

## Fortress Ukraine

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June 2022

Contemplating long-term security for Ukraine may seem premature as Russia continues its offensive in the eastern regions and strikes the western cities with missiles. Yet, the Ukrainian government has already begun thinking in these terms. In March, President Volodymyr Zelensky [called](#) on the world's most powerful governments to provide Ukraine with firm security guarantees. When Western officials [balked](#) at the prospects of a mutual-defense pact with Kyiv, Zelensky floated the idea of Ukraine's own path to security emulating the experiences of Israel. While thinking of Ukraine's future in [terms](#) of "a big Israel with its own face" may be unusual and even extreme, centering Ukraine's security on the principle of self-defense is a better alternative than banking on collective security that comes with eventual membership in NATO. By maintaining close defense partnerships with the US and European countries for modernizing and equipping its military and bolstering its air defense and drawing on assistance from other partners willing to share technology, training, and intelligence, Ukraine can tailor its security posture to its unique situation and security needs.

### Why Is There a Need for Ukraine's Own Path to Security?

Many [analysts](#) link Ukraine's future security to its eventual membership in NATO or, short of the Article 5 protection, to a defense pact with the US, UK, or some other trusted partners. Policy proposals by **Petro Burkovskiy** and **Olexiy Haran**, and **Maria Popova** and **Oxana Shevel**, subscribe to this position. While certainly desirable and consistent with Ukraine's chosen path enshrined in the country's constitution, NATO's membership faces serious obstacles in the near term and, more importantly, neither policy option may effectively guarantee Ukraine's security from the threat of Russia's attack in the future.

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<sup>1</sup> All opinions expressed in this policy memo are those of the author and do not represent an official position of the US government, Department of Defense, or National Defense University.

Washington has already [signaled](#) an unwillingness to offer Kyiv the kind of legally binding protections it has requested. So has the UK, which [announced](#) that the country was not ready to become a guarantor of Ukraine's independence when the latter floated a peace deal with the Kremlin. While it is not impossible to extend NATO's membership to a country at war, the foreign occupation of Ukrainian territories would be a big practical obstacle to Kyiv's admission to the Alliance. Removing this obstacle will not happen overnight but will require patience, time, and [careful diplomacy](#). During this time, Euro-Atlantic unity boosted by Russia's aggression can be threatened by the vicissitudes of domestic politics in the US and Europe as the war drags on. Turkey's threat to veto Sweden and Finland's [historic bid](#) to join NATO on the grounds of their perceived harboring of the exiled Kurdish militants reveals some deep cracks within the organization sealed by the Russian aggression against Kyiv. A prolonged admission process makes NATO aspirants particularly vulnerable to Russia's gray zone and even kinetic attacks.

In addition to the feasibility of membership, NATO's collective defense may not effectively safeguard Ukraine from Russia's future aggression. As **Paul D'Anieri** maintains, "Article V guarantee only protects the members as long as it is considered 'airtight.'" The kinds of Russian attacks that the NATO wargamers have been concerned about the most are known as *fait accompli*: Russian troops launch a massive surprise assault overwhelming a NATO member's military forces and seizing some territory. This creates a [dilemma](#) for NATO: launch a costly counter-offensive risking casualties and a nuclear escalation, or accept a Russian *fait accompli*. Ultimately, there will always be a mismatch between Moscow's vital interests in Kyiv and the European countries' major concerns with the sovereignty and independence of Ukraine.

Even if NATO, with combined forces exceeding Russia's military capabilities, decides to counter-attack in fulfillment of Article 5 commitments, the Alliance has [significant challenges](#) conducting large-scale combat missions. Currently, NATO relies on a weak military force deployed on the eastern flank. If attacked, this first line of defense will trigger the intervention of stronger forces from NATO's rear. Until NATO shifts from "deterrence by reinforcement" to "[deterrence by denial](#)," membership in the Alliance does not prevent the horrific destruction of sovereign territory by a determined aggressor.

**Maria Popova** and **Oxana Shevel** discuss a possible compromise with Russia for Ukraine's admission to NATO, including a promise of no NATO troops or heavy weapon systems permanently placed on the Ukrainian territory. However, these are the types of capabilities that Kyiv needs to prevent the *fait accompli* in the future. Lastly, membership in NATO may drag Ukraine into conflicts it would not want to be a part of in the long run. Top US officials made it clear that their goal in Ukraine is to see [Russia weakened](#) in order

to shift their focus to China's challenge in the Indo-Pacific, which remains Washington's top priority, according to the unclassified factsheet of the US [2022 National Defense Strategy](#). Many analysts of US-China relations have concluded that an armed conflict between Washington and Beijing is a [real possibility](#) this decade.

