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From Buffer to Frontier: Ukraine and the EU

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In June 2022, the European Union granted candidate status to Ukraine. A strong political statement, which was welcomed as such in Kyiv. But for a country at war, symbols do not suffice. Accepting a neighbour that is under invasion as a candidate for membership must mean accepting more responsibility for that neighbour's survival. Ukraine was a buffer state; it has become a frontier state. The EU should finally come up with an overall plan to provide military support to Ukraine over the long term, gradually taking over the main effort from the United States. After one year of war, the time for piecemeal decisions (a dozen tanks now, another dozen in a month) is long past.

Until Russia re-invaded Ukraine on 24 February 2022 (which I had not expected), my assessment was that for many years to come Ukraine would remain a buffer state. A buffer is not necessarily formally neutral; it is, above all, an independent state, that is not fully controlled by any of the powers in between which it is wedged, and maintains productive relations with all of them.

BUFFER STATE

Without calling it such, that is how the EU has treated Ukraine. Against better knowledge, the Europeans in 2008 did give in to US pressure to open the door for NATO membership, which obviously would upend the geopolitics of the region. By not mentioning any date, however, the Europeans hoped to have avoided setting in motion a train of events that could lead to confrontation with Moscow. In the same vein, the EU subsequently did strongly encourage Ukraine's

aspirations for closer relations, but always making it clear that the Union did not seek exclusivity. For Brussels, Ukraine could very well have close relations with Moscow at the same time.

It was Russia, refusing to accept anything less than an exclusive sphere of influence, that turned this into a zero-sum game for the total allegiance of Ukraine. And instead of luring Ukraine back into Russia's orbit by making it an attractive economic offer, in 2014 President Putin decided to force it by invading the Crimea.

Even then, the EU did not give up on the geopolitical status quo. Had the Minsk Agreements, mediated by Germany and France, been fully implemented and respected by both parties, Ukraine could have remained viable as a buffer state. The EU certainly did not legally recognise Russia's annexation of the Crimea, but would have lived with the fact. In international politics, the primary goal usually is not justice (the de facto loss of the Crimea definitely was an injustice) but peace and stability. Indeed, the EU and Russia maintained a working relationship, as EU sanctions ultimately remained limited, and the mutually beneficial energy partnership continued.

Fragile though it was, from 2014 to 2022, in the EU's eyes this arrangement seemed to work, and complacency set in about the non-implementation of the Minsk Agreements. The energy deal in particular worked so well for everybody, that I, like many others, assumed Russia would not jeopardise it by resorting to force again. Why would it? Though the 2014 invasion failed to pull Ukraine back into the Russian orbit, Putin did secure the Crimea,

and forestalled NATO membership by fomenting an armed rebellion in the east of the Donbas. Sadly, that was a grave underestimation of the geopolitical importance of Ukraine for Russia and its self-confidence as a great power. Russia invaded again, and European geopolitics have changed irrevocably.

FRONTIER STATE

In this renewed Russian-Ukrainian war, the EU and the US have gradually become ever more involved as non-belligerents. They massively support the Ukrainian war effort, politically, economically, and militarily, but without entering the war themselves. If thanks to Ukraine's impressive willpower and courage, and with Western support, an independent Ukraine survives, it will no longer be a buffer state. Instead, it has already become part of the Western security architecture, as its frontier state. Eventually, probably after many years, constructive relations with Russia may be restored, but Ukraine will fundamentally be embedded in the Western political and economic system.

That was not the only option. In theory, the EU (and the US) could have decided not to get involved, and abandon Ukraine to Putin's designs. Just like the West did not challenge the Soviet Union's sphere of influence when in 1956 and 1968 Moscow asserted its control over Hungary and Czechoslovakia by force of arms. The EU would not have lost much, for no major European interests are at stake in Ukraine as such. Indeed, some might argue that non-intervention in 2014 would have greatly simplified relations with Russia, although on the other hand one cannot know whether it might not have fuelled even greater Russian ambitions.

