aggression’, as the country increasingly feels abandoned by one of its most significant allies (Ptaschenko 2024). These perspectives indicate a recognition within Ukraine that, while NATO membership remains a top diplomatic priority, the path to accession may ultimately prove longer and thornier than previously anticipated.

From aspirations to membership to strategic realities: rethinking Ukraine’s NATO future

Initially, NATO membership was widely seen in Ukrainian public debates as a pathway to ending the war. Ihor Todorov, Director of the Centre for International Security and Euro-Atlantic Integration at Uzhhorod National University, even argued that had Ukraine become a full-fledged NATO member earlier, Russia would not have dared to start the war at all (Todorov 2023). After the invasion, public opinion polls from 2022 showed overwhelming support for joining

the Alliance, fuelled by the belief that NATO membership would serve as a powerful deterrent against further Russian aggression and help bring the war to an end (Rating Group 2022). As the conflict continued, however, expectations have shifted markedly. As early as June 2022, Ukrainian MP Taras Stetskiv asserted that ‘NATO membership [for Ukraine] will only be granted once the war is over’ (Stetskiv 2022). Later, Vladimir Fesenko of the Penta Analytical Centre similarly observed that ‘as long as the war continues, Ukraine has no chance of being part of NATO’ (Fesenko 2024b), echoing President Volodymyr Zelenskyy’s sobering statement: ‘We [Ukrainians] understand that NATO membership is a matter for the future, not the present’ (Zelenskyy 2025).

Thus, while support for NATO membership in Ukraine has reached an all-time high in the post-2022 context, many experts and politicians are increasingly acknowledging the limits of NATO engagement, especially in light of the sobering rhetoric of the new American administration. Frustrations with the Alliance’s consensus-driven decision-making process, particularly regarding military aid, have become the first significant bone of contention. Maria Kovach-Butsko of the Centre for Defence Strategies, for example, has criticised NATO’s ‘salami-slicing security assistance for Ukraine’ and ‘cautious verbal deterrence’ toward Russia, arguing that these approaches have not only undermined Ukraine’s defences but may also have eroded NATO’s credibility in Moscow’s eyes (Kovach-Butsko 2023). A growing sense of disillusionment is also reflected in the words of Ukraine’s former Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba, who lamented that ‘some very good friends of Ukraine fear a positive response to Ukraine’s bid for accession more than they fear providing Kyiv with weapons’ (quoted in Bayer 2022).

As a result, a distinct shift can be discerned towards self-reliance in Ukraine, and increasing scepticism about whether Ukraine will ever join NATO. A Carnegie-sponsored opinion poll conducted in March 2024 revealed that 61 per cent of respondents prioritised developing a robust domestic defence industrial base over NATO membership (36 per cent), while nearly 60 per cent of Ukrainians do not expect a NATO membership invitation at all (Gonik and Ciaramella 2024). Although the creation of the NATO-Ukraine Council in July 2023 was broadly welcomed as a step in the right direction, it is widely viewed as insufficient as a substitute for full-fledged membership in the long term (Razumkov Centre 2024). Experts such as Kapitonenko argue that the Ukrainian leadership should accept that NATO accession is off the table for the foreseeable future and adopt a more realistic approach in its relations with the alliance (Kapitonenko 2024). He suggests that Kyiv should prioritise structured military cooperation with NATO, such as training and interoperability initiatives, but also develop opportunities that go beyond immediate and ad hoc assistance to bring the war to an end in the most favourable conditions possible for Ukraine.

The question of when and how the war might end remains a subject of intense debate. Discussions about the war’s con-

clusion have traditionally centred on achieving military victory. President Zelenskyy's 'Victory Plan' stands as the most prominent example of this (Zelenskyy 2024). However, the precise political and practical implications of 'victory' have rarely been examined in either public or expert discourse (cf. Podvorna 2024). While Ukrainian public intellectuals often express scepticism about the feasibility of achieving a complete military victory over Russia under current conditions, they remain reluctant to propose alternative scenarios.

