

SQUEEZING THE MOST OUT OF IT:

HOW NATO'S SUPPORT FOR UKRAINE HAS EVOLVED

From long-term reforms back in 2014 to coordination of military support during full-scale war

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Member of the Supervisory Board of the New Europe Center, Advisor to the Deputy Prime Minister on European and Euro-Atlantic Integration (2023–2025), Senior National Advisor on Political Affairs at the NATO Representation in Ukraine (2016–2022)



This material was funded by the UK government as part of the "Mutual Transformative Power: changing Ukraine through cooperation with wider Europe" project, implemented by the New Europe Center. The views expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and may not coincide with the official position of the UK government.

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FULL-SCALE WAR



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the last decade, Ukraine-NATO relations underwent serious transformation — from cautious support for strategic defence reforms after 2014 to large-scale coordination of military assistance during full-scale war. The initial Alliance approach was based on the long-term development of defence capabilities, institutional reforms, and the provision of primarily non-lethal assistance. This model allowed to create a foundation for the transformation of Ukraine's defence and security sector, including the development of command and control systems, personnel training, and separate key capabilities. Even the full-scale invasion did not significantly alter NATO's approach.

After 2024 the logic of support gradually changed: along with reforms programme and development of capabilities, NATO started to play an increasingly prominent role in coordinating international military assistance, training Ukrainian forces, and developing new formats of practical cooperation. Initiatives such as NSATU, revision of the Comprehensive Assistance Package, the launch of JATEC, and other new innovative programmes indicate a gradual shift from limited advisory support to more active involvement by the Alliance in ensuring Ukraine's defence capabilities in wartime.

Despite the growing level of practical cooperation, the political framework of future relations remains uncertain, creating the gap between the dynamics of the war and the slower logic of NATO's institutional planning. Ukrainian experience of modern warfare, the large-scale use of unmanned systems, and the rapid adaptation of the national defence industry are increasingly influencing discussions on the future development of defence capabilities in Europe.

Under these conditions, Ukraine-NATO cooperation is gradually shifting from a model of one-sided assistance to a logic of mutual strategic value (inter-improvability). Ukraine's wartime experience is becoming a source of practical lessons for modernising the Alliance's approaches to defence planning, innovation, and deterrence, whilst cooperation with NATO opens up opportunities for Ukraine to develop defence-industrial cooperation, technological partnerships, and contribute to shaping a new security architecture in Europe.

"LONG HORIZON" STRATEGY: REFORMS INSTEAD OF WEAPONS (2014–2022)

In March 2014, when Russian "little green men" started operation in Crimea, a number of requests were sent to NATO Headquarters through Ukraine's Mission to NATO (and sometimes even directly) on urgent assistance required by the Ukrainian military that covered the needs from clothing and equipment to heavy arms and missile systems. At that time Ukraine was still bound by the non-alignment principle, but NATO was forced to react to the requests from **its "special" partner** and proposed the **formula of political and practical support**.

Political support was not that hard to provide. On April 1, 2014 Acting Minister for Foreign Affairs Andriy Deshchytsia took part in a meeting of the Ukraine-NATO Commission, where member states unanimously condemned Russia's illegal military intervention and its violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. The allies did not recognise the illegal and illegitimate annexation of Crimea and called on Russia to de-escalate the situation and scale back its military activities along Ukraine's borders¹. Following this, a decision was also taken to suspend the activities of the Russia-NATO Council (RNC). Meetings of the RNC resumed in 2016, and by the time of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia had held 11 RNC meetings with NATO, the last of which took place on 12 January 2022².

For the Alliance's leadership, maintaining a consensus on supporting Ukraine and scaling back cooperation with Russia was already seen as an achievement. For Ukrainians, however, NATO's political encouragement became a source of 'memes' reflecting various shades of concern. Russia did not respond to calls to cease its aggression, and the prospects of NATO membership remained uncertain.