In any case, once the EU persisted in signing an association agreement with Ukraine even after the 2014 Russian invasion, non-intervention no longer was an option. Since then, the EU is de facto committed to the survival of an independent Ukraine. Going back on that after the second invasion in 2022 would have undone the EU's trustworthiness as a partner, it would have been dishonourable, and, simply, illogical.

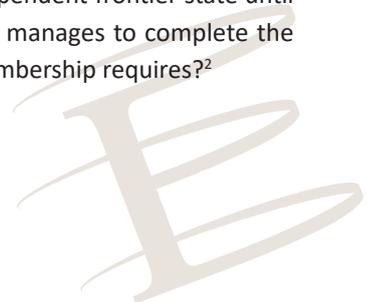
CANDIDATE STATUS

Instead, the EU went even further and accorded Ukraine candidate status. This decision was driven by emotions and perceptions rather than strategy. When Commission President von der Leyen first put this forward, the majority of Member State governments were opposed. But in the end nobody wanted to appear insufficiently supportive of Ukraine by vetoing the idea. French President Macron made a valiant effort by proposing the European Political Community as an alternative to candidate status, but eventually the EPC was launched in addition to accepting Ukraine as a candidate. Yet eight months after the decision has been taken, the EU still has to decide on a strategy (and set emotions aside).

More than NATO's 2008 decision to bring in Ukraine at some indefinite time in the future, EU candidate status, because it triggers a formal process, is a strong signal that Ukraine is now included in the Western security architecture. There is no precedent: the EU has never accorded candidate status to a country at war. It did accept as candidates countries that came out of a war, on the Balkans. That did not entail formal security guarantees, but there is no doubt that if ever war erupts again on the Balkans, the Western powers (through the EU, NATO, the UN, or an ad hoc coalition) will intervene to enforce peace.

How far then must the EU go to secure the survival of candidate country Ukraine that is at war now? It must be well understood, first of all, that it is in nobody's interest to rush membership. Ukraine's economic and political systems are just not ready, even without taking into account the destruction wrought by the war. Moreover, EU membership entails a collective defence guarantee (enshrined in Article 42.7 TEU), so the EU cannot take Ukraine in as long as the war is ongoing – unless it abandons non-belligerence and decides to fight Russia itself.¹

Consequently, the question is: Which strategy can ensure Ukraine's survival as an independent frontier state until the time its own leadership manages to complete the massive reforms that EU membership requires?²



EU INTERESTS AND STRATEGY

Strategy-making is a rational process: objectives are set in light of the interests to be secured, the cost-benefit assessment of the alternative courses of action, and the balance of power between the parties involved.

The starting point of EU strategy, therefore, is not that Ukraine has right on its side (which it has) nor indignation (which is justified) about this war of aggression; the starting point must be the EU's own interests. Its *vital* interests are not directly at stake: the EU's own survival does not depend on the survival of Ukraine. That is why the EU Member States do not go to war against Russia themselves.

Instead, it is a major EU interest to contain the war and prevent its escalation into a direct great power war of the West against Russia. For that would mean launching military operations in many other theatres and risking nuclear war, which would threaten everyone's survival. Maintaining non-belligerence is vital, therefore, and European leaders should refrain from stating that we are already at war with Russia. As long as Europeans, Americans and Russians are not directly firing at each other, we are not. This is a proxy war.³

The other major EU interest is to maintain an independent Ukraine on as large a territory as possible, so that it remains a strong frontier state, instead of Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania acquiring new borders with Russia, which would greatly complicate deterrence and defence. And, of course, the more Russia breaks its teeth on Ukraine, the less capable it will be of aggression or interference in other countries. Vice versa, a victorious Russia may see Ukraine as a springboard for further incursions into the Black Sea region (where Moldova is also a candidate country) and the wider Mediterranean area.

Those two EU interests must be balanced against each other. It is, of course, highly desirable that Ukraine liberates all of its territory and returns to the status quo ante 2014. But that is not strictly necessary for it to be established as a strong frontier state. And if the push for

liberation of the last inch of Ukrainian territory entails a high risk of provoking escalation, it may even run counter to the EU's interest.

