

Navigating a Frozen Conflict: The Future of Ukraine's Security Following the 2024 Russian Invasion

Introduction:

It was in 2005 that Vladimir Putin famously described the collapse of the Soviet Union as being “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century”.¹ Vladimir Putin assumed the presidency of Russia in 2000, and from the outset, has made his stance on Ukraine unequivocally clear. He maintains that Russians and Ukrainians are “one people,” united by over a thousand years of common history, beginning with the emergence of the first Slavic state—Kyivan Rus—in the 9th century. It is precisely due to this that he argues that both nations should share a common political future. His words and actions have shown undeniable desire to reunify Ukraine with Russia, highlighted by events such as his interference in Ukraine's 2004 election—campaigning for Yanukovich (a pro-Russian candidate), backing falsified results, retaliating with politically motivated gas cutoffs after the Orange Revolution, his support for separatist movements in regions like Donetsk and Luhansk, and attempts to block Ukraine's Western integration (for example, through its pressure campaign in 2013 to stop Ukraine from signing the Association Agreement with the European Union).²

Despite there being a strong unification desire coming from Moscow, Ukrainian nationalist sentiment has been increasing. This growing sense of national identity has not only deepened Ukraine's cultural and linguistic separation from Russia, but also motivated its turn toward Western institutions like NATO and the EU—reflected, for example, in the overwhelming nationwide support for pro-European candidates like Poroshenko in 2014 and Zelensky in 2019, even in formerly pro-Russian regions. Ukraine has shown an ever-growing desire to become more independent from Russia since gaining its independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union, making enormous efforts to do so. The Budapest Memorandum serves as an example of this, whereby Ukraine willingly gave up its nuclear weapons in exchange for promises from certain countries, most notably Russia: to respect its sovereignty, not use force against it, and accept its borders.³

Evidently, Russia did not respect the memorandum, with its first clear violation against it occurring with the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014.⁴ Following the annexation, the already tense relationship between NATO and Russia continued to deteriorate, due in part to NATO's heightened military presence on its Eastern Flank and Ukraine's path toward joining the alliance.

It was shortly after NATO's dismissal of a Russian demand for a guarantee that Ukraine would never be allowed to join the alliance in January 2022 that Russia launched its ground invasion of Ukraine in February of the same year,⁵

¹ BBC News. “Putin: Soviet Collapse a ‘Genuine Tragedy’.” April 25, 2005. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-32491662>.

² Chatham House. “Russia's War in Ukraine: Identity, History, and Conflict.” March 2022. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/03/russias-war-ukraine-identity-history-and-conflict>.

³ Lieber Institute West Point. “Ukraine Symposium – The Budapest Memorandum's History and Role in the Conflict.” December 8, 2022. <https://lieber.westpoint.edu/ukraine-symposium-budapest-memorandum-history-role-conflict/>.

⁴ War on the Rocks. “The Budapest Memorandum and the Russia-Ukraine Crisis.” March 17, 2014. <https://warontherocks.com/2014/03/the-budapest-memorandum-and-the-russia-ukraine-crisis/>.

⁵ Reuters. “Russia Demands NATO Roll Back from East Europe and Stay Out of Ukraine.” January 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-demands-nato-roll-back-east-europe-stay-out-ukraine-2022-01-10/>.

framing the invasion as a mission to liberate “oppressed” Russians “trapped” in Ukraine and to protect Russian security from increasing Western proximity because of Ukraine’s growing ties with the West.

Current State of Affairs:

Since 2022, Russia has managed to seize around 20% of Ukrainian territory.⁶ Attempts at securing peace between both countries have been made. As an example, in 2025, Trump threatened to stop military aid to Ukraine if no steps were taken toward reaching a ceasefire.⁷ After an initial failed mineral agreement between Ukraine and the USA, military aid was halted, but once the agreement was revised to include more safeguards for Ukraine, it was signed by President Zelensky. Since then, negotiations have continued—Ukraine accepted a temporary ceasefire, while Russia insists on limited freezes and neutrality rather than a full ceasefire. It seems reasonable to believe that the conflict will develop into a stalemate scenario, whereby no binding, security-guaranteeing ceasefire agreement is in place⁷. In response to this, it will be crucial for Ukraine to develop policies that address both its internal security and its external defence—particularly in to prevent another attack from Russia.

