At its upcoming Vilnius summit, NATO is likely to offer Ukraine a closer relationship than before, but less than full membership. That will be a mistake: NATO should extend its defence guarantee to all Ukrainian-administered territory.

When they met in Bucharest in April 2008, NATO leaders discussed the membership aspirations of Georgia and Ukraine and declared “these countries will become members of NATO”, but gave them no timetable or road map to joining the alliance. Fifteen years later, as NATO leaders prepare to meet in Vilnius on July 11th and 12th, allies seem to be coalescing around offering Ukraine an as-yet undefined closer relationship with NATO, while putting off membership, again, for a future that may never come. In Bucharest, the US was the main cheerleader for incorporating Georgia and Ukraine into the alliance; this time it seems to be one of the main obstacles – though there are plenty of others. The current NATO position gives Russia a de facto veto over Ukraine’s future foreign policy orientation and its accession to the alliance: as long as Russia occupies some Ukrainian territory, refuses to make peace and keeps the war bubbling with occasional attacks, NATO will continue to say that Ukraine is an unsuitable candidate for immediate membership. US hesitation gives Vladimir Putin hope that one day, with a friendlier president in the White House, the West will stop supporting Ukraine militarily and Kyiv will have no choice but to surrender to him.

NATO’s secretary general, Jens Stoltenberg, said recently that everyone agreed that Ukraine would become a member, but added “to become a member in the midst of war is not on the agenda and that is not the issue. The issue is more what happens when the war ends, in one way or another”. To many allies, including the US, offering a security guarantee to a country at war with the nuclear power next door seems too risky. But NATO leaders should think again. Bringing Ukraine into NATO as quickly as possible, along with the other countries caught between the alliance and Russia, would be a better way of stabilising the region than the various alternatives proposed.

Putin’s preferred option of the total surrender of Ukraine and its subjugation to Russia is no longer achievable, if it ever was. The fantasy, entertained by a few commentators in Ukraine and the West, of
Russia's total collapse seems equally unlikely – despite the trouble Russian forces have had dislodging two anti-Putin militias, the Ukraine-based ‘Freedom of Russia Legion’ and the ‘Russian Volunteer Corps’, from Russia's Belgorod region. In the absence of regime change in Kyiv or Moscow, there are five main options for Ukraine's long-term future security arrangements if it is not given a pathway to NATO membership – some of which could be combined:

★ **Partition.** This is the least desirable option, since it would reward Putin's violation of international law, but it *seems* to be the approach that China is pushing for. During a tour of several European capitals, Li Hui, China’s envoy for the conflict, has reportedly urged his interlocutors to recognise occupied territories as Russian. The American political scientist Samuel Charap has also *suggested* that the war might end with an armistice which “would leave Ukraine – at least temporarily – without all its territory”. The world has lived with partitioned countries for many years, but the precedents are not encouraging. Charap argues that South Korea eventually became a stable democracy, and flourished economically. The unfortunate population of North Korea, however, have suffered decades of oppression and periodic famines – probably not a fate that President Volodymyr Zelenskyy feels he can accept for Ukrainians under Russian occupation. And 70 years after the Korean War ended, South Korea's security still relies on the presence of almost 30,000 US troops in the country – a force not likely to be on offer for Ukraine.

★ **Neutrality.** Even after the war started, Ukraine *explored* this as a possibility, and some Western analysts *promoted* the idea. There have been various models of neutrality in Europe, some of which have worked better than others: Switzerland’s neutrality has been respected since 1815; Belgium's was violated when it suited Germany’s Kaiser Wilhelm II in 1914. Finland had neutrality forced on it after the Second World War as the price of maintaining its independence from the Soviet Union, but ultimately sought greater security first in the EU and now in NATO. Ukraine's problem, however, is that regardless of its foreign policy choices, it is a land which Putin and many Russians regard as indissolubly Russian. Ukraine's neutrality would not address Putin's belief that Ukrainians are really Russians and that Ukraine has no right to exist as a sovereign entity independent of Russia – a point he *underlined* again in a recent meeting with the Chairman of Russia’s Constitutional Court.