EU strategy must also take into account what is feasible and probable, therefore, given the balance of power between Ukraine and Russia. Since Moscow can still mobilise a lot more military potential, for now it has the capacity to remain on the offensive. While the Ukrainian armed forces are constantly learning, so are the Russians. It cannot be excluded, sadly, that a renewed Russian offensive is successful and captures yet more Ukrainian territory. Even if Ukraine manages to halt future Russian attacks, and further counter-offensives perhaps even push the Russians back more, it also cannot be excluded that if once Russia goes on the defensive, it can hold on to the bulk of its conquests indefinitely.

A PLAN FOR EU MILITARY SUPPORT

The absolute first priority, therefore, is to provide Ukraine with the military support necessary to hold the line in the weeks and months to come, and prevent further significant loss of territory. This is not only important, but urgent: it requires heavy weapons now, which Ukraine can operate immediately, in numbers sufficient to fight a Russian offensive to a standstill.

The second priority is to ensure that Ukraine can sustain its military operations over time – months and years. That means offensive operations to liberate Ukraine's territory if militarily possible. But as a minimum it means sustaining Ukraine's defensive operations until such time as Russia concludes that further offensives are hopeless and goes on to the defensive.

It is regrettable, but understandable, that military support has so far been accorded piecemeal. Initial reluctance to provide heavy weapons was caused by fear of Russian escalation and underestimation of Ukraine's military prowess. The sheer fact that Ukraine did not allow itself to be defeated strongly motivated the EU and the US to increase support, along with the systematic Russian atrocities. Indeed, Russia has escalated its war against

Ukraine to such a violent extent that there is little reason to hold back, short of crossing the line from non-belligerence to belligerence.

Given the intensity of combat, attrition will be high. With a hundred or so tanks, for example (which is what Europeans and Americans have promised in the first instance), one does not win a war against Russia. It may well be that after a few major actions, most or all are destroyed. Is the West planning to replace those? Does it have the capacity even if it wanted to? We really are long past the time for piecemeal decisions.

The EU must urgently produce an overall plan to direct the provision of military materiel to Ukraine over the coming weeks, months, and years. That requires combined defence planning with Ukraine, so that Ukrainian capability objectives and European defence industrial capacity can be tailored to each other. At the same time, of course, EU Member States must replenish their own stocks. Meanwhile, they should give more thought to transferring materiel from their own operational units to Ukraine, given the urgency and the absolute need to enable Kyiv to hold the line now, in the very short term. Given that Russia's deployable conventional capabilities will be absorbed by its war against Ukraine, EU and NATO members incur little additional risk in doing so.

This is a European more than an American responsibility. Ukraine is a neighbour of the EU, so if it falls, it will be EU Member States that face a longer border with a self-confident Russia, not the US. It is not acceptable, therefore, that today the Ukrainian war effort stands or falls with US military support, whereas if the Europeans would stop their provisions tomorrow, the impact would be limited. But over time, US support may waver, depending on domestic politics. That is why the EU must gradually take over the main military effort from the US. It is well equipped to do so, moreover: in the European Defence Fund and the European Peace Facility it has the instruments (which NATO has not) to design and implement a large-scale defence industrial effort.⁴ A long-term plan means

hundreds rather than dozens of tanks, to use the same example.

The US contribution will remain indispensable, of course, notably in the field of intelligence. The American nuclear umbrella is vital in deterring escalation and maintaining non-belligerence. But the core conventional effort is a job for Europe.

FROZEN CONFLICT OR FRAGILE PEACE?