Assuming such a frozen conflict scenario were to materialize, the following suggested policies—if implemented effectively—could help establish the most peaceful and secure outcome possible. Arguably, Ukraine’s biggest goal is to guarantee its own survival, which will be dependent on its ability to deter and, if the circumstances were to arise, repel any forms of Russian aggression. For this, it needs to both focus on its own military capabilities and to get guarantees of external support in the event of a future conflict.⁷

The Strengthening of Ukraine’s Military Capabilities:

When it comes to focusing on its own military capabilities, Ukraine could achieve this by continuing to strengthen its defence sector using a strategy that bases itself on decentralization, partnerships with the private sector and a technology-forward approach. As a response to Russia’s full-scale invasion, Ukraine’s military has already made significant progress, adjusting from a slow, centralized procurement system to one that promotes battlefield-tested innovation, collaboration between military units and civilian engineers and off-the-shelf technologies. This led to a drastic rise in defence production, especially with equipment such as drones, making the military more efficient overall.⁸ It is by virtue of all of these steps taken that Ukraine’s army has turned into one of the most efficient and innovative armies in Europe.⁹ However, the Ukrainian army still faces many great challenges. For one, it suffers from a lack of manpower. Ukraine may want to increase its troop size and its military efficiency. To tackle the issue of too little manpower, Ukraine could make service terms more flexible by, for instance, allowing unit preference allocation as to boost motivation among soldiers and improve training quality and safety.

Another significant problem the Ukrainian military faces is its heavy reliance on Western aid. While some degree of Western aid is recommended to be striven for, it is important for Ukraine to be less reliant and more importantly, less

⁶ Reuters. “Ukraine Accuses Russia of Undermining Next Round of Peace Talks in Istanbul.” March 28, 2022.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/ukraine-accuses-russia-undermining-next-round-peace-talks-istanbul-2022-03-28/>.

⁷ New York Times. “Trump Pressures Ukraine to Accept a Peace Plan That Sharply Favors Russia.” January 15, 2025.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/15/world/europe/trump-ukraine-peace-plan.html>.

⁸ Atlantic Council. “Ukraine’s Innovative Army Can Help Europe Defend Itself Against Russia.” February 22, 2025.

<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/ukraines-innovative-army-can-help-europe-defend-itself-against-russia/>.

⁹ Atlantic Council. “Ukraine’s Growing Military Strength Is an Underrated Factor in Peace Talks.” March 1, 2025.

<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/ukraines-growing-military-strength-is-an-underrated-factor-in-peace-talks/>.

susceptible to it (as the cutting of military aid from the US by the Trump administration has shown). For this, it is helpful that Ukraine diversifies its foreign aid sources.¹⁰ It is also crucial for Ukraine to boost its internal economy by, for instance, increasing domestic tax revenues and reallocating spending in an efficient manner. It can do this by raising progressive taxes, cutting non-defence expenses and better allocating government subsidies with the aim of improving efficiency and reducing its fiscal deficit so as to be less reliant on external aid.

Another key objective Ukraine should aim to meet is to boost domestic production. This is particularly relevant in defence and energy sectors. It is crucial for Ukraine to scale up underutilized sectors, like the drone manufacturing one, which currently only produces at 40% capacity.¹¹ Hereby, it is also a good idea to relocate businesses to safer areas within the country. Additionally, there are plenty macroeconomic tools at Ukraine's disposal that can be implemented to improve its trade balance, which, currently runs a significant deficit,¹² such as the gradual devaluation of the Ukrainian currency, the Hryvnia and the expansion of export routes, with the aim of reducing the trade deficit.¹¹

In a frozen conflict scenario, Ukraine must maintain a continuous and sustainable deterrent force, with troops stationed at the border at all times, as is common in other long-standing standoffs like that between North and South Korea.¹³

The Seeking of External Safety Guarantees:

In light of recent events, Zelensky has expressed to be willing to give up occupied territories—areas Ukraine lost control over due to the ongoing war—as long as there are sufficient security guarantees in place to ensure that Ukraine's sovereignty and its current borders, as they stand, are not put at risk again in the future.¹⁴ In practice, this means having enough support from the West—namely, firm assurances of military assistance to Ukraine were Russia to attempt another incursion within Ukraine's (current) borders.¹⁴

Ukraine has long been aware that in order to avoid being dominated by its bordering superpower, it must increasingly align itself with the West. Its actions—such as applying to join both the EU and NATO—demonstrate its intentions to do so.¹⁵ Juxtapositionally, it was arguably this very move towards Western alignment, particularly NATO, that contributed to Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, as Moscow perceived Ukraine's closeness to the West as a growing threat to its own security². Still, it is difficult to imagine a truly sovereign Ukraine that stands entirely alone¹⁵. Many scholars see

¹⁰ Medium. Narayan, Shankar. "Europe Moves to Replace Starlink in Ukraine." April 2025. https://medium.com/@shankar_narayan/europe-moves-to-replace-starlink-in-ukraine-d9db8d0523cd.