Many Ukrainian strategists prefer to sidestep deeply unsettling uncertainties by focusing instead on more optimistic scenarios. In these narratives, Russia is ultimately defeated through a combination of economic and political collapse. Such visions include a decisive Ukrainian victory in which Russia is militarily weakened, denuclearised and compelled to pay extensive reparations (cf. Shevchuk 2023). Within this framework, Ukraine not only consolidates its defence capabilities – potentially even cultivating a nuclear deterrent – but also emerges as a formidable regional power, solidifying its role as a 'pillar of European security' (ibid.).

This optimistic outlook is not free of dissenting voices. Although the dominant discourse centres on hopeful projections, marginal perspectives occasionally venture into more pessimistic territory. Some analysts warn that an enforced armistice or outright defeat could trigger Ukraine's economic decline and further exacerbate human capital outflow (cf. Amelin 2024). One prominent critic, Vladimir Fesenko, encapsulates these concerns by casting doubt on the feasibility of a comprehensive and fair peace treaty between Russia and Ukraine. Against the dramatic backdrop of Donald Trump's return to the Oval Office, Fesenko questions the possibility of any credible guarantees to prevent Russia from reneging on such an agreement (Fesenko 2025). While noting that Putin has repeatedly violated Ukraine's internationally recognised borders despite prior agreements to the contrary, Fesenko contends that a ceasefire – if Russia were to agree to one – could serve as a viable, albeit compromised, route to ending the conflict. His argument is that if both parties can secure a stable ceasefire with an absence of active hostilities, the Verkhovna Rada might eventually opt not to extend martial law, thereby opening the path for elections and ultimately a comprehensive peace agreement. However, Fesenko cautions that if Putin's declaration that, for instance, Ukraine should come under external administration overseen by the United Nations reflects his true negotiating position rather than mere propaganda, the peace talks are destined to reach an impasse (ibid). Supporting this perspective, Oleksiy Melnyk, Co-Director of the Razumkov Centre, emphasises that the likelihood of achieving a lasting truce is minimal. He attributes this pessimism to the fact that the conflict's underlying driver – Putin's imperial ambitions – remains fundamentally undressed (Melnyk 2025).

The general hesitation expressed in expert assessments probably stems from fears of a potential societal backlash against peace deliberations that fall short of absolute vic-

tory (Axyonova and Lozka 2024). As the war has proceeded, this reluctance has been shaped by both external pressures – such as state monitoring and restrictions on information – and internal concerns about the repercussions of deviating from the dominant narrative. Since early 2025, however, some cautious voices have been calling for a reassessment of these entrenched positions. 'A victory by military means only, though inspiring, may no longer be attainable. At what cost, we must ask, does our continued struggle come? Perhaps an imperfect ceasefire, one that might not satisfy all our demands for justice, is a necessary step. This is not an appeal for complacency; it's an appeal for survival', argues Iulia Mendel, former spokesperson for President Zelenskyy (Mendel 2025). While acknowledging that a ceasefire could allow Russia to regroup and potentially renew its offensive, Mendel contends that even a temporary truce might afford Ukraine the opportunity to strengthen its own defences in ways that were unthinkable before the invasion. 'War has taught us the peril of simple answers and rosy narratives. We must be pragmatic' (ibid.).

In sum, while many experts continue to stress the indispensability of full NATO membership – as enshrined in Ukraine's constitution – others increasingly advocate a more pragmatic approach that addresses both Ukraine's relationship with the alliance and its broader conflict resolution strategy. These voices argue that, given the absence of tangible prospects for immediate formal NATO membership and the pressing need to reassess war-ending strategies, Ukraine–NATO cooperation should evolve towards a more practical framework. At the same time, debates about the prospects for an enduring ceasefire or a negotiated end to the conflict underscore the persistent uncertainties surrounding Ukraine's future. Whether pursuing formal membership or establishing itself as a self-sufficient state capable of safeguarding its sovereignty independently, Ukraine's course will be profoundly influenced by how NATO navigates its internal challenges, ranging from emerging conflicts among its members (such as the Greenland issue) to redefined strategic priorities in an increasingly divided alliance, a topic explored in the penultimate sections.

NATO's challenges through Ukrainian eyes: security first, values second?