### **How Can Ukraine Defend Itself?**

In the last eight years, Kyiv's effort at military reform, coupled with millions of dollars worth of Western military aid and training, has transformed Ukrainian defense into a formidable and battle-hardened [fighting force](#) capable of fending off a better-equipped and larger army. Lessons from Ukraine's security cooperation with the West and its army's heroic and skillful performance in the war can serve as guides for developing its self-defense strategy.

Kyiv's self-defense strategy will not be carried out in isolation but with Western support. One of the goals of the US mission in Ukraine has been to provide Kyiv with the means to defend itself against Russian aggression. This is unlikely to change so long as the Putin regime or a regime of a like-minded successor remains in the Kremlin. To deepen and institutionalize Ukraine's defense cooperation with the West, most notably with the US, Kyiv should advocate for elevating Ukraine's status to a "major non-NATO ally." Of course, Ukraine's reconstruction will be a key part of its self-defense, and Western donors can and should underwrite the costs of reconstruction. To channel Western assistance toward Ukrainian defense, the costs of reconstruction can be covered by Russian assets. Its frozen currency reserves can be potentially converted into [reparation payments](#) for Ukraine.

The first priority for Ukraine's self-defense strategy will be to build a robust air defense system across the country. Ukraine will be vulnerable to Russian ballistic and cruise missile attacks on Ukrainian cities, military sites, transport systems, and energy infrastructure, whether in a protracted conflict or after the war ends. Therefore, Ukraine and its partners need to develop Ukraine's own Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) defenses featuring a mix of anti-aircraft, surface-to-air, and, possibly, anti-ship systems. A robust A2/AD system may even protect Ukrainian territory from the carnage of Russia's tactical nuclear weapons. To evade the air defense, the Russian military is more likely to outfit its highly efficient Iskander short-range ballistic missile system with nuclear warheads. Currently, the only air defense system that has demonstrated the ability to intercept the Iskander is the Israeli Barak-8 air defense system. By collaborating with a wider range of partners for procuring military technologies, Ukraine may be better to meet its security needs.

The second priority lies with the continuous military modernization and training of the Ukrainian troops for operating advanced military technologies. Although NATO and its members have trained around 10,000 Ukrainian troops annually in various exercises and courses, much of that training used Soviet legacy weapon systems available in Ukraine. At the outset of the war, the Western desire to supply Ukraine with much-needed aircraft and surface-to-air systems was hindered by the limited availability of the Soviet-style parts and ammunitions as well as the challenges of training Ukrainian crews to operate Western military craft during the war. In addition, Ukraine, which is home to bright technological minds and a robust arms industry, should support the development of homegrown military and cyber technologies. By investing in its own solutions to some of its military needs, Kyiv will be most responsive and adaptable to future threats.

Third, Ukraine will need to boost its intelligence and cyber capabilities by upgrading its own intelligence services and establishing intelligence-sharing partnerships with the US and other NATO members. Still, another priority will be to continue investing in expanding, training, and arming the volunteer Territorial Defense Forces (TDF). The [idea](#) behind the TDF is to deny the adversary an option of a *fait accompli* victory with the threat of fierce resistance. Included in Ukraine's strategic defense plan months before Russia's invasion, the TDF proved to be indispensable to denying Russia's seizure of the Ukrainian cities, including its capital Kyiv. Many more Ukrainians volunteered to defend their home country than were provided with proper weapons and training. The lack of noncommissioned officers or volunteers to lead the TDF troops for tactical operations or serve as vital links with the military has been a major obstacle to actualizing the TDF's full potential.

**Paul D'Anieri** acknowledges some risks stemming from "Fortress Ukraine." The robust Ukrainian military capable of fighting Russia without NATO's help might launch a counteroffensive to regain its territories still under Moscow's occupation, even in the face of NATO's objection. This, however, is for Ukraine to decide, and staying outside NATO, makes Kyiv less susceptible to the Alliance politics. The greatest obstacle to a security approach based on self-defense comes from the Ukrainian people. As discussed by **Petro Burkovskyi** and **Olexiy Haran**, public opinion in Ukraine strongly favors Ukraine's membership in NATO. Because a decision to strive for the country's self-defense will be politically costly for a Ukrainian government, the choice must be made by NATO if it is unable to offer a clear path to membership within a near-term time frame.

## **Conclusion**

"Fortress Ukraine" may not get a seat at NATO's table, but it has all ingredients to develop future security based on the principle of self-defense. It will be grounded in the Ukrainian

people's willingness to fight for their country's freedom and independence, matched by its ability to do so built through the partnership and assistance from the West.