

How NATO Can Help End the Ukraine War
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CHICAGO/KYIV – Last month, yet another NATO summit concluded with a vague statement that Ukraine will, at some point, be a member of the alliance. But while it is impossible to provide a precise date for Ukraine’s accession while the country is at war, the event that should trigger it should be clear: the United States and its NATO allies should stand ready to provide full protection to Ukraine as soon as a peace deal is reached. This would enable and encourage Ukraine’s government to make the difficult choices that are needed to bring an end to the fighting.

The first step toward charting a path toward durable peace in Ukraine is recognizing that Russia did not launch its full-scale invasion in 2022 merely to take some Ukrainian territory. Nor was the goal to prevent vague promises of future NATO membership for Ukraine from being fulfilled – though the Kremlin did exploit these promises to convince Russians and others that the invasion was crucial to preempt serious threats to Russia’s security.

Rather, Russia’s goal has always been to destroy Ukraine as an independent democratic country, which Russian President Vladimir Putin views as an existential threat to his autocratic regime. The lack of NATO security guarantees for Ukraine fueled Putin’s illusion that the country could be easily defeated on the battlefield.

After more than two years of war, this illusion has been dispelled. The Ukrainian government’s official position is that its forces will keep fighting until they liberate all territory currently under Russian occupation. This stance should not be viewed as an impediment to peace: if your adversary’s goal is your total destruction, territorial concessions will not buy an end to the war; they will merely weaken your position.

The real barrier to any reasonable peace settlement is Putin, who remains committed to ensuring that a free and democratic Ukraine does not survive and has a long track record of renegeing on promises and violating treaties. Since no political institutions in Russia can force Putin to honor the terms of a peace deal, it is reasonable to assume that he would readily abandon it and re-invade Ukraine at the first opportunity – unless the international community gives him a very good reason not to.

A negotiated peace in Ukraine can be credible only if it includes tangible international commitments to ensure the country’s long-term independence. Incorporating NATO protection for Ukraine into any peace deal is the obvious solution. After all, it is the threat of war with NATO that prevents Russia from invading, say, the Baltic states.

A plausible way forward would start with Ukraine’s military stabilizing the frontlines, using Western weapons and aid. Once this condition is met, Ukraine could join Russia at the negotiating table, with the shared understanding that any agreement would be backed by NATO guarantees. For example, NATO membership could include a proviso that the alliance’s protection covers only the parts of Ukraine controlled by the Ukrainian government at the time

of admission. This approach would reassure Ukrainians that any territorial concessions would not simply enable Russia to invade more of the country.

This would not be first time NATO has admitted countries with unresolved territorial disputes. But other approaches could be considered. For example, Ukraine could be offered a kind of de facto NATO membership, or negotiators could agree to limit NATO's normal military presence in parts of Ukraine, as was done in Norway during the Cold War. A major multilateral commitment to developing Ukraine's military would enhance the deterrent further.

Of course, NATO can grant Ukraine membership without Russia's involvement. But including NATO security guarantees in a peace deal, rather than establishing them separately, would make it harder for Putin to convince Russians that they pose a threat to Russia's national security. To be clear, they do not: Russia's massive nuclear arsenal guarantees its security very effectively. When Russians understand that NATO protection of Ukraine does not entail any threat to Russia, they will be less inclined to support preemptive wars of aggression.

NATO security guarantees for Ukraine – whether in the form of membership or some other arrangement – would amount to a major commitment for the US and its allies, with significant costs and risks. But these should be weighed against the prospect of prolonging a European war that has already resulted in vast destruction and cost hundreds of thousands of lives, with regular threats of further escalation.

Ultimately, it will be up to Ukraine to decide how to manage the difficult and costly trade-offs that any peace negotiation will require. Ukrainians are the ones who have been forced to fend off an unprovoked Russian invasion, so only they can decide what more they are willing to sacrifice to liberate the occupied territories. But it is up to the international community – especially NATO – to ensure that when Ukraine decides to negotiate, any peace deal is credible, and the country's long-term independence and security are guaranteed.

Like so many other observers of the Ukraine war, we would like to see Putin and his cronies tried for launching an unprovoked war of aggression, killing civilians, and terrorizing communities. We would also like to see all Russian-occupied territories returned to Ukrainian control. But the most urgent priority must be to end the war and ensure Ukrainians' future safety. That is what NATO security guarantees can help to achieve.

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