

Opinion – The Vilnius Summit and the Future of NATO

Written by Alexander Brotman

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ALEXANDER BROTMAN, JUL 16 2023

This week's NATO Summit in Vilnius was one of the most consequential in recent history with profound implications for the future of the alliance and its most adamant prospective member state, Ukraine. After close to a year and a half of war, the Ukrainians are slowly starting their long-anticipated counter-offensive that could be a decisive push in their battle to reclaim land held by Russia since as early as 2014. In Moscow, Putin's hold on power was recently tested by Wagner chief Yevgeny Prigozhin's mutiny, and the future command of Russian forces in Ukraine remains uncertain. In the midst of these developments, Western support for Kyiv has been intensifying, most notably with the US approving the transfer of cluster munitions to Ukraine and France and the UK providing long range weaponry capable of striking Crimea. However, many cracks within the NATO alliance remain and Ukraine's future in NATO is far from certain. The summit's joint communique makes Vilnius 2023 remarkably similar to the NATO summit at Bucharest in 2008, with lofty promises that Kyiv will become a member state at some point in the future and an invitation extended 'when allies agree and conditions are met.'

While the war is ongoing, the US President, Joe Biden, is not prepared to admit Ukraine into NATO, and Germany has taken a similar, more conservative position that has exposed divisions amongst the alliance. Ukraine is not yet ready for NATO, according to Biden, as further democratisation measures are needed in addition to the restoration of all of its borders. As Biden's decision on providing cluster munitions shows, there are no easy options available at present, and NATO is contending with both the future Euro-Atlantic trajectory of Ukraine while also starting to prepare for all eventualities should the collapse of Putin's Russia be on the horizon.

For Ukrainian President, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, and Foreign Minister, Dmytro Kuleba, any outcome akin to that of the 2008 Bucharest Summit is unacceptable. At Bucharest, NATO agreed that both Ukraine and Georgia 'will become members of NATO' at an uncertain date without providing a membership action plan or MAP, leaving ambiguity that Russia was all too eager to exploit. At Vilnius, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg announced it will remove the MAP from Ukraine's accession process, arguing it is no longer needed given the interoperability and political integration Ukraine has made with NATO as a result of the war. Despite the promising tone, the language and lack of a clear timeline in the communique still invokes the ambiguity of Bucharest, leaving Kyiv, and some allies such as Poland and the Baltic states wanting more.

In a recent piece for *Foreign Affairs*, M.E. Sarotte offered a rebuttal to a proposal for a so-called 'German model' for Ukraine's NATO membership that has been proposed by former US policymakers and featured in op-eds in prominent US newspapers. The German model would create a rump Ukrainian state in the west that would be able to join NATO sooner than the eastern half which would have to wait until the cessation of hostilities with Russia. Given the changing nature of the Ukrainian frontline in contrast to the fixed border that existed between West and East Germany, this would inadvertently serve Russian interests by making Article 5 'a matter of debate rather than a deterrent', according to Sarotte. Once Article 5 is cast into question the entire function of NATO is cast into question as well. While good intentioned, this model unnecessarily partitions Ukraine at a time when its unity across all regions is its most prized asset. It is also an example of the importance of giving Ukraine a seat at the table in determining its own security affairs, as such a proposal is unlikely to ever emanate from Kyiv.

In its recent history, Ukraine has heard many times that it is 'not yet ready' for entering the EU, NATO, and the other trappings of the West that signal prosperity, development, and democracy. While it is important for NATO to maintain

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its rigorous standards for the accession of new member states, it is also important that it not establish a moralising position that fails to grant Ukraine full autonomy and agency over its own territory. Zelenskyy echoed this in a tweet in response to the Vilnius communique, saying ‘we value our allies but Ukraine also deserves respect.’ Respect for Ukraine and its place in Europe has been a driving factor for Zelenskyy since the full-scale Russian invasion began last year. Thus, telling Ukraine it is not yet ready will only further drive Kyiv’s ambitions to prove itself to be a worthy member of the transatlantic alliance.

Ukraine’s accession also poses a quandary for NATO’s largest and most influential member states like the US and France who are arguably more determined to expand their reach in the Indo-Pacific and combat 21st century challenges rather than work to revitalise a 20th century organisation. The opposite is true for the Baltic states and Poland, of which an enlarged NATO to include Ukraine and potentially Georgia at a later date would be a turning point in ensuring a more stable security environment in Europe. For Tallinn or Warsaw, enlargement is a progressive principle that in turn serves to enhance Europe’s dealings with other rising powers and security threats emanating from China. In contrast, for Paris, Ukraine risks remaining a second-tier security dilemma that isn’t personal in the way it is for the Baltic states. Ukraine is not ‘coming home’ or ‘returning to Europe’ just as the Baltic states did after decades of Soviet occupation but is merely solidifying its role as a borderland of Europe that needs to be securitised.

Despite this, NATO’s relevance is clearly on display at Vilnius in the example of Finland and Sweden’s accession, with Turkish President Erdogan now giving Stockholm the green light and Hungary expected to follow suit. It is hard to say that NATO is not inspiring, both to countries at war like Ukraine, and to countries at peace like the Baltic states who view the protection of NATO as critical to ensuring their security. However, challenges are likely to continue to occur on multiple fronts, including the role NATO should play outside its original area of operations in the Indo-Pacific, and the general functioning of the institution as a result of enlargement and the at times different policy aims of states like Turkey and Hungary. French President Macron is blocking the establishment of a NATO liaison office in Japan precisely because it shifts the alliance’s focus away from the North Atlantic. In the Indo-Pacific, France would also like to embrace strategic autonomy and act independent of NATO, historically viewed as a US-led organisation with diverging interests, including over the state of Taiwan. Thus, the growing pains present within NATO are only set to sharpen in the years ahead.

Given the conflict in Ukraine shows no signs of abating, it is up to all NATO member states to ensure their continued commitment to Kyiv in whatever ways best suit their national interest. For Estonia, this will likely be the continuation of spending at least 1% of its entire GDP on Ukraine’s defence, while pushing other NATO member states to make spending 2% of their GDP on the military a floor and not a ceiling. In contrast, states like Albania, Hungary, and Turkey will likely pursue less public, hard-power displays of support.

NATO is becoming increasingly more diverse and divergent as an alliance, and the individual approaches of all member states will continue to reflect that. However, NATO still operates on the principle of consensus, and if Ukraine joins, as it most likely will, it will only be as the result of a unanimous decision made across the alliance. This is ultimately NATO’s greatest strength and what will make Ukraine’s position more secure once it ultimately joins. The strongest communique to come from the Vilnius summit would be an acknowledgement that Article 5 will extend to Zaporizhzhia, Kherson, Bakhmut, and Mariupol in the next decade. For now, it must extend to every inch of NATO territory from its newest members to its oldest, and to the hearts and minds of all Ukrainians as they fight for the values of, and in defence of, the transatlantic alliance on territory that is not yet its own.

About the author:

Alexander Brotman is a political risk and intelligence analyst with a focus on EU politics and security developments. He has written for several political risk publications, including Global Risk Insights, Foreign Brief, and Geopolitical Monitor, and has provided direct research support to a leading scholar of Russia and Eurasia in Washington. Alexander received his MSc. in International Relations from The University of Edinburgh. He is currently

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based in Washington DC.

He writes in a personal capacity and not with any professional affiliation.