★ **The ‘hedgehog’ strategy.** Some Western analysts have *suggested* that Ukraine's best option is to emulate Israel, and make itself too ‘prickly’ to be an attractive target – with military support from friendly countries, but no security guarantees and no allied ‘boots on the ground’. That would imply Ukraine maintaining a large army and still larger well-trained on-call reserves even after hostilities end, with a permanently high defence budget. If it was lucky, and future Western governments saw it as something very close to a treaty ally, in the way that US administrations have seen Israel, then it too could hope to be given a ‘qualitative military edge’ (*QME*). US law obliges the administration to preserve Israel’s QME, by ensuring that it always has access to better weapons and more advanced military technology than its Arab neighbours – even those that are closely aligned with the US, such as Saudi Arabia.

There are two problems with this option. One is financial: given the devastation that eastern and southern Ukraine have suffered in the war, Ukraine and its partners will have to invest enormous sums in reconstruction as soon as it is possible to rebuild – both for humanitarian reasons and because the country needs to get its economy restarted. It is unrealistic to expect that they could simultaneously maintain the kind of defence budget that Israel had when its confrontation with the Arab states was at its height: Israel’s military spending exceeded 10 per cent of GDP in every year from 1967 to 1994.
The other problem is that Israel's strategic position vis-à-vis its Arab neighbours is very different from Ukraine's position with regard to Russia. Israel has had nuclear weapons since the late 1960s or early 1970s, while the Arab states have not (and Israel has conducted military operations against Iraqi and Syrian nuclear facilities to keep it that way). By contrast, Russia has the world's largest nuclear arsenal, while Ukraine has no nuclear weapons. Former US ambassador to NATO Ivo Daalder has warned that if Ukraine had to rely on its own resources to deter future Russian attacks, it might seek its own nuclear weapons. A nuclear-armed Ukraine might indeed be more secure, but it would alienate many of its Western partners by eroding the credibility of the global nuclear non-proliferation regime, thereby encouraging other vulnerable states with aggressive neighbours to go nuclear.

★ The EU mutual defence commitment (Article 42.7). This option would only be available once Ukraine joined the EU – which might be a decade or more away. Leaving that problem to one side, the EU's mutual defence commitment is in theory more binding than NATO's Article 5. The latter states that in the event of an armed attack on an ally, each other ally “will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force”. Article 42.7 of the Treaty on European Union goes further: “If a Member State is the victim of armed aggression on its territory, the other Member States shall have towards it an obligation of aid and assistance by all the means in their power” (author’s emphasis). But even if all EU members were willing to go to war for each other, the Union is not equipped with the command structures to co-ordinate them or the enablers to support them in fulfilling this guarantee (such as intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, or logistics). Even in aggregate, European forces are smaller and much less capable than the US forces that are the backbone of NATO. Soon after the war began, the Finnish and Swedish prime ministers wrote a letter to the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, stressing the importance of the Article 42.7 commitment; within weeks, however, both countries had applied to join NATO – concluding, presumably, that EU membership on its own was not enough to ensure their security. Apart from the timing problem (what security guarantees would Ukraine have before it joined the EU?), Kyiv would have to wrestle with the same uncertainty about the solidity of Article 42.7.

★ Guarantees from a ‘coalition of the willing’. If Ukraine cannot benefit from a guarantee provided by all the members of the EU or NATO, could a coalition of the states most interested in its success do it? Perhaps Emmanuel Macron had such an arrangement in mind when he said at GLOBSEC in Bratislava in May: “We should provide Ukraine with solid security guarantees” – without mentioning NATO as the potential guarantor. At a recent private meeting of US and European officials and think-tankers, there was some discussion of the possibility of some NATO member-states having a relationship with Ukraine like the one that allies had with Finland (and still have with Sweden) in the run-up to NATO accession. The UK and Sweden, for example, agreed in May 2022 that in the event of an attack on one of them, they would “upon request from the affected country assist each other in a variety of ways, which may include military means”. That does not constitute a legally binding guarantee of help, but such an agreement might give Ukraine more certainty than it now has that Western assistance would continue as long as the country remained under attack. Such a guarantee would look unconvincing from a Moscow perspective, however, unless the US was a party to it. All the indications are that the US is not interested in offering Ukraine the kind of bilateral commitment to come to its defence that South Korea, Japan or the Philippines rely on.

