Policy Brief

Summary: Recent developments around the Ukraine-Russia conflict have summoned key elements needed to reinvigorate the NATO-Ukraine partnership, including common vision and goals, as well as a set of shared risk perception and threats. For Ukraine, while cooperation with NATO has traditionally been a bargaining instrument of its "multivectoral" foreign policy, it has now turned into an urgently important matter of national security. For NATO, while the Alliance has always relied on technical and peripheral ties with Ukraine, it is now a matter of geopolitical and strategic concern to make cooperation as fruitful as possible. The importance of strengthening the NATO-Ukraine Partnership has never been as critical as today, as outlined in six recommendations.

Six Recommendations to Strengthen the Ukraine-NATO Partnership

by Mykola Kapitonenko and Bruno Lété

Introduction

The year 1997 might not necessarily be engraved in our collective memory as a moment of great historical shift. Some might remember U.S. President Bill Clinton's second inauguration, or Great Britain handing back Hong Kong to China. But arguably for European geopolitics, 1997 was a year of enormous significance. That was when the foundations for Europe's future security architecture were effectively laid. NATO not only extended an invitation to Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary to join the Alliance, but also signed the Charter on a Distinctive Partnership with Ukraine, which established the NATO-Ukraine Commission to take cooperation forward. And Russia, for its part, signed the Russian-Ukrainian Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Partnership, which includes the vital 2nd Article, where both neighbors agreed to "respect each other's territorial integrity." For a moment, the path of Ukraine and Eastern Europe seemed to be headed toward peace and stability, guaranteed by the greater regional powers.

But a lot has changed in the past two decades. Russia's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula has openly violated the so-called "Big" Treaty, and undermined the values that govern the European, and indeed, the global security architecture. The direct seizure of another state's sovereign territory is something Europe had not witnessed since the wake of World War II. Moreover, Russia's assertive diplomatic use of military might, energy cuts, cyber-attacks, propaganda, and the exploitation of minorities' grievances has not only destabilized Europe's eastern flank but also threatens the security and prosperity of all member states of the European Union and NATO. Indeed, the impact of the events in the Crimea or in the Donbass goes beyond Ukraine and is of concern to the international community as a whole.

A Partnership, but with Obstacles

The Ukraine-Russia conflict has been a turning point in Euroatlantic security and has changed the European security landscape. The conflict not only poses a threat to the sovereignty of Ukraine, but also crystallizes an intensifying sense of deep mistrust and dissonance between Russia and the West. These new security realities demanded a significant response from NATO. In this light, the 2014 Summit in Wales has been an important step to rebalance the Alliance priorities in Europe. The Readiness Action Plan, which underpins Article 5 with a continuous military preserve, has

been a centerpiece outcome. But the Wales Summit has also encouraged NATO to start thinking more creatively about how it can help partners respond to aggression and to be more resilient, for instance against hybrid warfare.

While the events in Ukraine have brought Kyiv and Brussels on a converging path, both parties are still adapting to a vision of a common future. Indeed, relations between Kyiv and the Alliance had lacked substance and dynamism in recent years, a predicament for which both sides share responsibility. Although a Ukrainian membership in NATO was formally possible under the "open door policy" announced by the alliance at the April 2008 Bucharest Summit, Ukraine refrained from pursuing it, not in the least at the behest of individual members like Germany or France, and out of consideration for Russia. After that, Kyiv's relationship with NATO continued to muddle along. Relations seemed to reach a record low in 2010, when Ukraine's newly elected president, Viktor Yanukovych, formally renounced plans to even try for any sort of NATO membership, replacing them with an official policy of non-alignment. Both sides then downgraded their relationship to a largely technical level, under which Ukraine was described as a loosely affiliated "partner state."

But today, as in 1997, the NATO-Ukraine Partnership may well once again be at the heart of Europe's future security architecture, which creates an opportunity to strengthen the relations between Kyiv and the Alliance. But as the partners move to construct a stronger base for cooperation, they will need to consider three distinct but mutually reinforcing obstacles.

First, Russia is more powerful today than it was 20 years ago, from either an economic or military point of view. Russia has not only abandoned strategic cooperation with NATO, but no longer refrains from challenging it directly.

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And Moscow has proven to be able and willing to keep Ukraine away from NATO or the EU at a greater cost. Western sanctions, the drop in oil prices, and the resulting international isolation might have weakened the Russian national economy and constrained its industries, but these developments seem not to have persuaded Russian President Vladimir Putin to loosen his country's grip on Ukraine, at least for now.