As an aspiring member state, Ukraine and its analytical community is increasingly engaging with the systemic challenges facing NATO, ranging from nuclear deterrence and strategic cohesion to internal adaptation and its evolving global identity. These challenges underscore the delicate balancing act that Ukraine perceives NATO must perform to maintain its relevance and effectiveness in counter- ing an aggressive and revisionist Russia.

Ukrainian think-tankers emphasise that, as a nuclear alliance, NATO faces the dual challenge of ensuring robust deterrence while managing the risks of escalation with Moscow. While Ukrainian analysts generally downplay the likelihood of Russia using nuclear weapons, highlighting

NATO's crucial role in mitigating this risk, some acknowledge the tangible fear of nuclear escalation among member states. Kapitonenko and colleagues stress the psychological nature of Russia's nuclear threats, arguing that NATO must not succumb to nuclear blackmail (Kapitonenko et al. 2024: 19). They note that Moscow's past nuclear rhetoric towards Ukraine has rarely been backed by action, contending that an overly cautious posture in the West risks emboldening Russia even further. Kruchinina highlights the importance of maintaining NATO's nuclear deterrence efforts while calling for renewed emphasis on arms control to prevent Moscow from exploiting opportunities to escalate the conflict (Kruchinina 2023). In other words, while the likelihood of nuclear escalation is widely considered to be moderate, Ukrainian analysts insist that NATO's response must be balanced, neither overreacting to Moscow's sabre-rattling nor leaving it unchecked.

Another significant challenge identified by Ukrainian analysts is NATO's role as a political community rooted in democratic values and collective defence. The rise of authoritarian regimes such as Russia and China is seen as a credible threat to NATO's commitment to defending democracy. Against this backdrop, Yuriy Yakymenko and colleagues (2023: 23) argue that NATO must prioritise bolstering democratic values, which play a cornerstone role in sustaining Ukraine's democracy during the ongoing war. Accordingly, they advocate NATO and EU expansion, emphasising that these organisations should not fear Russia but rather focus on safeguarding democracies in central and eastern Europe: 'Brussels must protect and preserve democracies in Eastern Europe. Otherwise, enlargement will be limited to the Western Balkans, and the EU's influence on the continent will shrink like a shagreen skin' (Pashkov 2024). Gerasymchuk and Drapak of Ukrainian Prism believe that NATO and EU membership for Ukraine would bolster NATO's identity as a champion of liberal and democratic values, as 'Ukraine [has] demonstrated its role as a defender of the free world, underscoring its commitment to democracy, freedom, and human rights during the Russian aggression' (Gerasymchuk and Drapak 2024).

The Ukrainian think tank debate has long centred on the pivotal US role in NATO when it comes to achieving these goals. With the return of Donald Trump as president, however, Ukrainian experts are divided on whether NATO should continue to be US-dominated or evolve into a more balanced transatlantic partnership with a stronger European (EU) pillar. Pashkov and his colleagues argue that Ukraine, as an official EU candidate, would benefit more from a re-balanced NATO, given the long known uncertainties about the new US administration's commitment to Europe (Pashkov et al. 2023). Against this backdrop, most Ukrainian analysts agreed on the need for European states to significantly increase defence spending (cf. Gerasymchuk and Shelest 2023: 12–13). The adequacy of the current 2 per cent of GDP threshold for NATO defence spending, which stems from a different geopolitical era, has come under particular scrutiny. Experts such as Kapitonenko suggest that higher com-

mitments – such as the 3 per cent of GDP recently proposed by NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte – may be necessary to ensure Europe's long-term security (Kapitonenko et al. 2024: 15–16). Mykhailo Pashkov of the Razumkov Centre adds that increased spending would bolster aid to Ukraine, accelerate the modernisation of its military infrastructure (now largely aligned with NATO standards), and enhance its conventional and cyber resilience (Pashkov 2022: 3).