¹ *Statement of the NATO-Ukraine Commission*. April 1, 2014: <https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/2014/04/01/statement-of-the-nato-ukraine-commission>

² *NATO-Russia Council meets in Brussels*. NATO, January 12, 2022: <https://www.nato.int/en/news-and-events/articles/news/2022/01/12/nato-russia-council-meets-in-brussels>

Moreover, when it came to practical support from the Alliance, things turned out to be far more complicated than Kyiv had anticipated. Ukraine's requests for weapons were immediately rejected, given that the Alliance does not possess its own arsenal and cannot dispose of member states' weapons.

One of the first Alliance delegation that came to Kyiv in 2014, after listening a tense briefing from Ukrainian military about the development of Anti-Terrorist Operation, instead of expected urgent decisions for help, offered to focus on the strategic question: of **how Ukrainians envisage the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU) in 10 years' time.**

The groundwork for long-term vision of the development of Ukrainian Armed Forces allowed to demonstrate solidarity with Ukraine, but also to avoid giving Russia any pretext to accuse the Alliance of dragging it into the war, which was a requirement put forward by several key allies. It was precisely on the basis of this approach that an informal yet fairly strict framework was established for specific measures to strengthen Ukraine's ability to provide for its own security. It was based on the following principles:



NATO's support and help shall be **exclusively non-lethal**;



Alliance's assistance shall be focused on **strategic and long-term security reforms** through capacity building and institutional development programmes and improvement of capabilities, so that Ukraine can defend itself;



NATO's support **cannot have any direct influence on the actions of Armed Force of Ukraine**, especially on combat and battlefield developments, all training and tactical preparation activities for military personnel may only be carried out by individual allies on a bilateral basis;



Advisory assistance should generally be guided by Euro-Atlantic standards and principles, but **should avoid setting any specific milestones aimed at bringing the country closer to membership or deepening integration.**



Infographic 1. NATO Trust Funds

This framework provided the basis for consensus among all NATO member states. During the **Summit in Wales** in September 2014, **it was announced** that a number of **NATO-Ukraine Trust Funds** will be established for practical support in defence and security reforms, as well as development of key military capabilities (see Infographic 1). In 2016, during the NATO Warsaw Summit, those instruments were merged under the umbrella of the **Comprehensive Assistance Package (CAP)**, which became a main mechanism of practical support for reforms.

However, since the political framework governing NATO's support was not clearly and fully conveyed to Ukraine, Ukrainian expectations of the Trust Funds were excessively high.

In autumn of 2014 Ukrainian military hoped that with the help of Trust Funds, they would be able to quickly secure funding for the procurement of non-lethal equipment and software, and to finance a range of technical solutions to protect military and logistics infrastructure. Instead, funds were primarily spent on needs assessments, feasibility studies, visits by NATO experts, and the work of relevant advisers.

By 2018, the allies had collectively contributed **over €40 million** to these funds on a voluntary basis, enabling the implementation of dozens of small-scale projects in the areas of force management, logistics, cyber security, medical support and demining. For instance, through the Trust Funds, Ukraine eventually received both computers and communication systems, partially renovated ammunition depots, treated several dozen wounded servicemen, and funded the national team's participation in the Invictus Games. However, the bulk of the assistance was, after all, focused on developing recommendations and long-term planning. For example, in the **Trust Fund on Counter-IED and Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD)**, the practical phase of project implementation never actually began. (Notably, the figure of €40 million did not alter much in upcoming years prior to large scale invasion).

Interest towards Trust Funds steadily decreased from both Ukraine and NATO. In 2018–2022, the dynamics of Trust Funds were minimal, urging NATO to think about new “brands” of support to Ukraine in terms of extended reform of work with partners and transition towards Individual Partnership Action Plans.

In October 2014 the United States were first to provide practical support to the Armed Force of Ukraine in repelling Russian armed aggression, by sending a battalion of California National Guard to train military regiments of AFU. This is how the Ukraine-US Joint Coordination Committee was formed, where later Canada, the UK, Lithuania, Poland, Sweden, and Denmark would join. **The Multinational Joint Commission (MJC)** became somewhat of an "ancestor" of Ramstein that contrasted with NATO's decisions that were slow and too distant from the frontline realities. During its work, it succeeded in expanding the training of units to brigade level and increasing international technical assistance to Ukraine to \$250 million per year. For the military and political leadership of the defence forces, the contribution and significance of the MJC were clear and indisputable.