Second, the political and military credibility of NATO beyond its own borders is at risk of looking increasingly ambiguous. While NATO has refocused its attention on Europe, the conflict in Ukraine continues to seriously test the willingness and capability of the Alliance to deter revisionist states from threatening the stability in Europe beyond member states' territory. But NATO will look less determined in contributing to the security of Ukraine or Eastern Europe if potential aggressors perceive an Alliance focusing only on Article 5 core business and narrowing its vision to the European hinterland. In the case of Ukraine or other NATO partners, the issue of NATO's credibility has become particularly crucial. Unlike member states, these countries cannot rely on Article 5 guarantees to deter potential aggressors; many have watched NATO's reaction closely as Russia entered Crimea and the Donbass region. Questions remain as to whether the reassurance measures NATO offered Ukraine have effectively strengthened the Alliance's image as a power that is to be taken seriously, also beyond its own borders.

Third, Ukraine might simply not have the capacity to absorb NATO support and implement assistance or modernization programs because of the lack of major political, social, and economic reforms. Today Ukraine finds itself fighting on not one but two fronts: on the military and also the societal front. The current government has yet to deliver on its promises of major structural and political changes. Some of the laws that have passed have flaws, corruption is still a problem, and certain individuals connected to the old regime are still trying to stage a comeback. Indeed, military strategy, international diplomacy, and civil reform all come together in Ukraine's formidable conundrum and might hinder Ukraine's further integration into NATO.

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Recommendations to Strengthen the NATO-Ukraine Partnership

Recent developments around the Ukraine-Russia conflict have summoned key elements needed to reinvigorate the NATO-Ukraine partnership, including common vision and goals, as well as a set of shared risk perception and threats. For Ukraine, while cooperation with NATO has traditionally been a bargaining instrument of its "multivectoral" foreign policy, it has now turned into an urgently important matter of national security. For NATO, while the Alliance has always relied on technical and peripheral ties with Ukraine, it is now a matter of geopolitical and strategic concern to make cooperation as fruitful as possible. The importance of strengthening the NATO-Ukraine Partnership has never been as critical as today. The following six recommendations define how NATO can strengthen that relationship.

Develop a Clear Policy to Deal with Russia
Russia is at the very root of the current crisis in the regional security system, because of its intention to install control over former post-Soviet republics — primarily Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova — by turning them into weak, corrupt and inefficient states. Russia's effort has effectively weakened NATO (and EU) strategies to create a neighborhood of well-governed, self-determined, and prosperous nations. For NATO, managing relations with Russia might well be most difficult challenge of all. Putin's speech at the Valdai Discussion Club in October 2014 illustrated the anger, resentment, and self-righteousness he feels toward the West, so Russia is likely to continue to chip away at Ukrainian sovereignty and test NATO's resolve. The problem is that NATO, on one hand, will need to increase the stakes and make it more costly for Putin to further destabilize Ukraine and Eastern Europe. On the other hand, NATO has no interest in turning Russia into an implacable enemy as it was during the Cold War. Indeed, punishment alone is unlikely to change the mind of the Russian leader, and NATO surely will face the need to engage with Moscow for more confidence building measures and détente in Ukraine. Another defining factor for NATO to consider is the perceived return of the United States to the diplomatic table. Recent visits to Russia and Ukraine by U.S. officials such as Secretary of State John Kerry and Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland may suggest that Washington is increasingly frustrated about the slow pace of progress made by the Normandy format, a diplomatic group consisting of

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Germany, Russia, Ukraine and France to resolve the situation in the East of Ukraine. Is the United States changing its tactics and now angling for a greater direct involvement in these negotiations? The secretary general and allies will need to consider these elements, and develop a clearer and more convincing vision than NATO has right now regarding how their commitment to Ukraine equates with their relationship with Russia.

Provide Modern Weapons to the Ukrainian Armed Forces
The crisis in the Donbass and the Crimea is not only a political problem, but a military one too. Putin has shown no sign of being willing to abide by a diplomatic agreement only. On the contrary, Russia has increased military pressure on Ukraine by continuing to covertly send light firearms, tanks, and heavy equipment across the Russia-Ukraine border in an attempt to bolster the pro-Russian separatists. In contrast, the Ukrainian army is often ill-equipped or relies on outdated hardware, giving it a comparative disadvantage on the battlefield. To date, NATO and its members have shown much restraint in delivering modern weaponry to the Ukrainian armed forces, often citing concern about provoking Russia, jeopardizing the diplomatic process, or escalating the conflict. Clearly this restraint has not been reciprocated on the Russian side. As long as Moscow and the separatists perceive that the Ukrainian armed forces are struggling, they will be encouraged to push further. A stronger Ukrainian military, with enhanced defensive capabilities, will increase the prospects for negotiation of a peaceful settlement. At the very least, this material support should also come with more intensive involvement of the Ukrainian armed forces in NATO joint training and exercises in order to enhance interoperability. Only once the Kremlin knows that the risks and costs of further military action are high will it seek to find an acceptable political solution.

