

The U.S. Should Demonstrate Its Support for Ukraine at the 2021 NATO Summit

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

Ukraine is in the midst of a national struggle that will determine its future geopolitical orientation: the West or Moscow.

It is in America's interest that Ukraine remain independent, sovereign, and on the path to NATO membership.

The U.S. should rally European NATO members to reaffirm their support for Ukraine and to help Ukraine improve its defensive military capabilities.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) summit in Brussels on June 14, 2021, offers an opportunity for the Alliance to focus on Ukraine. Over the past two months, Russia has been conducting a sizeable military buildup along its border with Ukraine and in occupied Crimea. During this same period, fighting has increased in eastern Ukraine. The United States should rally European NATO members to show solidarity with Ukraine, help Ukraine to improve its defensive military capabilities, and ensure that Ukraine remains on the path to NATO membership.

A National Struggle

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MAP 1

Conflict Areas in Ukraine



SOURCE: Information Analysis Center, National Security of Ukraine, “MAP ATO – 23.02.2017,” <http://mediarnbo.org/2017/02/23/map-ato-23-02-2017/?lang=en> (accessed April 21, 2020).

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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 13,000 lives lost and 30,000 wounded,¹ has inflicted heavy damage on the Ukrainian economy, and has slowed Ukraine’s progress toward deepening ties with the transatlantic community.

Fact: Russia invaded Ukraine. Fact: Russia illegally occupies Crimea. Fact: Russia provoked and now supports a separatist movement in eastern Ukraine that did not previously exist. Fact: Russia is the aggressor, and Ukraine is the victim.

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 close relations with organizations like NATO. It is in America’s interest that Ukraine remain

independent and sovereign and maintains the ability to choose its own destiny without outside interference.

Ukraine and NATO

Ukraine joined the North Atlantic Cooperation Council in 1991 and the Partnership for Peace in 1994. In 1997, the NATO–Ukraine Commission was established to direct relations between Ukraine and NATO, providing a forum for discussion of security topics of mutual concern. At the 2016 Warsaw Summit, NATO established the Comprehensive Assistance Package (CAP) for Ukraine, which now entails 16 programs. An important initiative contained in CAP was the establishment of 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 standardization; (3) cyber defense; (4) military career transition; (5) countering improvised explosive devices; and (6) medical rehabilitation.

A review of CAP currently underway will conclude by the end of the year, with a goal to “better align this package with Ukraine’s current requirements.”² Ukraine is a contributing nation to the NATO Kosovo Force (KFOR) and the Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan, and regularly hosts NATO training exercises. In June 2020, “the North Atlantic Council recognized Ukraine as an Enhanced Opportunities Partner, acknowledging the country’s strong contributions to NATO missions and operations.”³

Even though NATO stated in 2008 that someday Ukraine would be invited to join the Alliance, until 2014 the Ukrainians made little effort to help to make this invitation a reality. 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 former President Petro Poroshenko and his successor and current President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Even so, the country has a long way to go before NATO membership becomes a serious possibility.

Nevertheless, the Alliance continues to have an interest in helping Ukraine to defend itself and institute necessary political and economic reforms. A practical step in this regard was the publication in September 2020 of Ukraine’s “National Security Strategy” and “Law on Intelligence,” on both of which advisors from NATO assisted.⁴ Russia’s continuing aggression undermines Ukraine’s transatlantic aspirations and regional stability. NATO simply cannot afford to ignore Ukraine. At the Brussels Summit, NATO should demonstrate that it will:

- **Speak with a clear and united voice.** NATO must continue to present a united voice against Russia's aggression, reiterating the need for a complete restoration of Ukraine's territorial integrity. Furthermore, the NATO-Ukraine Commission should meet at the head-of-state, or head-of-government, level at the Brussels Summit as a sign of Alliance commitment.
- **Improve the quality of non-lethal support to Ukraine.** While the U.S. sale of Javelin missiles to Ukraine is helpful, NATO needs to improve the quality of non-lethal equipment, especially in terms of secure communications and more capable unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs).
- **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 on potential future Ukrainian membership.
- **Support evolution of NATO's trust funds for Ukraine.** NATO is currently evaluating the CAP for Ukraine, including the effectiveness of the six trust funds established at the 2014 Wales Summit. A review is needed as some are incongruent; for example, NATO's devoting resources for training on countering improvised explosive devices (IEDs) makes little sense when IEDs are not a major threat to the Ukrainian military. If other trust funds are deemed effective, NATO should encourage its members to increase voluntary contributions to those funds.
- **Ensure that NATO's new trust funds are fully funded.** The total budget of these new funds is \$40 million. To date, only half of this amount has been raised from NATO's members.
- **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 at 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 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.
- **Help Ukraine to improve its maritime domain awareness capability.** Most of the nonlethal support provided by NATO members to Ukraine since 2014 has focused on the land war in the east of the country. NATO should expand this support to improve Ukraine’s maritime security by providing improved radar and appropriate surveillance capabilities, such as UAVs.

U.S. Leadership Needed

While the success of Ukraine will rest in large part on the shoulders of Ukrainians themselves, the Biden Administration, working with NATO, should not hesitate to provide support to Ukraine. Furthermore, because of the deep interconnectivity of the Black Sea region, U.S. and NATO support for Ukraine indirectly supports Georgia, which is under constant pressure and threat of aggression from Russia. The U.S. should use the Brussels Summit as an opportunity to reaffirm its commitment to, and support for, the people of Ukraine. This, in turn, will make both America and its allies safer.

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Endnotes

1. "Death Toll Up to 13,000 in Ukraine Conflict, Says UN Rights Office," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, February 26, 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/death-toll-up-to-13-000-in-ukraine-conflict-says-un-rights-office/29791647.html> (accessed May 19, 2021).
2. North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *The Secretary General's Annual Report 2020*, last updated March 16, 2021, p. 95, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_182236.htm (accessed May 24, 2021).
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.