However, **it was difficult to quantify the practical results of the Alliance's support in terms of figures and short-term outcomes.** NATO advisers were involved in drafting the Strategic Defence Bulletin, national security legislation — including provisions relating to special operations forces, defence procurement, and other regulatory documents and doctrines.

And although in 2014 the question of the vision for the development of the Ukrainian Armed Forces 10 years down the line seemed rather premature, some of the transformations supported by the Alliance became critical eight years later, with the start of the full-scale invasion.

Among such achievements were the setting of real professional sergeants' corps, the emergence of new rules governing relationships within military units (mission command principle), establishment and subsequent development of Special Operations Forces. For instance, the well-known and now indispensable Delta situational awareness system traces its origin to NATO C4 Trust Fund.

However, some reforms that had more priority for NATO didn't resonate in Kyiv, in particular, the strengthening of democratic civil control, reduction of powers and demilitarization of Security Service of Ukraine, changes to state secrets, as well as energetic advocacy for implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 "Women, peace, security".

2022–2026: DELAYED RESOLVE

In February 2022, NATO advisors, together with other diplomatic missions, left Kyiv due to the danger of Russian invasion. On February 24, 2022, one of the first Volodymyr Zelenskyy's calls was from the NATO senior officials, and the tone of this talk became a reason for lukewarm reception from Ukrainian officials to even mentioning NATO during the next couple of months. It was still felt in the Ukrainian President's address to the NATO Summit on 24 March 2022³.

In any case, for a time NATO, whilst generally supporting Ukraine politically, remained on the sidelines when it came to providing practical support, largely due to the position taken by the United States.

When anticipations and calculations of a swift victory for the Russian operation clearly failed to materialise, the Alliance returned to its established framework for providing assistance to Ukraine: at the NATO summit in Madrid in 2022, the Alliance's member states decided to scale up the Comprehensive Assistance Package.

NATO focused on urgent, short-term non-lethal supply and at the same time prepared a list of long-term institutional projects, sometimes not coordinating its own vision with the Ukrainian government.

With the help from CAP's urgent track, Ukraine received **medical equipment, fuel and food supply**. NATO tends to leave a lot of the projects outside public disclosure, like, for example, co-financing Starlink terminals for AFU, or raising funds for the purchase of acoustic sensors for the anti-drone system.

In turn, the long-term package of CAP projects covers a broad range of areas — from institutional reforms to development of defence capabilities. Projects are already being implemented in CAP framework to modernise defence management, military education, cybersecurity, strategic communications, medical rehabilitation for service personnel, the restoration of military infrastructure and humanitarian demining.

³ *Speech by President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy at the NATO Summit*. March 24, 2022: <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/vistup-prezidenta-ukrayini-volodimira-zelenskogo-na-samiti-n-73785>

As of the end of 2025, over **31 country-donors provided over 1.2 billion euros to CAP trust fund**. Amongst the key initiatives of the package — creation of the system for recovery for injured military (project RENOVATOR), restoration of military infrastructure in the «Phoenix» project, development of humanitarian demining and reform of defence procurement system according to NATO norms and principles.

Integrated Air and Missile Defence (IAMD) project is also the flagship project of CAP, which strengthens a multi-level air space security architecture in order to counter modern threats — cruise and ballistic missiles, UAVs, aviation and other means of air attacks.

And despite financial content and the number of projects definitely increased, the reputation of CAP received negative connotations because of a few factors.

The results of Comprehensive Assistance Package are often being negated by **difficult bureaucracy and too slow speed of procurement and delivery**, that sometimes can exceed 18–20 months.

NATO Support and Procurement Agency (NSPA) that historically has a mandate for complex cross-sectoral multinational projects, was forced to react to the urgent requests from the Ukrainian side on goods procurement which member states are generally able to procure on their own. Transparency, compliance with competitiveness, minimization of risks and non-selectivity of procedures, are understandable in peaceful times, but during war times some of the NATO financed items have already lost their relevance by the time they reach Ukraine.

Moreover, until 2025 NATO did not look into the possibility of procuring non-lethal equipment for Ukrainian' needs from Ukrainian manufacturers. In 2025, after the Ukrainian counterpart stressed multiple times on the need of simplification of processes, NATO began to look for the change of NSPAs' formats of work for Ukrainian track.

