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# Security in limbo

A sustainable truce will require providing Ukraine with enhanced security. The country has pinned its hopes on bilateral guarantees

Ukraine took a gamble when it pinned all its hopes on its Western partners, and in recent months, this has caused problems. Talk of Western aid being cut or delayed has become something of a refrain among Kyiv diplomats.

Ukraine sees the West's involvement in the war as its chance to defeat Russia, which remains a strong adversary. But there are many challenges. In an environment where it would be too ambitious to hope for NATO membership, even for the most ardent idealists, the focus has shifted to what is often referred to as 'bilateral security guarantees'. The UK-Ukraine Agreement on Security Cooperation deserves special attention, as it provides more detail on what form these 'guarantees' might take and how they might work, as well as whether they might resolve the dilemma of Ukrainian security.

## The key to a Ukrainian victory?

The Ukrainian war has now transitioned into a long-term conflict. The events of last year forced many Ukrainians to rethink the situation, the prospects and the odds of success. Some have also re-evaluated the criteria for that success. As yet, there has been no real discussion in Ukraine about what victory might look like, with the definition so far mainly centred on the official version set out in President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's Peace Formula. The latter document follows the theory of 'just war' and outlines the best outcome of the war for Ukraine, which would be victory: the restoration of territorial sovereignty (in just war terms: *status quo ante*), reparations, holding Russia accountable and security assurances for Ukraine.

But reality is more complex. Almost two years of this war have shown how difficult, if not impossible, securing such a victory would be. Any post-war settlement would pose a major challenge for Ukraine: an

unfavourable balance of power with Russia, which would remain a geopolitical reality on the Ukrainian border and pose a long-term threat to national security. The current war increases the risk of escalation in the future.

In this context, the problem of security assurances has become fundamental for defining victory and formulating a security strategy for the future Ukraine. A sustainable truce will require providing Ukraine with enhanced security guarantees, whether that be in the form of NATO membership, something that is currently extremely unlikely, or indeed in any other form.

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However, this is a complex problem for which we cannot expect simple solutions. Security assurances are essentially defence treaties, whether bilateral or multilateral, which envisage participation in a war on the side of an ally that has been subject to attack. And the problem is that there is currently no one willing to support Ukraine at a level not seen before the Russian invasion. As the Ukrainian war drags on and becomes part of a global struggle for the future of the international order, the great powers will be carefully managing their own risks and will be keen to avoid these kinds of commitments.

In the past, Ukrainian politicians struggled to understand why the doors to NATO remained permanently open to Kyiv, and yet, entry was still barred to them. Today, the problem is far more acute. Because of the war, the majority of NATO member states are increasingly reluctant to invite Ukraine to join the Alliance, and consequently, a paradox arises: the prospects of membership may improve, but not until after the war is over and a sustainable peace has been achieved. Thus, for now, Ukraine can expect no more than symbolic declarations.

Faced with such a reality, Ukrainian diplomacy has pinned its hopes on bilateral security guarantees. But with this too, there are problems. There are, for instance, different interpretations of the term ‘guarantees’: Ukraine needs defence pacts, whereas its Western partners are mostly willing to support the country with arms and money. This difference in approaches has been obvious for quite some time and eventually became clear even to the optimists at last year’s NATO summit in Vilnius. At the summit, the G7 countries signed a Joint Declaration of Support for Ukraine, which made no mention of security guarantees but simply committed to continuing the forms of support that have been provided

to Ukraine during the war. Over time, the declaration was also signed by other states, on the basis of which bilateral talks commenced to pin down the concrete support mechanisms. These talks ultimately resulted in the signing of the aforementioned agreement with the UK. The majority of the states participating in such talks do not have a defence pact in mind but rather the strengthening of the Ukrainian armed forces, supporting reforms, good governance, sanction mechanisms, exchanging intelligence data or providing financial aid. Some of the states argue that we should wait for the end of the war or agree upon collective action.

Against this background, the UK took the step of entering into the agreement with Ukraine, demonstrating once again that it was prepared to take the initiative.

