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Brussels NATO Summit 2018: Don't Lose Focus on Ukraine

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The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) summit in Brussels on July 11 and 12 is an opportunity for the Alliance to provide realistic and meaningful support to Ukraine. In 2014, Russia invaded Ukraine. Russia illegally occupies Crimea. Russia provoked and now supports a separatist movement in eastern Ukraine that did not previously exist. Russia is the aggressor, and Ukraine is the victim. Realistically, Ukraine has a long way to go before NATO membership, but that does not mean that the Alliance should disengage from Ukraine. On the contrary, NATO should deepen its partnership with Ukraine at the upcoming summit. It is in NATO's best interest to assist Ukraine in countering Russian aggression and to work toward the nation's long-term peace and stability.

On NATO's Doorstep

Ukraine is in the midst of a national struggle that will determine its future geopolitical orientation: the West or Moscow. The outcome of this struggle will have long-term implications for the transatlantic community and the notion of national sovereignty. Since 2014, almost 5 percent of Ukraine's landmass and more than half of its coastline have been under illegal Russian occupation in Crimea.

In eastern Ukraine, Russia and Russian-backed separatists continue to propagate a war that has resulted in more than 10,000 lives lost, 23,000 wounded,¹ and an internally displaced population of almost 2 million people; has inflicted heavy damage on the Ukrainian economy; and has slowed down Ukraine's progress toward deepening ties in the transatlantic community.

Modern Ukraine represents the idea in Europe that each country has the sovereign ability to determine its own path and to decide with whom it has relations and how, and by whom it is governed. No outside actor (in this case Russia) should have a veto on membership or closer relations with organizations like the European Union or NATO. In many ways, the future viability of the transatlantic community will be decided in the Donbas, the region in eastern Ukraine where the fighting has been taking place.

It is in NATO's interest that Ukraine remains independent and sovereign and maintains the ability to choose its own destiny without outside interference.

Russian Aggression

When Kremlin-backed Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich failed to sign an association agreement with the European Union in 2013, months of street demonstrations led to his ouster in early 2014. Russia responded by violating Ukraine's territorial integrity, sending troops aided by pro-Russian local militia, to occupy the Crimean peninsula under the pretext of "protecting Russian people." This led to Russia's eventual annexation of Crimea.

Russia's annexation of Crimea is an unprecedented act of aggression in the 21st century. The annexa-

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MAP 1

Conflict Areas in Ukraine



SOURCE: Information Analysis Center, National Security of Ukraine, “MAP ATO – 23.02.2017,” <http://mediarbo.org/2017/02/23/map-ato-23-02-2017/?lang=en> (accessed February 27, 2017).

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tion has de facto cut Ukraine’s coastline in half and has essentially turned the Black Sea into a Russian-controlled lake. Russia has since claimed rights to underwater resources off the Crimean peninsula previously belonging to Ukraine. Furthermore, Russia has launched a campaign of persecution and intimidation of the ethnic Tatar community there.

In addition to the exploits in Crimea, Moscow took advantage of political grievances held by the Russian-speaking population in Ukraine’s east to stoke sectarian divisions. Backed, armed, and trained by Russia, separatist leaders in eastern Ukraine declared the so-called Lugansk People’s Republic and the Donetsk People’s Republic. Since then, Russia has continued to back separatist factions in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine with advanced weapons, technical and financial assistance, and Russian conventional and special operations forces.

Two cease-fire agreements—one in September 2014 and another in February 2015, known as Minsk I and Minsk II—have come and gone. Today Ukrainian soldiers are wounded almost daily and killed almost weekly—proof that Minsk II is a cease-fire in name only.

NATO–Ukraine Relations

Ukraine joined the North Atlantic Cooperation Council in 1991 and the Partnership for Peace in 1994. In 1997, the NATO–Ukraine Commission (NUC) was established to direct relations between Ukraine and NATO, providing a forum for discussion of security topics of mutual concern.

NATO has also established six temporary trust funds to assist Ukraine in providing its own security. The trust funds cover (1) command, control, communications, and computers; (2) logistics and standard-

1. Interfax-Ukraine, “Nearly 10,000 Ukrainians Killed, 23,000 Wounded Since War Started,” *Kyiv Post*, February 21, 2017, <https://www.kyivpost.com/ukraine-politics/nearly-10000-ukrainians-killed-23000-wounded-since-russian-aggression-started.html> (accessed June 28, 2018).

ization; (3) cyber defense; (4) military career transition; (5) countering improvised explosive devices; and (6) medical rehabilitation.