Overall, faced with the unprovoked and unjust aggression of the Russian Federation, Ukrainians still had excessive expectations of the international security system in general and of NATO in particular.

From Ukraine's perspective, Russia's attack demonstrated that the concept of deterring Russia had failed on the European continent; consequently, Ukraine's request for assistance is justified and fair. A striking example was the advocacy campaign calling for NATO forces and assets to help to close the skies over Ukraine.

In NATO things are seen differently, though: there were, and still are some convinced that deterrence is working, as Russia, despite threats, does not try to use force against NATO member states. So, defending Ukraine is the mission solely for the Ukrainian government and those countries that are ready to provide support.

When Ukraine withstood the pressure of the first full-scale offensive wave of the Russian invasion, the idea of rethinking approaches to supporting Ukraine began to gain traction within the corridors of headquarters.

The first step was the decision taken at the Vilnius Summit, where the **NATO-Ukraine Council (NUC)** was established. Unlike the status of its predecessor, the Commission, within the NUC Ukraine was granted an equal right to vote and the ability to initiate and promote its own agenda at the political level and within a number of the NUC's working bodies. Furthermore, although an immediate invitation could not be secured, it was agreed that Ukraine was capable of integrating into NATO without a Membership Action Plan⁴.

For NATO this was a rather radical step, considering that **lately Ukraine is rather undermining typical NATO's standards and practices, pointing out the incompatibility with the realities of combat, rather than making efforts to achieve interoperability.** However, whilst many in Ukraine consider **the Armed Forces to be too advanced for NATO, the Alliance still perceives systemic issues of the Soviet past and insists on the need for qualitative transformations.**

The complex vision of such transformations were developed during joint Ukraine-NATO consultations, first of which began in Lublin in October 2022. This track, which involved various experts on NATO security planning and representatives of all Ukraine's security and defence agencies, was called **Interoperability Roadmap.** In its essence this is Ukraine's preparation for integration into NATO defence planning system, which will help reduce the future admissions process to a purely political decision.

The agreed package of initial interoperability requirements covers both institutional and systemic requirements, as well as functional indicators developed for specific services and branches of the defence forces. It was drawn up ahead of the 2024 NATO summit in Washington and took

⁴ Vilnius Summit Communique. NATO, July 11, 2023: <https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/2023/07/11/vilnius-summit-communique>

into account the views of all relevant Ukrainian institutions. Given the sensitivity of even the very idea of the 'practical integration' of Ukrainian units into NATO's defence planning model, the authors of the concept found ways to secure allies' agreement without attracting undue political attention. The package of initial requirements was noted by the Alliance during the Washington summit, and went largely unnoticed in Ukraine, as the Ukrainian government expectations for the Summit were, above all, air defence systems, financial commitments and weapons.

Subsequently, interest in the concept of the interoperability roadmap in Ukraine waned, despite the coordination efforts of the Government Office for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration. And, notwithstanding reported progress in the execution of individual implementation plans, the primary challenge remains updating the list of initial requirements and aligning it with the vision for the future development of Ukraine's defence forces. For the time being, however, the issue of interoperability in the Ukrainian context is often dismissed as 'not a priority'.

Another "radical" out-of-the-box decision for NATO diplomacy was the formation of **Joint Analysis, Training and Education Center (JATEC)** in Bydgoszcz, Poland. Ukraine actively advocated for simultaneous opening of the branch office in Kyiv, but not all allies were ready for such a decision.

The concept for the Center was finally approved at the summit in Washington, and the official opening took place on February 17, 2025. JATEC forms part of NATO's command structure and reports directly to the Headquarters of the Supreme Allied Commander Transformation. One of the Center's areas of work is the creation of an Innovation Hub, and thanks to a series of hackathons, for the first time in the history of Ukraine-NATO relations, a full cycle of support for innovative technological solutions has been provided: from concept and operational application to technical recommendations.

JATEC has also launched an initiative to integrate Ukrainian expertise into the planning, conduct and evaluation of NATO collective defence exercises. Ukrainian representatives are increasingly participating in NATO TTX, contributing their experience and gaining practical skills in coordinating with allies.