In this complex environment, NATO's internal cohesion has become a major concern for Ukrainian think-tankers. Initially, there was a sense of euphoria in Ukraine about Trump's return; for example, Yuriy Yakymenko and colleagues from the Razumkov Centre saw it as an opportunity to foster greater European autonomy within the alliance (Yakymenko et al. 2023: 16). However, Trump's promise to end the war 'in 24 hours' (later revised to six months) and his generally isolationist rhetoric have raised doubts in Ukraine regarding the future of American support and the alliance's overall stability. As these debates over NATO's identity and transatlantic balance intensify, they set the stage for a closer examination of how Trump's presidency reshapes Kyiv's expectations regarding US involvement in Ukraine.

Recalibrating expectations: Trump's presidency and NATO's role in Ukraine

Donald Trump's initial calls for increased European defence spending, alongside his earlier arms deliveries to Ukraine following Russia's first invasion, were met with cautious optimism by some in Ukraine's strategic community. These actions raised hopes that a decline in American military aid might be offset by stronger European contributions or an unpredictable 'surprise factor' on the part of Trump himself. Journalist Stanslav Asseev captured this sentiment ahead of Trump's 2025 inauguration: 'Our country cannot afford another three years of war at this rate. With Trump, the situation could shift—either way, there will be a turnaround' (Asseev 2025). This optimism soon gave way to mounting concerns, however.

President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's visit to the Oval Office in late February 2025 highlighted the fragility of these expectations. Yuliya Kazdobina of Ukrainian Prism noted that Trump's earlier threats to withdraw from NATO – and his recent proposal to stop Ukraine's membership as part of a peace treaty with Russia – were proving all too real (Kazdobina 2025). Volodymyr Kulyk, a political science professor at the Kyiv School of Economics, warned that 'Trump is proving as bad as we feared. He's willing to strike a deal with Putin at Ukraine's expense, even expecting Ukraine to pay with mineral resources. The question is: what will Ukraine and Europe do?' (quoted in Seddon and Miller 2025). Mykola Sunhurovskyi, Director of Military Programmes at the Razumkov Centre, echoed this concern, arguing that Trump's policies aim to force Ukraine into peace rather than confront Russia, predicting with 99 per cent certainty that territories under Russian control will remain so (Sunhurovskyi

2025). Petro Oleshchuk (2025) of the Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv went even further, framing Trump's actions as the latest US attempt to 'sell' Ukraine to Russia for its own gain. Mariia Zolkina of the Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation flagged the pace of the Trump administration's push to conclude a deal with Russia as a cause for concern. 'I think we're heading towards a Minsk III', she warned (Zolkina 2025). 'This agreement', she noted, 'will be much worse than the previous ones—not only because it's a full-scale war, but also because now the U.S. may bet on a quick solution instead of a strategic one' (ibid.). As a result, Mykola Kapitonenko argues, in these circumstances 'relying on NATO and transatlantic solidarity no longer makes sense. Ukraine's security must become more pragmatic, as must its dialogue with partners. Trump's worldview favours deals with Moscow over indefinite support for Kyiv' (Kapitonenko 2025).

Amid these criticisms, former President Petro Poroshenko offered a more pragmatic view, suggesting that Trump is 'neither-Ukrainian nor pro-Russian, but pro-American' (Poroshenko 2025). He argued that Ukraine should focus on convincing the United States of the benefits of its victory: 'If Putin agrees to a ceasefire, the war ends; if he refuses, America will back us again, seeing who is truly obstructing peace.' Poroshenko envisions a path forward involving security guarantees from NATO countries, an end to martial law, elections and a new government. Meanwhile, journalists Oleg Pavliuk and Serhiy Sydorenko of European Pravda argued against this approach, lamenting Trump's unpredictability, writing that 'the US administration has already proven its capacity for sharp U-turns, and this trait is unlikely to change' (Pavliuk and Sydorenko 2025).

Public opinion reflects this shifting landscape. Anton Grushetskyj of KIIS reported that while initially 54 per cent of Ukrainians viewed Trump's re-election as beneficial, over 70 per cent now deem his presidency 'bad for Ukraine'. Having said that, 80 per cent still insist on continuing the fight without US support (Grushetskyj 2025). The upshot is that Ukraine has started to lean more on bilateral security agreements with European NATO members. These 26 non-binding pacts provide immediate military aid and long-term cooperation, with staunch support from the United Kingdom, Poland, the Baltic states and the Nordic countries. Sweden, for instance, has pledged €2.2 billion annually from 2024 to 2026, while Denmark, Norway and the Baltics have made significant financial commitments of their own. In contrast, Spain and Italy remain cautious, prioritising Ukraine's internal reforms over explicit security guarantees, wary of escalating tensions with Russia. Kazdobina highlights a further key challenge in this respect: while many European allies offer aid, few provide the binding commitments needed to deter Russia effectively, leaving Ukraine balancing tactical support with aspirations for deeper NATO integration (Kazdobina 2025).

