

MEMO

to NATO Leaders

TO: NATO heads of state and government

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SUBJECT: Decisive action needed at NATO's Vilnius summit on Ukraine and the completion of Europe

What do world leaders need to know? The Atlantic Council's new "Memo to..." series has the answer with briefings on the world's most pressing issues from our experts, drawing on their experience advising the highest levels of government.

Bottom line up front: NATO's upcoming Vilnius summit has to produce more than an articulation of transatlantic solidarity against Russian aggression and a rhetorical expression of support for Ukraine. Allied leaders must leverage the opportunity to drive forward a NATO defense and deterrence posture that substantially and materially reinforces European security and peace, underscores NATO's resolve to support Ukraine, and begins the process of completing a Europe whole and free where Ukraine is fully integrated within the transatlantic community, including as a member of NATO.

Background: The high stakes of this summit center on Ukraine but extend far beyond it and the current war

The central issue at the NATO summit in Vilnius, Lithuania this July will be the Alliance's response to the threat posed by Russia's brutal and unjustified full-scale invasion of Ukraine, now in its second, potentially decisive year.

In his public statements and in the draft treaties Russia presented to the United States and NATO before the invasion, Russian President Vladimir Putin made clear that his imperial ambitions go well beyond Ukraine. Today he remains convinced that time is still on his side despite the Russian military's mediocre performance, and that the West will soon tire of its support for Kyiv.

The United States and its allies need to take an unequivocal stand in Ukraine, where the courageous Ukrainian people are on the front lines fighting for their own freedom but also defending the values and security interests of the transatlantic community. If the United States and its allies don't do enough to ensure that Ukraine prevails against Russia this year, they could face the need for direct and much costlier intervention in the future.

Much is at stake in the outcome of this nearly decade-long war that Russia launched against a democratic European state, first in 2014 with the seizure of Crimea and portions of eastern Ukraine, and which Putin escalated with his attempt to seize the entirety of Ukraine in February 2022:

- **Ukraine's sovereignty and independence:** The country's status as a democratic, pluralistic, and diverse society is on the line. Moreover, Putin aspires not just to acquire territory but also to create a new version of the Russian Empire and avenge the dissolution of the Soviet Union. He seeks to erase by force the history and identity of the Ukrainian people and deny their very existence as a nation. To this end, Russia is committing atrocities on a scale not seen in Europe since World War II.
- **The international order's endurance:** If Putin is allowed to maintain control over Ukrainian territory, it will significantly weaken the rules and norms of the post-World War II order that have long served as the basis for international peace and prosperity. The world will once again be dominated by spheres of influence, military coercion, and the philosophy of might makes right. Other ex-Soviet states and even NATO members could be the next targets of Putin's aggression, and other autocrats, including Chinese leader Xi Jinping, could be emboldened to follow the Russian example.
- **Nuclear coercion's effectiveness:** If Russian aggression is allowed to stand, it will be the result in part of Putin's use of nuclear coercion to limit the scale and nature of international military support to Ukraine, including assistance from the United States and its NATO allies. If this precedent is set, it could encourage the Kremlin and other adversaries armed with nuclear weapons to engage in similar coercion elsewhere, and it will motivate other countries to introduce nuclear weapons into their military arsenals as well.
- **Russia's evolution as a democracy and international actor:** Zbigniew Brzezinski, the former US national security advisor (and Ian's father), used to observe that Russia cannot be a democracy if it continues to be an empire. If Putin's aggression is not fully reversed, Russia's own prospects of evolving into a more constructive international actor will be severely diminished.
- **NATO's credibility:** What NATO does and does not do in support of Ukraine will shape the confidence that its member states have in the Alliance and the respect it garners among its adversaries. Thanks in large part to strong US leadership, NATO allies are united in opposing Russia's war of aggression at a level unprecedented in the post-Cold War era. But allied support could erode if the war devolves into a protracted and costly stalemate.

Recommendations for actions to take in Vilnius

Russia's aggression is not simply an attack on Ukraine. It is an attack on NATO's core interests, one necessitating a more vigorous response by the Alliance to strengthen the security of all Europe's democracies. That response must include the following steps:

- **Fortify NATO’s defenses along its eastern flank:** Deterring Russian aggression requires more robust implementation of the Alliance’s [pledge](#) at its 2022 Madrid summit to “defend every inch” of NATO territory. In Madrid, allies decided to increase NATO’s enhanced Forward Presence deployments from battalion- to brigade-level formations, but only brigade-level headquarters are actually being deployed to front-line countries. Instead, full brigade units should be deployed to those countries along with essential intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; air and missile defense; long-range fires; and other necessary enabling capabilities so that there are sufficient forces in place to respond to any form of Russian aggression or land grab. Allies should deploy lead elements of these additional forces by the time of the Vilnius summit and set the goal of full deployment by year end. In confronting an aggressive Russia, allies should no longer be bound by the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act’s constraints on permanent stationing of substantial combat forces or tactical nuclear weapons on the territory of countries that joined NATO after the Cold War.
- **Fully endorse Ukraine’s war aims:** Ukraine and Ukraine alone must define its objectives in this Russian-launched war. In Vilnius, allies should signal their complete commitment to supporting Ukraine in its effort to achieve its definition of victory in this conflict. According to the terms set by Ukraine’s president and embraced by its parliament and citizens, that means the expulsion of all Russian forces from occupied parts of the country and the full restoration of Ukraine’s territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders of 1991, including Crimea. This is the only outcome that would deny Russia the fruits of aggression and fully uphold the principles of the rules-based order. Any ambiguity regarding these goals on the part of allies before negotiations between Ukraine and Russia have even begun would undercut Ukraine and strengthen Putin’s confidence in ultimately realizing his maximalist ambitions.
- **Significantly expand economic sanctions on Russia:** The transatlantic community must lead an effort to substantially increase the economic costs that the international community is imposing on Russia for its invasion of Ukraine. The International Monetary Fund’s [projection](#) that the Russian economy will actually grow in 2023 is a prominent indicator of the inadequacy of the current sanctions regime. A more painful sanctions strategy will, as always, involve some economic blowback on allies’ economies. But a failure to fully exercise the West’s economic leverage risks prolonging this conflict by fueling Putin’s war machine and communicating a lack of determination that sustains Putin’s confidence. Increased US and EU sanctions should include additional actions to cut Russian revenue from its exports; intensified restrictions on exports to Russia, particularly of high tech; and broader sanctions on Russian enterprises, including those engaged in sanctions evasion.
- **Launch a NATO initiative to increase member state production of defense capabilities necessary to achieve victory in modern conventional war:** Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has demonstrated that NATO defense stocks and production capacity are not sufficient for possible contingencies involving major powers, including the requirement for prolonged weapons supply to Ukraine.

At the Vilnius summit, allied leaders should approve a two- to three-year timeline for expanding production capacity for weapons systems and ammunition critical to NATO's defense needs, to include providing Ukraine what it requires to prevail against Putin's invasion and deter Russia from invading a third time.

- **Expand and institutionalize NATO's military support to Ukraine:** Allies have succeeded in helping Ukraine recover [more than half](#) of the territory Russia captured since its full-scale invasion while avoiding the war becoming a direct conflict between NATO and Russia. But this has come at the cost of allies appearing deterred by Russian nuclear threats from providing Ukraine everything it needs to prevail. At the Vilnius summit, NATO should:
 - » **Announce a new package of military assistance in support of Ukraine's planned 2023 counteroffensive,** which will likely be underway at the time of the summit. The package should lift allies' self-imposed limits on offensive weapons and provide longer-range systems such as ATACMS that enable Ukraine to deny Russian forces a sanctuary for launching attacks on Ukrainian civilians and critical infrastructure. If the Russians can no longer strike with impunity from occupied Crimea or across the Russian border, they are less likely to escalate and more likely to get serious about negotiations. The package should encompass expanded training for Ukrainian forces in NATO countries, including training pilots on advanced Western fighter jets, and the deployment of NATO trainers at uncontested locations in western Ukraine.

- **Move beyond the ambiguous formula regarding Ukraine's NATO membership enunciated at the 2008 Bucharest summit,** which has proved destabilizing in Europe. In Vilnius NATO leaders should assert clearly that, as former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger [has stated](#), Moscow's aggression means that European security requires a Ukraine anchored to NATO. This means membership and interim steps toward that goal. Such steps could include:
 - » **Establish a new NATO-Ukraine Deterrence and Defense Partnership (DDP).** Building on Ukraine's status as a member of the Enhanced Opportunities Partnership program, the DDP would be aimed at **building up Ukraine's long-term capacity to defend itself and deter any future Russian aggression.** Allies' commitment to arm, train, and equip Ukrainian forces—backed, if possible, by NATO common funding—would serve as a **post-war security guarantee for Ukraine** until allies are ready to admit Ukraine as a full-fledged NATO member.

 - **The partnership should be offered as an alternative to a NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP),** but like a MAP its objective would be to facilitate Ukraine's preparation for eventual membership in the Alliance. Such a program would open the door to direct accession by Ukraine as was offered to Finland and Sweden.

- **Ukraine should be invited now to participate in meetings of the North Atlantic Council in the same way that Sweden and Finland were pending their full accession;** that would be a powerful signal of Alliance commitment.

- » **Make permanent the 54-nation Ukraine Defense Contact Group** as the vehicle for coordinating short-term military assistance to Ukraine while the war continues and for building Ukraine's long-term deterrence posture under the DDP. The Contact Group could be reinforced by a **steering group of the most active supporters** of Ukraine committed to securing state-of-the-art technology for Kyiv.

- » **With the United States in the lead, begin discussions among NATO allies on offering Ukraine an Article 5-like collective defense guarantee for all territory that it controls at the time hostilities with Russia end.** This could be implemented initially by a coalition of the willing (for example, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and Poland), but preferably by all allies since they would be sharing the same risks.

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