Apart from **JATEC, Ukraine and NATO launched a dialogue on innovations development**. A Roadmap for innovation was one of the approved documents during the NATO Summit in Washington in 2024. In November

2025, the first major joint programme was launched, called **UNITE — Brave NATO for accelerating new defence innovations on the battlefield**. Under this initiative, financial grants are to be awarded to manufacturers in areas such as counter-unmanned aerial vehicle (c-UAS) systems, SIGINT systems, navigation in electronic warfare environments, and ground-based robotic systems. The first call for proposals for joint defence research and development, with a budget of 10 million euros, was launched as early as March 2026⁵.

Only a narrow circle of specialized experts in Ukraine can see the practical and long-term meaning of such programmes or institutions as JATEC, as public and political focus is, understandably, on survival and defence capabilities of Ukraine here and now.

The striking discrepancy between the planning horizons and priorities within the Alliance and in Ukraine distorts perceptions of the results of joint efforts. Whereas NATO is convinced that it is making incredible efforts to secure additional long-term support for Ukraine, sometimes in defiance of established internal practices, Ukraine sees no practical benefit for conducting combat operations and immediately undermining the military capabilities of the Russian Federation.

This is precisely why the flexibility and speed of bilateral or multinational initiatives, such as the Ukraine Defence Contact Group, better known as the Ramstein format, have traditionally attracted far greater interest from the Ukrainian side than any proposals from NATO.

NATO Security Assistance Training for Ukraine (NSATU) was intended to break this trend. The initial proposal for greater NATO involvement in providing practical assistance to Ukraine was first raised back in February 2024 at a meeting of the Alliance's national security advisers. The initiative came from the US administration at the time, which perceived risks in the pre-election rhetoric of then-presidential candidate Donald Trump. Ukrainian government circles reacted to the idea of greater NATO involvement in coordinating support for Ukraine with more than just caution, if not outright negativity, pointing to the risks of protracted

⁵ *Ukraine and NATO launch UNITE — BRAVE NATO: first competition for joint defense solutions begins*. Ministry of Defence of Ukraine, March 25, 2026: <https://mod.gov.ua/en/news/ukraine-and-nato-launch-unite-brave-nato-first-competition-for-joint-defense-solutions-begins>

procedures, excessive bureaucracy, and the exposure of sensitive information to certain Alliance members inclined to support Moscow's actions. Hence, initially, Ukraine did everything in its power to protect the well-established and familiar Ramstein format from 'NATO infringements'.

In fact, the prospect of a Trump presidency forced the Alliance to move beyond the usual model of supporting Ukraine exclusively with non-lethal aid packages, and to take on the primary role of coordinating assistance to strengthen the defensive capabilities of the Ukrainian armed forces not tomorrow or the day after, but in the midst of combat operations today.

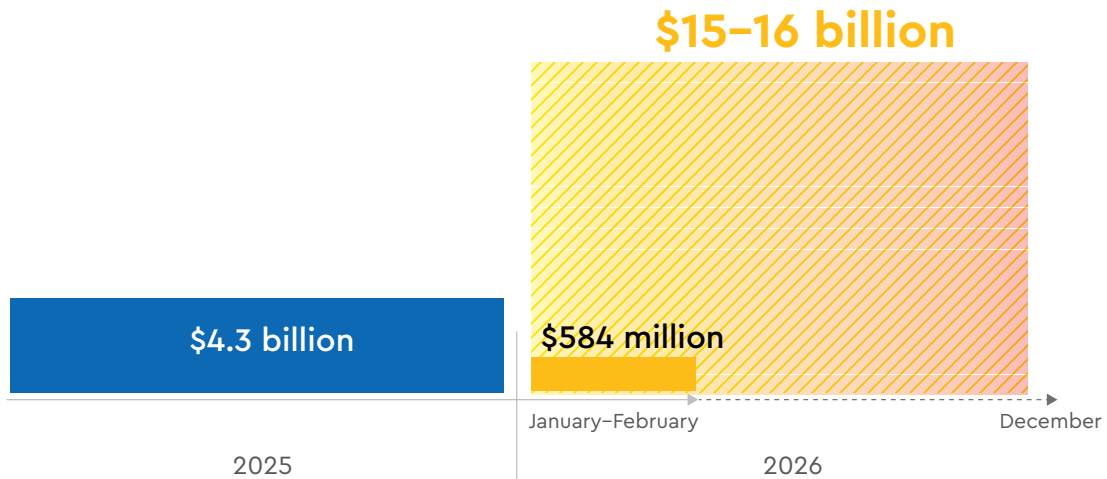
Ultimately, allies launched the NSATU at the NATO summit in Washington, but it did not replace the Contact Group. Its mandate covers the coordination of various tracks of military assistance and logistics (up to Ukraine's borders). The NSATU also coordinates the training of Ukrainian military personnel in foreign countries, as well as the planning of defence capability development. A separate NSATU command is based in Wiesbaden, Germany, and reports to the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR). The initiative's staff consists of around 300 military personnel from NATO member and partner countries, including Ukraine. NSATU is also responsible for coordinating Eastern European logistical hubs through which weapons and equipment provided to Ukraine are delivered. On April 3, 2025, the NSATU Trust Fund was established to simplify financial arrangements.