Maximize the Cooperation Around Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communication
Today NATO and Ukraine are in a less-than-ideal position to win the information war with Russia. The Kremlin's

assertive use of diverse media, the variety of target groups reached, and its abundant funding dwarf allied attempts at getting their own message across. In Ukraine and beyond, Russian strategic communications have resulted in broader public support for Moscow's policies, and fear and even angst over "Western meddling." After years of neglecting the importance of strategic communications, NATO now has to wake up to a new reality where TV stations, Twitter, and blogposts have the ability to influence a conflict. The Alliance will need to leverage all its in-house experience and expertise to provide advisory and funding support to Ukraine for public diplomacy and media relations, and to counter Russian propaganda. NATO should continue to fund initiatives like the Ukraine Crisis Media Centre or the *Kyiv Post*, and to beef up its Liaison Office in Kyiv with more experts. Moreover, NATO could also organize more frequent trainings for Ukrainian government officials, law enforcement agencies, and civil society activists in diverse communications disciplines, in Kyiv and especially in smaller regional and local towns. The Alliance needs to think through how better to reach those audiences that traditionally receive their information from Kremlin-controlled media. In this regard, it is probably less crucial to develop complex and costly counter-narratives, while stimulating audiences' capacity for critical thinking and media literacy has become ever important. NATO will undoubtedly find a willing ally in the European Union to support its efforts in this domain.

Invest More in the Reform of Ukraine's Security and Defense Sector
A bigger challenge for Ukraine is the need for major political, social, and economic reform. Inefficiency, corruption, and flawed regulations still cripple the country. NATO can assist in this process, particularly by enhancing the institutional foundations of Ukraine's security and defense sector. Existing NATO initiatives already bring some relief. For instance, Ukraine's Defence Education Enhancement Programme with NATO helps to reform the educational institutions in the security, defense, and military domain while improving interoperability with Allied forces.

The Alliance has been slow to recognize strategic communications as a real threat.

NATO's Building Integrity Programme strengthens transparency and accountability in the Ukrainian defense and security sector and reduces the risk of corruption. But serious reform requires a long-term approach. NATO will have to continue investment in exchange programs, deploying NATO instructors in Kyiv and regional towns, and pressuring the Ukrainian armed forces to streamline or to form public-private partnerships. NATO could also assist the Ukrainian defense and security sector in its planning process and make active recommendations toward long-term investments. But to make progress, the NATO secretary general will also need to convince member states to simply put more money on the table for Ukraine. At a time when the Ukrainian public is getting increasingly disillusioned with the pace of reform in the country, such measures would demonstrate NATO's readiness to assist the nation in its modernization process.

Strengthen the Triangular NATO-EU-Ukraine Relationship
Today, NATO and the EU are in the same boat. Their interests overlap, their policies are largely identical, and their structures are complementary. Moreover, in certain cases, the EU is better equipped to deal with issues in areas where NATO lacks capacity, and vice-versa. At the Ministerial Meeting in Antalya on May 14, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said he and Federica Mogherini, the EU's foreign policy chief, had agreed to intensify NATO-EU cooperation in countering hybrid warfare. This is a welcome step forward. But the relationship still needs to be better operationalized, in a way that both NATO and the EU can constantly chart their strategies and harmonize their actions. It requires more intense contact between both the institutions' leaderships and more staff-level mechanisms for daily information sharing and policy coordination. A triangular link should be established with the Ukrainian authorities, in order for Kyiv to feed both NATO and the EU the latest developments on the ground. Ukraine is capable of not only consuming but also contributing to common regional security. More than a year of hybrid war experience, technical and technological abilities, and transportation capacity could be vital for restoring regional security in Europe.

Keep the Open-Door Policy a Backbone of the NATO-Ukraine Partnership
The Ukraine crisis has been another example of the Alliance's dilemma with regard to enlargement. Obviously, the spotlight falls on the promise of eventual accession that was given to Ukraine (and Georgia) at the NATO

Bucharest Summit in 2008. But in the current security situation, open-door policy seems to many allies to be an impossible promise to keep, at least in the short to mid-term. Quite unsurprisingly, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko declared in March 2015 that Kyiv had no immediate plans of joining NATO and would instead focus on implementing much-needed reforms. His words were echoed shortly after by U.S. President Barack Obama, who indicated that his current priorities with regard to Ukraine did not include the question of NATO membership. Both statements highlight an important discord with both countries' past policies. Ukraine had indicated its desire to join NATO as early as 1992 (regardless of Ukrainian President Yanukovych's exceptional non-alignment policy) and the United States has traditionally supported NATO enlargement since the end of the Cold War. The problem today is that the open-door policy is too often seen as a series of legal and technical criteria that need to be met by an aspirant country. It is not only that. The open-door policy is a highly symbolic message that has encouraged many nations in the past to push for modernization and reform. Moreover, NATO's open door promise should certainly not be rolled back because of certain member states' fear of antagonizing Russia. Placing the open-door policy at the heart of the NATO-Ukraine partnership would show the Alliance's resolve, not only toward Ukraine, but to all NATO partners. In the absence of immediate membership prospects, NATO should think of what else it can offer to Ukraine to keep the country on a path toward much-needed reform.