## What was agreed?

The agreement, signed by Zelenskyy and British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, was not about security assurances, and indeed, no such guarantees are provided. Nor is it a defence pact: in this, or any future war with Russia, Ukraine should not count on the participation of British troops on its side. Ukraine and the United Kingdom are not allies, and the use of this term to describe their relationship has no more than symbolic meaning.

As its title indicates, the agreement is on security cooperation, covering only those issues that the UK already identified as its priorities last year: assistance to the Ukrainian armed forces, reforms, sanctions, exchange of information and financial assistance. The buzzwords in the document are ‘assistance’, ‘together’, ‘enable’ etc. What the document lacks are specifics.

The part of the document about defence and security cooperation envisages joint work on bringing the Ukrainian armed forces up to NATO standards, providing undefined levels of continued assistance, consultation with the aim of improving governance, support for border protection and – the only firm commitment – £2.5 bn in military aid in 2024. It is interesting that, at the beginning of the document, reference is made to the UK supporting Ukraine for as long as it needs, only later to limit the timeframe of the agreement to 10 years. Point 7 also provides that, in the event of external military aggression against the UK, Ukraine will provide it with effective military assistance. When it comes to Ukraine’s security obligations, the agreement could be an example of the adoption of asymmetric commitments by parties.

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The issue of maritime security and the pledge to contribute to the development of Ukraine’s

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naval fleet, as well as defence industry cooperation, have the potential to become the most promising elements of the agreement. However, for this to happen, Ukraine still needs to win the war. As long as the war continues, the only realistic prospect is that the repair and maintenance of British military equipment will be shifted to Ukraine — large-scale joint defence projects require different conditions. Cyber security, intelligence, the reconstruction of infrastructure, combating propaganda and organised crime — all these are important and promising areas of cooperation, but they simply adapt the terms of a much broader Political, Free Trade and Strategic Partnership Agreement, signed in 2020, to the needs of military realities.

For Kyiv, the important part of the agreement is the political part, in which the UK expresses its support for Ukraine's Peace Formula, pledging its commitment to the sanctions regime and holding Russia accountable. This should indicate the level of international support for the Ukrainian vision of victory and peace, at least among Western states. The section of the agreement on reconstruction and humanitarian cooperation does not contain much in the way of specifics either. Evidently, this is about helping Ukraine to reduce the suffering of its citizens; but over the last year, it has become clear that conferences on post-war reconstruction are somewhat premature.

The answer to the question as to why, in the agreement, the UK fails to provide Ukraine with security guarantees, regardless of which English or Ukrainian word is used for this, can be found in the penultimate part — Part 8. Here it states that, in the event of future Russian armed attack against Ukraine, the parties will consult within 24 hours; and the UK undertakes to provide Ukraine with swift security, military and economic assistance, and would impose sanctions on Russia. In this part of the agreement, the term 'military assistance', as used above to describe Ukraine's obligations in the event of an attack on Britain, is replaced by a more specific description which excludes Britain's participation in an actual war against Russia.

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Of course, this agreement is not the Budapest Memorandum. If only because it was prepared under completely different conditions. For the signatories of the Budapest Memorandum in

*agreement is not an alternative to NATO membership, this may be exactly how the West sees it.*

1994, the war seemed unthinkable, and Ukraine agreed to point 6, which provided for consultations — but no more. Now, there is a war that has been active for almost two years, and the West no longer plans to limit itself to consultations, instead providing Ukraine with significant amounts of support. Yet, this is not enough for Ukraine. The contours of a future security mechanism are a prerequisite for putting an end to this war.

It is vital that any similar agreements on security cooperation – and several are already in the pipeline – are assessed realistically and soberly. Not only do such agreements not provide Ukraine with security guarantees, nor do they represent a step, a bridge or indeed any other kind of structure that will advance Ukraine towards NATO membership. This is a separate, larger problem and such an agreement will take Ukraine no closer to resolving it. Despite the rhetoric of many Ukrainian officials that a cooperation agreement is not an alternative to NATO membership, this may be exactly how the West sees it. Moreover, even in the preparation of the agreement with the UK, there are far too many political nuances. The signing of similar agreements with several other major donors would of course allow the country to look to the future with more certainty, but it would not solve the problem of Ukraine's security and would leave Kyiv hostage to the decisions of Western partners.

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