Despite earlier skepticism, even the most ardent NATO critics in Ukraine acknowledge that NSATU has proven helpful, particularly in enabling a rapid transition to a model of procuring American weapons and military equipment using funds from partner countries, better known as PURL (Prioritized Ukraine Requirements List).

Under this model, the Ministry of Defense of Ukraine, together with the Armed Forces of Ukraine, provides operational military assessments and a list of critically needed weapons. These are then coordinated through NATO and a coalition of allies to determine optimal procurement packages of equipment and ammunition from the United States.

In 2025, contributions to the PURL program amounted to \$4.3 billion, and in just the first two months of 2026, \$584 million has already been mobilized. Ukraine and its allies project that in 2026, Ukraine may receive arms supplies

Figure 1. Contributions to the PURL program



worth approximately \$15–16 billion through PURL. This includes air defense systems, ammunition, missiles, and other high-precision weapons.

Currently, more than 80% of all military assistance to Ukraine is delivered through NATO⁶. According to Alliance representatives, support for Ukraine is expected to reach at least \$60 billion this year.

Overall, the emergence of NSATU and PURL is a vivid demonstration of NATO's adaptability to new realities. For the first time since the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian war in 2014, the Alliance has moved beyond the framework of "soft power" and its previous detachment from developments on the Ukrainian battlefield.

One example is the significant increase in personnel at the NATO Representation in Ukraine, which, against the backdrop of optimization and budget cuts within NATO's administrative structures, was a rather difficult reputational decision for both the previous and current Secretaries General. They sought to signal that NATO is strengthening cooperation with Kyiv and has no intention of reducing its support.

However, for many allies, even such cautious steps cause discomfort and concern that Russia may gain additional arguments to justify a large-scale conflict with NATO in the future. They are not convinced by the argument

⁶ 80% of military aid to Ukraine is delivered through NATO, says Ambassador Alyona Getmanchuk. RBC-Ukraine, January 23, 2026: <https://www.rbc.ua/rus/news/cherез-nato-yde-80-viyskovoyi-dopomogi-ukrayini-1769161246.html>

that neither in 2014 nor in 2022 did the Alliance take any actions that could have provoked Moscow's aggression, and that the level of escalation is determined solely in the Kremlin based on its own geopolitical views. Indeed, there are still those within NATO who would prefer to return to the familiar 3D framework (deterrence, defence, dialogue) of relations with Russia that existed prior to 2022.

This makes the personal commitment and energy invested in advancing support for Ukraine by Secretary General Rutte, as well as by many less public officials at NATO headquarters and within its military commands, all the more valuable. **Every day, decisions are made that increase Ukraine's importance for Euro-Atlantic security** and make it more difficult for Russia to "pull" Ukraine out of the Euro-Atlantic security architecture. Undoubtedly, from Ukraine's perspective, the most effective and rational solution remains rapid and full membership in the Alliance. However, under current political realities, one can only say that NATO is increasingly recognizing the cost of losing Ukraine. The formula repeatedly stated in Alliance documents — that "a sovereign and democratic Ukraine is key to Euro-Atlantic security" — has finally gained practical recognition. Although this has come at the cost of losses and immense efforts by the Armed Forces of Ukraine — something that should also be continuously emphasized in Brussels.