¹¹ CEPR. "Replacing Foreign Aid: A Macroeconomic Plan B for Ukraine (and Europe)." March 12, 2025. <https://cepr.org/voxeu/columns/replacing-foreign-aid-macroeconomic-plan-b-ukraine-and-europe>.

¹² FocusEconomics. "Ukraine Merchandise Trade Balance (USD bn)." May 2025. <https://www.focus-economics.com/countries/ukraine/news/trade-balance/ukraine-merchandise-trade-balance-usd-bn/>.

¹³ CSIS. "North and South Korea: A Frozen Conflict on the Verge of Unfreezing?" February 15, 2024. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/north-and-south-korea-frozen-conflict-verge-unfreezing>.

¹⁴ Euronews. "Ukrainian President Says NATO Membership Can End 'Hot Phase' of War." March 12, 2025. <https://www.euronews.com/2025/03/12/zelensky-nato-membership-could-end-hot-phase-of-ukraine-war>.

¹⁵ Atlantic Council. "How Ukraine Rebuilt Its Military Acquisition System Around Commercial Technology." March 2025. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/how-ukraine-rebuilt-its-military-acquisition-system-around-commercial-technology/>.

Ukraine's accession to the EU and NATO as essential to keeping Russia out in the long run. However, these ambitions face a range of political and structural challenges. This paper argues that Ukraine should indeed pursue full EU and NATO membership—not only for its own long-term security, but also for the broader stability of Europe. Regardless, while full membership may remain a long-term objective, it is crucial that collaboration between NATO and Ukraine is strengthened in the near future, and that the procedural and political obstacles standing in the way are addressed more decisively.

In order to make Ukraine's gradual integration into NATO possible, NATO and Ukraine should design a stabilization and integration action plan.¹⁶⁴ This plan could resemble the strategy used with West Germany's incorporation into NATO in 1955. The case of West Germany provides an important precedent from which policies can be drawn and applied to the context of Ukraine. In the former, NATO admitted a country that had unresolved territorial disputes and held only partial sovereignty over its entire territory (sovereignty over the Western but not Eastern part). It accepted West Germany as a member with the limitation that Article 5—arguably the most important article in the alliance, which states that an attack on one shall be countered by all—applied solely to the territory it fully controlled, namely the West.¹⁶ In a similar way, it should be possible for Ukraine to follow the example set in 1955, on the condition that NATO and Ukraine clearly define the area to which NATO protections would apply. This area of applicability could include only those territories that Ukraine has full control over, thereby excluding areas such as Crimea and Donbas. This strategy would be an efficient way to protect Ukraine from future attacks on its current territory. However, it is important to emphasize that Ukraine's accession to NATO should be framed in such a way that NATO would come to Ukraine's aid in the event of a Russian attack on its current territory, but not in the event that Ukraine attempts to retake the Russian-controlled areas by force¹⁷. This is a crucial distinction, because, by excluding the second scenario, this policy framework aims to avoid the high risk of a direct war between NATO and Russia. It also makes Ukraine's accession much more realistic, as it would more likely meet the requirements of Article 10, requiring a unanimous vote by member states, if members feel that its (limited) accession strengthens deterrence against Russia—something that benefits both their own security and, naturally, Ukraine's—while remaining limited enough not to provoke a full-scale conflict. To make the agreement even less provocative to Russia from NATO's point of view, the agreement between Russia and Ukraine could be limited to Ukraine's current territory and even more limited to, as an example, 5 miles away from the borders—as to exclude the chance of escalation over small and local border conflicts with Russia.¹⁶

Conclusion:

A frozen conflict scenario requires Ukraine to strengthen both its internal military capabilities and its external security guarantees. By implementing strategic reforms and constructing realistic yet meaningful partnerships, Ukraine can strengthen its resilience and better protect its sovereignty against Russian aggression.

¹⁶ Council on Foreign Relations. "Ukraine, NATO, and War Termination." January 2025. <https://www.cfr.org/article/ukraine-nato-and-war-termination>.

¹⁷ ECFR. "Only NATO Can Secure a 'West German' Future for Ukraine." April 2025. <https://ecfr.eu/article/only-nato-can-secure-a-west-german-future-for-ukraine/>.

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