Ukrainian debates about deploying European troops as peacekeepers to secure a possible truce in the ongoing war

with Russia further illustrate the contending perspectives. Many experts generally view the concept of a European-led peacekeeping force, even without American involvement, as a positive step. However, observers such as Oleksandr Sayenko, commander of the 67th Brigade in 2022–2023 and now a military analyst at the Independent Anti-Corruption Commission (NAKO), assert that the contingent must be robust enough to compel Russia into peace by military means: 'thirty thousand troops are insufficient for this' (quoted in Kot and Danishevska 2025). Furthermore, Oleksandr Khara, executive director of the Centre for Defence Strategies, stressed that air and naval security – including through air defence, missile defence systems and a naval component – should be at the heart of peacekeeping efforts. This step, he contends, would ensure that such deployment does not escalate into a global conflict, as Trump has contended (ibid.). On the other hand, not everyone is convinced of the strategy's utility. Professor Ihor Todorov of Uzhhorod University, for example, has raised doubts about the feasibility of deploying European troops, highlighting the risks of potential Russian retaliation and unintended escalation that could provoke a backlash in contributing countries' societies (Todorov 2025). He also questioned the strategic rationale behind stationing foreign forces far from the front lines – a move suggested by France and the United Kingdom – arguing that ultimately it might assist Russia in its attempts to discredit the European nations involved (ibid.).

As Ukrainian hopes in Trump's administration fade, some experts are proposing alternatives to NATO membership. Volodymyr Fesenko suggests an 'Israel of Eastern Europe' model, relying on bilateral guarantees from major powers such as France and/or the United Kingdom, though the details remain unclear (Fesenko 2024b). Leonid Polyakov of the Centre for Domestic Policy Studies advocates a similar 'Israeli variant', emphasising deterrence through national capabilities and strategic partnerships (Polyakov 2024). Despite these grim assessments, a faint optimism persists. Ukrainian intellectuals urge European NATO members to seize this moment in the face of an unpredictable American administration, redefining their strategic role and countering global powers that undermine liberal democracy. These themes are explored further in the concluding section.

China and Global South

The Ukrainian think tank community recognised early on that Russia's invasion in February 2022 carried broader implications for Ukraine's international relations, resonating across the global system. Among the most intensely debated topics in this context is Ukraine's relationship with the People's Republic of China. Despite Beijing's cautious rhetoric and diplomatic initiatives to end the war, Iryna Habro and Oleksandr Shevchuk of Petro Mohyla Black Sea National University argue that China has become one of the primary enablers of Russia's aggression (Habro and Shevchuk 2023). Kapitonenko and Kyian note that the war has prompted significant reassessments of Ukraine's partnership with

China, as Beijing continues to supply military aid to Russia and provides alternative routes for strategic goods circumventing Western sanctions (Kapitonenko and Kyian 2023: 18). Although China remains one of Ukraine's most important trading partners, many Ukrainian think-tankers now perceive it more as a security threat, warning that the cost of further rapprochement with China may be too high. Bokova and Chekasov of Zaporizhzhia National University, for instance, argue for recalibrating Ukraine's relations with China by strengthening economic ties with Western allies. They emphasise the need to avoid strategic dependencies in defence imports (especially in drone manufacturing), agricultural exports and infrastructure (particularly in the energy sector) that Beijing could exploit in the future (Bokova and Chekasov 2023).