UKRAINE-NATO: ON THE PATH TO A NEW REALITY

The irony of the current situation lies in the fact that the intensity of specific practical areas of cooperation, as well as NATO's willingness to strengthen its presence in Ukraine, contrasts with the vagueness and uncertainty of the political framework for future relations. And while Ukraine continues to fight and NATO is trying to piece together a complex puzzle of political unity, the question remains: what could be the next steps for deepening cooperation beyond the "money and weapons" format?

STANDARDS AND/OR PRACTICES

Within the Ukrainian military community, there is a growing perception that interoperability with NATO has ultimately lost its relevance. This view has been reinforced by statements from the political leadership of leading NATO countries regarding the impossibility of Ukraine's integration into NATO in the near future. Accordingly, the argument goes: what is the point of investing effort and resources into meeting the standards of an organization we are unlikely to join anytime soon?

Moreover, some allies working with Ukraine on the *Future Force Structure* have framed expectations accordingly: by 2035, Ukraine should be capable of deterring and repelling Russian aggression independently, rather than together with allies. However, the financial requirements for such anticipated self-sufficiency exceed the capacity of Ukraine's national budget even under the most optimistic economic scenarios. Not to mention that the Russian Federation is expected to retain its nuclear capabilities beyond 2035.

In March 2026, one of the Alliance delegations, as part of the work on implementing the initial package of requirements for institutional interoperability, once again raised the issue of revising national planning documents, including the National Security Strategy. NATO experts also inquired about Ukraine's vision for the development of its defense forces in the coming years. The discussion largely resulted in vague formulations and uncomfortable pauses.

At present, Ukraine's planning is primarily focused on achieving battlefield dominance and surviving a war of attrition. NATO recommendations are often perceived as an additional burden rather than a supportive tool for solving these core tasks.

Does this mean that Ukraine is rejecting NATO standards and practices? Not at all. In reality, their implementation often takes place outside formal procedures and the usual regulatory framework. In combat brigades that demonstrate the highest effectiveness and attract the largest number of personnel, NATO standards are discussed without skepticism. To illustrate this, the recent decision by the Third Army Corps and the Khartiia Corps to introduce the position of a *battle commander* provides a case in point, as this role is not typical of the existing command structure of the Armed Forces of Ukraine.

According to Ihor Obolenskyi, commander of the 2nd Khartiia Corps, he began advocating as early as 2016 that NATO and Western training represent the future, having understood the importance of a human-centered approach and proper planning⁷. Thus, Ukraine is primarily interested in those practices and standards that can rapidly enhance combat capability and help achieve superiority on the battlefield over the post-Soviet Russian army.

⁷ *Khartiia: Business Approach, NATO Standards, and Robotic Operations*. Ukraïner, May 10, 2025: <https://www.ukraïner.net/13-bryhada-khartiia/>

However, in Ukraine there is also a clear understanding **that a fundamentally different security reality will emerge from the current war — one whose contours are being shaped right now on the battlefield.** Many Ukrainian military leaders and policymakers are convinced that in this new reality much of NATO's doctrinal and planning framework will prove obsolete and require revision. In fact, former Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine and now Ambassador to the United Kingdom, General Valerii Zaluzhnyi, has frequently spoken publicly about the Alliance's "outdated" nature and the mismatch between its standards and the realities of the war in Ukraine. During a meeting with students at the Ukrainian Catholic University, Zaluzhnyi went so far as to state that the Alliance effectively has no real power — and even if it did, it would be exhausted within a few months. "NATO will never make itself effective; that is why they exist within the paradigm they are in," he concluded⁸.

Such assessments are broadly shared within Ukraine's military leadership, which believes that the Armed Forces of Ukraine are currently several steps ahead of NATO in understanding modern technologies and the innovative nature of the battlefield.