Ukraine is a contributing nation to the NATO Kosovo Force (KFOR) and the Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan, and regularly hosts NATO training exercises. The sale of the Javelin anti-tank missile by the U.S. to Ukraine marked a historical milestone in the bilateral security relationship.

Ukraine's Future in NATO

Even though NATO stated in 2008 that someday Ukraine would be invited to join the Alliance, until recently, the Ukrainians made little effort to help make this invitation a reality.

Once an aspiring NATO ally under the leadership of President Viktor Yushchenko, Ukraine's previous pro-Russia government under President Yanukovich blocked membership progress. In 2010, the Ukrainian parliament passed a bill that barred Ukraine from committing to "a non-bloc policy which means non-participation in military-political alliances."²

In light of Russia's aggression, the Ukrainian people have demonstrated, whether on the streets of the Maidan or through the ballot box, that they see their future connected to the West, not under Russian domination. This is especially true under the leadership of Petro Poroshenko. Even so, the country has a long way to go before NATO membership becomes a serious possibility.

Strengthening Partnership

Russia's ultimate goal is to keep Ukraine out of the transatlantic community. NATO must remain engaged and continue to support Ukraine. At the Warsaw summit the Alliance should:

- **Speak with a clear and united voice.** NATO must continue to present a united voice against Russia's aggression against Ukraine, reiterating the need for a complete restoration of Ukraine's territorial integrity. Furthermore, the NUC should meet at the head-of-state or head-of-government level in Warsaw as a sign of Alliance commitment.

- **Ensure that Ukraine is on the agenda for NATO.** At the summit, the NATO-Ukraine Commission should meet at the head-of-state or head-of-government level as a sign of Alliance commitment. The U.S. should pressure Hungary to refrain from blocking further cooperation between NATO and Ukraine.
- **Improve the quality of non-lethal support to Ukraine.** While the sale of Javelin missiles is welcome, NATO needs to improve the quality of non-lethal equipment, especially in terms of secure communications and more capable unmanned aerial vehicles.
- **Continue joint exercises with Ukrainian forces.** NATO-led training exercises in western Ukraine have helped to create a professional and capable Ukrainian military. This is in NATO's long-term interest. More training opportunities should be considered. In addition, NATO countries should continue robust participation in exercises in or near Ukraine, especially the Rapid Trident and Sea Breeze exercises.
- **Reaffirm NATO's open-door policy for Ukraine.** NATO should reaffirm that its open-door policy remains in place and that Russia does not have a veto right, including for potential future Ukrainian membership.
- **Evaluate NATO's trust funds for Ukraine.** NATO should evaluate the effectiveness of the six trust funds established at the 2014 Wales Summit. For example, NATO's devoting resources for counter-improvised explosive device (IED) training makes little sense when IEDs are not a major threat to the Ukrainian military. If deemed effective, Alliance members should be encouraged to increase voluntary contributions to the trust funds.
- **Ensure that NATO's trust funds are fully funded.** The total budget of these new funds is about \$9.5 million. To date, only half of this amount has been raised. President Donald Trump

2. Luke Coffey and Daniel Kochis, "NATO Summit 2016: The Alliance Must Deepen the NATO-Ukraine Partnership," Heritage Foundation *Issue Brief* No. 4590, July 5, 2016, https://www.heritage.org/global-politics/report/nato-summit-2016-the-alliance-must-deepen-the-nato-ukraine-partnership#_ftn8.

should apply pressure on allies to ensure that they contribute their fair share.

- **Focus NATO's Centers of Excellence on the war in Ukraine.** NATO should encourage NATO's Centers of Excellence to assist Ukraine in facing Russian aggression, especially at the centers focusing on cyberspace (Estonia), energy security (Lithuania), and countering propaganda (Latvia). The Alliance should consider inviting Ukraine to become a Contributing Participant in each of these three centers.
- **Work with NATO to open a NATO-certified Center of Excellence on Hybrid Warfare in Ukraine.** There is no precedent for a Center of Excellence being in a non-NATO country; however, doing so can improve NATO-Ukraine relations and show how important the war in the Donbas has become for Europe's overall security. The Center of Excellence would provide an opportunity to engage in meaningful dialogue and training in how to address the challenges associated with hybrid warfare, using lessons learned from the fighting in the Donbas.

Conclusion

While Ukraine is not a NATO member, the Alliance continues to have an interest in helping Ukraine defend itself and institute necessary political and economic reforms. Russia's continuing aggression undermines Ukraine's transatlantic aspirations and regional stability. NATO simply cannot afford to ignore Ukraine.

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