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A lesson in realism

One of the messages of the Vilnius Summit is that as long as the war in Ukraine continues, there will be no NATO membership

NATO is a prime example of stability, bureaucratic continuity and routine work. In 2008, the final declaration of the Bucharest Summit stipulated that 'Ukraine will become a NATO member'. Fifteen years later, the international security system is completely upended, and the Communiqué of the Vilnius Summit now states the following: 'Ukraine's future is in NATO'. It will be difficult to find 10 differences between the two.

But, of course, the differences are within the context. The world has changed a lot – but NATO's most influential members' desire to not take any risks for Ukraine's security remains unchanged. It is surprising how generations of Ukrainian politicians have kept a blind eye to this. With their unwillingness to understand the fears and calculations in Washington, Berlin, or Paris, they have done Ukrainian foreign policy no favour. It is difficult to imagine a more challenging situation for a state than a war with a much stronger opponent and without allies.

Yes, we have partners whose interests today coincide with ours and who support us. But the difference between partners and allies is that you cannot demand anything from the former. That is why rhetoric and accusations are the wrong response to the decisions of the Vilnius Summit, which, in the end, was not so much about Ukraine as about the new realities in the struggle for the international order in which the Alliance has found itself.

A broader agenda

A closer look at the joint Communiqué makes it clear that NATO is concerned about the erosion of the international security foundation, the arms control regime and, above all, nuclear security. These issues are covered in much more detail than the few sentences on Ukraine. That means that the Alliance is facing a broad agenda, keeping a close eye on

numerous regions and international issues and, thus, requiring good risk and resource management. Considerations of this kind have shaped NATO's strategy towards Ukraine, both in 2008 and in 2023.

Did the Ukrainian leadership really believe that NATO membership was practically already in the bag? If so, then one of the lessons from Vilnius is that when it comes to international security dilemmas, even the most eloquent rhetoric loses its appeal.

Few will risk the security of the Alliance for the sake of Ukraine's security.

NATO's machinery is simple – as is the answer to the question of why Ukraine is denied membership. NATO is a classical collective security system in which protection from others is exchanged for the risk to be, in turn, obliged to protect one of the partners. The Alliance's key advantage is its high deterrent and protective effect, defined by the readiness of all partners to fight more than by the cumulative military potential. For such a system, Ukraine does not represent an opportunity, but a huge risk.

How experienced or effective the Ukrainian armed forces are is irrelevant – the Alliance needs to keep the risk of war low. Otherwise, there is a high chance that some states wouldn't stand up to their obligations, resulting in NATO's loss of effectiveness or even its total collapse. The danger of Ukraine's membership in NATO, even before the Russian invasion, was precisely this – a possibility to lead to an internal split in the Alliance because of the high probability of war with Russia. Today, with a full-blown conventional war underway in the middle of Europe, these risks skyrocketed. And few will risk the security of the Alliance for the sake of Ukraine's security.

Besides, there is no added value in Ukraine's membership to NATO. On the contrary, it would mean extra obligations, which are better to be replaced by money and arms deliveries – and that is precisely what the pledges made by the member states on the fringes of the summit amount to. Ukraine *has* to fight because it is struggling for its own statehood and independence. NATO, however, has no need to invite Ukraine into its alliance so that this fight can continue.

No membership during wartime

In the 15 years since the Bucharest Summit, the world has changed. In 2008, China's economy, measured by purchasing power parity, was only

half than that of the US or the EU. Today, it is 25 per cent larger than that of the US. The world is heading towards a bipolar order – if it is not already there. These changes have not played in Ukraine's favour. And they created an environment much less conducive to its aspiration to join NATO.

No country today becomes a NATO member following the prescriptions of the early 21st century. Contrary to popular belief, it can be said that Ukraine is further away from NATO membership today than it was in 2008. The West is avoiding complicated dilemmas, minimising its security commitments and saving resources. The war is also not playing in favour of Ukraine's NATO membership, although many people believe it forces the West to integrate Ukraine — no, it won't.

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One of the messages of the Vilnius Summit is that as long as the war in Ukraine continues, there will be no NATO membership. However, this doesn't automatically mean that membership will come *after* the war. And, apparently, that also means that the question of Ukraine's membership or non-membership may be decided in the context of broader agreements on the future security order. Apart from that, it could furthermore mean a potentially unpleasant and difficult dilemma for the Ukrainian leadership: to seek peace with Russia in the hope of joining NATO – or to be at war for an indefinitely long time with the hope of regaining the occupied territories. Gradually, the attitude of the West is becoming apparent here: first, the war must end; only then, all fateful decisions are to be taken. This may apply not only to Ukraine's membership in NATO, but also in the EU.

Ukraine's bet on NATO has once again not paid off. But one has to be realistic. That Ukraine's membership would be decided at the summit was out of the question. It was about the forms and extent of support – and that deserves gratitude. Most likely, the next summit in Washington will be the same. In Vilnius, NATO displayed an ability to think strategically and it demonstrated its power. The Alliance has gained time. Russia is weakened, the allies are strengthened. Ukraine has contributed significantly to this – albeit with no choice. That's why Kyiv has the right to demand more help and support. Unlike NATO membership, this is realistic.

There is a widespread belief among Ukrainians that the leaders of Germany and France made a mistake in 2008 by not granting Ukraine and Georgia a 'Membership Action Plan' (MAP), thus provoking Russian aggression against both states. This has always been a weak argument: that things would have taken a different course for the two countries with a MAP cannot be verified. The Summit in Vilnius demonstrated that other Western leaders, in the meantime, are ready to take similar decisions. The questions of who was mistaken and when remain unanswered.



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