



to the President

TO: POTUS

FROM: Ambassadors John Herbst, Steven Pifer, Alexander Vershbow, and 39 other national security leaders

SUBJECT: A bold agenda for the Washington summit: How to advance vital US interests by helping Ukraine win and defining its path to NATO membership

What does the US president need to know? Our new “memo to the president” 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: Washington will host a NATO summit next year to mark the Alliance’s seventy-fifth anniversary. It comes at a time when the international order faces an unprecedented challenge from an authoritarian alignment of China and Russia that is seeking to undermine US and global security and prosperity. The most immediate danger comes from Moscow’s nearly decade-long aggression in Ukraine. The NATO summit and the run-up to it present an opportunity for US leadership to meet this danger by taking steps to provide Ukraine the means to win the war and by setting a clear path for Ukraine’s membership in NATO.

Background: Moscow will continue to threaten the security of the free world if it is not defeated in Ukraine

Moscow’s brutal war, which [some legal experts](#) have concluded is genocide, is not just about Ukraine. It is part of a Kremlin plan to reimpose its will in the territory of the former Soviet Union and beyond. If not clearly defeated in Ukraine, Moscow will continue with its territorial conquests and threaten the security of the free world.

This gives the United States a vital stake in the war’s outcome.

Meeting this challenge requires two things:

- **A clear commitment to help Ukraine achieve decisive success on the battlefield.** This requires the United States and its allies and partners to move beyond their current slow and incremental approach and provide the full range of advanced weapons that Ukraine needs, in sufficient quantity and on time. The goal should be unambiguous: Ukraine’s victory.

- As European stability and security requires a secure Ukraine, **Ukraine must be anchored in transatlantic security arrangements so that Russia is deterred from attacking again.** The 2024 NATO summit should define Ukraine's path to membership in NATO, including an invitation to Kyiv to begin membership accession talks. Ukraine's accession to NATO is the most effective and reliable deterrent to aggression, and the best guarantor of a stable and secure Europe, in the long term.

Under the Biden administration's leadership, the United States, NATO, and their partners have taken great pains to prevent a Kremlin victory in Ukraine. The United States has supplied approximately \$76 billion in military and economic aid to Ukraine since the full-scale invasion by Russia on February 24, 2022. Europe has provided approximately \$97 billion. With this aid, Ukraine has destroyed approximately 50 percent of Russia's conventional military capability, making our assistance a smart and economical investment in our security. Russian forces have proven unable to take political control of the country, although the aid provided to Kyiv has not been sufficient to enable Ukraine to inflict a decisive defeat.

Recommendations for actions in support of Ukraine

Provide Ukraine the weapons it needs to win the war: Since Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the United States has been slow to provide Ukraine the more advanced weapons it needs at each turn of the struggle. We see the results now in the limited gains of Ukraine's counteroffensive thus far.

A look at the battlefield explains why. The Ukrainian military faces a Russian force that is battered but still able to build significant defensive fortifications, including by mining an estimated 30–40 percent of the territory it has occupied. The provision of demining equipment to Ukraine has been slow and insufficient to demine territory so that it can be taken without enormous casualties.

Perhaps more important, Ukraine has conducted this offensive without F-16s and longer-range ground-based systems such as the Army Tactical Missile Systems (ATACMS), which has made it easier for the Russians to move key military assets out of reach of Ukraine's military.

- To expedite Ukraine's battlefield success, the United States and NATO should send more artillery, artillery munitions, and artillery-locating radars as well as short-range air defense assets to accompany ground forces and shoot down missiles fired from Russian helicopters.
- Ukraine also needs more UAVs to make the battlespace more transparent, and the latest US counter-UAV systems and full suite of electronic warfare systems required to defeat Russian jamming and other forms of radio-electronic combat.
- Ukraine also needs attack helicopters both for air defense purposes and to provide close combat air support for offensive and defensive operations.

The addition of ground-launched long-range fires, especially the 300 km ATACMS, would enable Ukraine to strike enemy lines of communication and logistics hubs deep inside Russian-controlled territory, target and destroy major transit routes, and suppress Russian air defenses, thus also helping to alleviate threats against Ukrainian air. If the decision is made to provide only the cluster M39 submunitions, with a range of about 150 km, Ukraine's arsenal will not have the range or heft to take out larger infrastructure such as bridges. (The cluster M39 submunitions can be useful in striking some other targets and infrastructure.) These systems, combined with more effective and far greater quantities of short-range mobile air defense and demining equipment, would enable greater breakthroughs of Russian lines and hinder Russian counter-maneuver and fires. Delaying these decisions only buttresses Russia's ability to harden its targets and dig in. Ukraine will be in a much stronger position to defend itself if it receives all of these assets in sufficient quantities and in a timely manner.