However, some voices caution against overestimating the Sino-Russian alignment and its implications for Ukraine. Alina Gritsenko of the Centre for Domestic Policy Studies argues that, instead of mirroring Western strategies of economic 'decoupling', Ukraine should leverage China's growing influence over Moscow to exert political and economic pressure on Russia (Gritsenko 2022). She suggests that 'Ukraine must present its own foreign policy framework, one that is not entirely dependent on the positions of the US and the EU' (ibid.). Similarly, Gerasymchuk and Shelest argue that the quality of relations between Russia and China should not be overestimated, emphasising that the asymmetry in power and influence between the two countries may render their cooperation opportunistic and short-lived, particularly as Russia's nuclear sabre-rattling increasingly contradicts China's stance on nuclear restraint (Gerasymchuk and Shelest 2023: 3, 18).

Beyond China, Ukrainian analysts increasingly recognise the growing importance of the countries of the Global South in putting international diplomatic pressure on Russia and reducing Moscow's ability to finance the war by cutting off its trade connections (cf. Borodyna and Nadin 2023). There is a rising concern, however, as Viktoria Orlyk of the Centre for Domestic Policy Studies argues, that despite the undisputed brutality of Russia's continued aggression, support for Ukraine continues to wane among these countries (Orlyk 2024: 2–3). Oleksandr Kraiev of Ukrainian Prism notes that the countries of the Global South are increasingly polarised into two blocs: one aligned with the West and the other with China, with the latter gaining more traction (Kraiev 2024). Kapitonenko adds that several nations are actively helping Russia to evade sanctions by buying oil, gas and other sanctioned commodities, despite ongoing Western efforts to prevent this through secondary sanctions (Kapitonenko et al. 2024: 5–6, 11). Finally, countries such as Iran and North Korea are frequently cited as key enablers of Russia's war effort through arms deliveries and, more recently, even by deploying troops on the battlefield (cf. Dudko and Pohorielova 2023). Consequently, Ukrainian experts urge NATO and its allies to counter this trend through intensified diplomatic and economic initiatives across the Global South (Orlyk 2024: 2–3).

Within this broader context, Africa also emerges as a critical region for NATO's joint efforts. Ukraine's analysts highlight that Russia's destabilising activities on the continent, including its support for conflicts in Mali and the Central African Republic, offer opportunities to undermine Moscow's global 'anti-imperialist' narratives, which it uses to garner African support (cf. Osipenko 2024). Ukrainian think-tankers stress the need for the alliance to deepen engagement in the region, particularly through initiatives addressing food security and energy expertise (Gerasymchuk and Shelest 2023: 22). Ukraine, as a key grain supplier to Africa, views itself as an essential player in these efforts. However, opinions diverge on Africa's strategic importance for Ukraine's continued efforts to deter Russian aggression in Europe. While some analysts argue that the region represents a crucial theatre for countering Russia's influence worldwide, others view it as a secondary priority compared with the immediate threats posed by Russia's ongoing military aggression, especially given Ukraine's limited economic and diplomatic resources (cf. Kapitonenko 2024).

In summary, while many Ukrainian analysts advocate focusing exclusively on the European theatre and addressing Russia's immediate threats, others support a more multifaceted approach. They propose the pursuit of proactive policies toward the countries of the Global South and leveraging the growing influence of countries such as China either to end the war or to increase its costs for Russia significantly. Nevertheless, they acknowledge the uphill challenge of securing additional global support, as fatigue over the conflict grows after three years of fighting and Russia doubles down on its efforts to forge alignments with countries it considers to be part of the 'Global Majority' (for more, see the Study on Russia, Spanger 2025: 19–21).

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The Future of NATO – Country Report Ukraine

NATO has been a key security pillar of German and European defence policy from the very outset. Since the end of the Cold War, however, it has undergone a series of international transformations and realignments, driven by developments in the global security environment and pressure from its own member states.

While the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine has strengthened NATO's self-perception as a key guarantor of collective security, the change in US administration at the beginning of 2025 raises fundamental questions once again. What role will the US play in Europe's future security, and how might European nations respond to the situation?

This publication is part of a Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung study entitled "The Future of NATO", which summarises and analyses the ongoing debates on the Alliance and current security challenges in 11 member and 3 non-member states. These country studies form the basis of an overarching publication which seeks to provide possible answers to the unresolved questions and propose potential scenarios for the future of NATO.

Further information on the topic can be found here:

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