Even if a credible coalition could be put together without US participation, it would leave other NATO members in an uncomfortable position: alliance unity would be placed under strain if one group
of allies felt that another group was knowingly increasing the risk of a conflict with Russia in the expectation that the rest of NATO would come to their rescue. If, say, Polish forces responding to a further Russian attack on Ukraine came under attack themselves while they were still on Polish soil, would all allies feel that that was an Article 5 contingency? Would some take the view that Poland had provoked Russia, and decide that they were not prepared to go to war in such a case?

NATO membership for Ukraine would have clear advantages over any of these options. It would not reward Putin for his aggression. Unlike the neutrality option, it would not leave Ukraine reliant on Russia's goodwill for its future security. By sharing the burden of defending Ukraine and deterring further Russian attacks among all the NATO allies, it would make the costs bearable for all, rather than forcing Kyiv to devote a large proportion of its economic output to defence. And by bringing Ukraine under NATO's nuclear umbrella, it would considerably reduce the incentive for Volodymyr Zelenskyy or a successor to develop a nuclear weapons programme of their own. Unlike the EU option, a NATO defence guarantee can be put in place as quickly as allies can be persuaded to ratify Ukraine's accession to the alliance (with bilateral guarantees from interested allies as a stop-gap until the ratification process is complete); and unlike the EU or any coalition of the willing, NATO membership would bring with it ready-made forces, command structures and enablers.

The argument implicit in the 2008 decision not to give Ukraine and Georgia Membership Action Plans that would have led, by a predictable process, to membership was that such a step would be provocative to Russia. That horse bolted a few months later, when Russia occupied 20 per cent of Georgia's territory – the provocation turned out to be NATO's weakness in not admitting Georgia and Ukraine quickly, and it was compounded by the West's unwillingness to offer Georgia any military assistance when it was attacked. Now the more respectable argument against Ukraine's membership is about the difficulty of admitting to NATO a country which is under attack and which does not control all its territory. Yet there are ways to deal with this.

One option would be to apply the Article 5 guarantee for the time being only to the territory currently under Ukrainian administration. This would to some extent reflect the way that NATO dealt with the accession of West Germany in 1955. The alliance extended its guarantee only to the Länder controlled by the Bonn government, even though the Federal Republic's 1949 constitution – the Grundgesetz – treated other territories that had previously been part of Germany as merely under temporary administration by other governments. NATO could put in place a 'ratchet' arrangement to extend the guarantee automatically to newly liberated areas once Ukrainian administrative control was firmly re-established there. The important thing, however, is not to incentivise Putin to continue to launch attacks on Ukrainian-held territory – which is the risk if Western leaders say that Ukraine cannot join NATO as long as the war continues.

NATO membership would not in itself prevent Russia continuing its assault on Ukraine. But NATO would be able to move air defence forces, logistic support and the like into Ukraine, and tell the Kremlin that an attack by Russian forces on Ukrainian-administered Ukraine would trigger Article 5. NATO would make clear that Putin risked a conventional response from the alliance, backed up by its nuclear deterrent. Despite repeated bouts of nuclear sabre-rattling, Putin has shown that he is reluctant to confront the West directly – he has not forgotten that NATO has powerful conventional and nuclear forces of its own. The US worries in the early stages of the war that Russia might attack facilities in Poland from which Ukraine was being supplied, but Putin has not done so, even though the flow of weaponry has significantly increased over the last 15 months.
After NATO foreign ministers met in Oslo on May 31st and June 1st, Stoltenberg said that when the war ended: “We must ensure that… we have credible arrangements in place to guarantee Ukraine’s security in the future”. Making a bold offer at the Vilnius summit of membership for Ukraine (and ideally for Georgia and Moldova too) would be the best way for NATO to achieve that. Instead, it seems it will offer a mixture of symbolism (upgrading the current NATO-Ukraine Commission to a NATO-Ukraine Council) and practical assistance in making Ukrainian forces more interoperable with NATO forces – useful, but not decisive. In many ways, NATO has come a long way since Bucharest; but when it comes to understanding how to stabilise parts of Eastern Europe threatened by Russian imperialism, it has hardly moved at all.

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