The not-publicly-stated prohibition on providing Ukraine all the weapons it needs to make a serious difference in Crimea, including not just ATACMS but long-range drones, must end. Moreover, the United States should seek NATO support to modify the prohibition on the use of weapons supplied by NATO nations to allow those weapons to be used by Ukraine's military, for self-defense, to strike military sites in Russia that are being used to attack Ukrainian cities as well as military and commercial targets.

To ensure that Ukraine receives the weapons it needs, and that the United States and NATO have the weapons they need to deter and defend against great-power aggression in the future, NATO members must move decisively to build up their arms industries. They are currently ill-prepared to handle conflict with near-peer adversaries, let alone supply Ukraine with what it needs to defeat Russia.

The strong approach outlined above could give Kyiv the edge on the battlefield and hasten an end to the war on acceptable terms. It would also set the stage for anchoring Ukraine in the security architecture of the transatlantic community.

Provide Ukraine a clear path to NATO membership: The NATO summit in Vilnius this summer showed the operational complexities of anchoring Ukraine in the West. The Alliance took new steps to bring Ukraine closer to NATO, such as dropping the need for a Membership Action Plan and upgrading the NATO-Ukraine Commission to a NATO-Ukraine Council, but these were just modest moves beyond the 2008 Bucharest summit language.

The Washington summit must serve as a platform to boldly advance Ukraine's NATO integration, defining a clear path to membership starting with an invitation to begin membership accession talks. That would provide an unambiguous signal to Kyiv that its defense of Western values has earned it a place in the Alliance. And it would show Moscow that its attempts to subjugate Ukraine will not succeed.

Beginning membership accession talks with Ukraine, while the penultimate step before actual accession, would not be a simple decision for NATO. While NATO admitted West Germany in 1955 when part of its territory was occupied by Soviet troops, the Alliance has never admitted a country engaged in active combat with hostile forces occupying part of the country. Since the start of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, NATO members have made clear their intent not to become combatants in the war. Were Ukraine at peace, the accession process could be straightforward. But with Russian troops occupying over 20 percent of Ukraine and Moscow still seeking to establish political control over the whole country, any approach must be as nuanced as it is bold.

Prepare for Ukrainian NATO accession under different scenarios: The NATO summit in Washington is set for July 2024. The allies will likely be preparing for the summit while the war and Russian occupation of Ukrainian territory continue. The battlefield situation will influence those preparations and the results of the summit. This means being prepared for different scenarios on when and how to proceed with accession talks and NATO membership for Ukraine.

- **If Ukraine wins a clear victory:** The simplest and best backdrop for the summit would be a clear Ukrainian victory, with Russia withdrawing from all Ukrainian territory. Were Ukraine's counteroffensive successful in cutting the land bridge to Crimea, that would badly stress the Russian army, perhaps leading to its collapse. In this case, NATO could issue the invitation to begin accession talks in Washington with the goal of rapid accession and with little reason to fear that NATO's membership offer would mean war with Russia.
- **If the war continues:** But if the war continues with Russia still occupying major parts of Ukraine, the question facing NATO leaders in 2024 will be more difficult. Even in this case, however, affirming that Ukraine's future is in NATO by issuing an invitation to membership accession talks would be a notable step forward.

Accession talks would leave open the timing of a subsequent decision to admit Ukraine as a member. Membership accession talks would not extend Article 5 protection to Ukraine, at least in a legal sense. The talks, which could take place in the NATO-Ukraine Council, would set out and monitor the conditions for Ukraine's entry, taking into account the state of the war, and determine how Article 5 would be applied geographically when Ukraine becomes a member. During the talks, the Alliance would continue to provide Ukraine the quantity and quality of arms needed to liberate its remaining territory from the Russians and deter any future aggression.

Make clear to Russia the cost of escalating the war: Russia may threaten to escalate the war in response to a NATO invitation to begin accession talks, including the possible use of nuclear weapons.

- The best way to defend Western interests and avoid a shooting war between Russia and NATO is to explain to Moscow in the clearest terms the consequences of such a step. That is, the Kremlin would have to decide if it wanted to risk a broader war with NATO.
- In addition, NATO should make clear to Moscow that Western support for Ukraine will only grow stronger the longer its aggression continues.

It is, of course, absolutely necessary for the United States and its NATO allies to look carefully at the risk of nuclear escalation when dealing with a rogue power like Russia. But the United States and NATO should not be self-deterred by Russian nuclear rhetoric. NATO's nuclear deterrent remains strong, and Ukraine has stated its willingness to fight through any Russian escalation.

Our recommendations would disabuse Vladimir Putin of the notion that he can still take control of Ukraine by outlasting the West. When that reality sinks in, negotiations will help define the terms of a just and stable settlement.

A strong majority of NATO members favors a bold course of action along these lines. Strong leadership by the Biden administration is essential for implementing it and making NATO's seventy-fifth anniversary summit truly historic.

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