Long-term military support will be necessary no matter how the war ends. Complete victory for Ukraine is, alas, improbable. If Ukraine can force Russia onto the defensive, hopefully pushing the front back further eastwards, and both parties fight each other to at least a temporary standstill, that might create a window of opportunity for negotiations. This could result in a ceasefire or perhaps even a peace agreement. Everything will depend on the parties' perception of the military balance of power and the possibility for further gains on the battlefield, and on their willingness to compromise over territory. A peace agreement implies mutual concessions, and thus some loss of territory for Ukraine: an injustice, definitely, but possibly the price of peace and stability. The war could also very well become a frozen conflict, however, with an ever-present risk of renewed escalation.⁵

In all of the above scenarios, Ukraine will have to maintain strong conventional armed forces, to deter a third Russian invasion. Even a formal peace agreement may be very fragile.

An actual peace agreement would open the door to EU membership, pending reconstruction (which the EU ought also to take the lead of) and, of course, far-reaching internal reforms. The Western powers need not wait for effective membership to guarantee a peace agreement, however. Indeed, if peace were signed, European and American troops could enter Ukraine itself, and provide the strongest possible deterrent against Russia violating it: non-belligerence would no longer be an option. But in the frozen conflict scenario, the future may look awfully like the present.



CONCLUSION

Could war have been avoided in 2022? The West did well in accepting high-level negotiations with Putin in late 2021, even though the “crisis” that he purported had to be solved was, of course, his own artificial creation. But that put the onus on Putin again, who then put such unrealistic demands on the table (amounting to NATO withdrawing militarily even from its own members) that they lacked all credibility. Nevertheless, perhaps the West did make a tactical mistake in rejecting the option of a formally neutral Ukraine (i.e. reversing the decision on NATO membership) out of hand. At that time, it was not in the cards anyway, so it would have been but a limited concession, whereas it might just have left the option open for Russia to accept Ukraine’s continued existence as a buffer state, rather than seeking full control. It is also quite possible, however, that Putin had decided early on to have recourse to war in any case, perhaps even before the negotiations had started.

By going to war, Russia has changed the geopolitical status quo – most likely to its own detriment, for a Ukraine that survives, on whichever territory, will be closed off to Russian influence, as the frontier of the West rather than as a buffer between it and Russia. The people of Ukraine, soldiers and civilians, are paying the price for that geopolitical gambit.

The EU thought that it had rediscovered geopolitics – when assuming office back in 2019, von der Leyen had announced that hers would be a “geopolitical Commission”. But the reality is that the EU seldom if ever explicitly thought through the geopolitical implications of its decisions. Even now, there is little discussion of what candidate status for Ukraine means for the geopolitics of the EU. The EU and its Member States must realise that Grand Strategy cannot remain implicit: one cannot achieve one’s objectives unless one defines what they are.

When Sven Biscop’s late father, François, did his military service, as a 2nd lieutenant he commanded a tank transport platoon, collecting tanks that broke down on manoeuvres. That happened, but at least Belgium did still have tanks – Belgium alone operated more than 300 Leopard I, in fact. Today the EU as a whole struggles to find just 100 for Ukraine...

The author warmly thanks the academic, diplomatic, and military colleagues whose insights both inspired and improved this policy brief.

Endnotes

- 1 Furthermore, 21 (and soon 23) EU Member States are NATO Allies, so even an aggression against an EU Member State that is not an Ally will inevitably pull in NATO, as those that are, will go to war, at which point the non-EU NATO Allies can hardly stand aside. Imagine that in 2022 Russia would have invaded not Ukraine, but Finland: could the US have abandoned it to its fate because it was a member of the Union but not of the Alliance?
- 2 At which point NATO membership becomes possible too, but not the other way around: not before Ukraine has consolidated its democracy and free market.
- 3 Just like in World War II, in spite of its massive military assistance to the UK, the US was a non-belligerent, and maintained an embassy in Berlin until 11 December 1941, when Nazi Germany declared war.
- 4 On the role of the EU, see: Luis Simón, [The Ukraine War and the Future of the European Union’s Security and Defence Policy](#). Washington, CSIS, 30 January 2023.
- 5 On the future of the war, see: Samuel Charap & Miranda Priebe, [Avoiding a Long War. US Policy and the Trajectory of the Russia-Ukraine Conflict](#). Santa Monica, RAND Corporation, January 2023.





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