There is no shortage of examples. These include the widely reported advantage of Ukrainian military personnel — particularly operators of unmanned systems — over NATO forces during exercises and training. It also includes the introduction of new procurement approaches (for instance, the U.S. government has recently replicated a drone marketplace modeled on Ukraine's DOT-chain system), as well as the creation of the world's first Unmanned Systems Forces. For example, Ukraine has already developed its own national standard for *deep strike operations*, while NATO is only beginning to consider such concepts. The Ukrainian battlefield has also called into question a number of NATO standards in areas such as medical support and evacuation, logistics, engineering approaches, and more.

As a result, many Ukrainian officials engaged in cooperation with NATO question **what interoperability really means in this context — if, within a few years, it may be the Alliance that will need to align its doctrinal base and standards with Ukraine's, rather than the other way around.** At the same time, every innovation introduced in Ukraine's security and defense sector

⁸ Valerii Zaluzhnyi Meets with Students of the Ukrainian Catholic University. YouTube, March 7, 2025: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sDy-8R87IUM>

is automatically labeled as being "in line with the best Euro-Atlantic NATO standards" (after all, what is the point of reforms if they do not correspond to NATO standards?).

From NATO's perspective, such an approach can seem overly self-confident and ambitious for a country that has been dependent on Western arms supplies and financial support for several years. Ukrainians, in turn, are frustrated by the reluctance of the Alliance's political leadership to recognize new realities and to treat the Russian threat and Ukraine's experience not merely as grounds for incremental adjustments, but as a trigger for urgent and fundamental reconsideration of its approaches and practices. **This unspoken mutual skepticism undermines respect and negatively affects dialogue.**

In their own way, both Ukraine and the Alliance are right. In times of uncertainty and existential threat, survival depends directly on the ability to quickly find effective solutions that work here and now, rather than on perfectly formulated plans. At the same time, without a clear strategic framework and resource planning, fewer and fewer partners are willing to tolerate urgent — and often inconsistent — requests from Ukraine without understanding the next steps and long-term plans.

Ensuring trust and mutual respect in relations is therefore a key task for the near future. Unfortunately, there are no simple solutions, despite the efforts of Ukrainian diplomats, including the Mission of Ukraine to NATO. Among the obvious steps is **consistency and the fulfillment of commitments**. Ukraine wants to see alignment between declared support plans and actual contributions, so as to avoid months of uncertainty and dependence on shifting political dynamics. NATO, for its part, would like to better understand who in Ukraine is ready to provide comprehensive political leadership across the full spectrum of relations with the Alliance — beyond the realm of money and weapons.

INTER-IMPROVABILITY INSTEAD OF INTEROPERABILITY

Returning to the issue of institutional development and the implementation of NATO norms and standards, it is important to acknowledge that the war is reshaping previously established logic. Today, the practical implementation of new standards is increasingly outpacing their formalization and regulatory codification.

The key question today is not how Ukraine should implement NATO standards in order to independently deter Russia in the future. What matters far more is how Ukraine and NATO can create joint mechanisms of deterrence and countering aggression already now. Because, frankly speaking, not only can Ukraine not clearly answer what its Defense Forces will look like in 2035, but NATO itself cannot be certain that it will exist in 2035 in its current format and structure. Especially given the present challenges, which even futurists would have struggled to predict. One of the Alliance's most powerful members is already questioning the effectiveness and viability of its current decision-making system⁹. Russia, despite the expectations of many Western politicians, still retains sufficient military and economic capacity to continue the war — and possibly even expand the theater of operations. This list could go on.

Thus, Ukraine and NATO are mutually dependent in navigating this period of uncertainty, and **for the Alliance, Ukraine can become both a curse and a blessing**. Ukraine's defeat in the war could undermine the entire carefully constructed security architecture in Europe, including calling into question the viability of the "strongest military-political alliance in history." Conversely, if Russia ultimately exhausts its military capabilities on the battlefields of Donbas, and Ukraine is able to effectively counter each of the aggressor's technological solutions, NATO will be able to continue maintaining relative stability in the Euro-Atlantic region — at least on its eastern flank.

To achieve this, it is necessary to shift the established paradigm — from the formula "NATO supports Ukraine" to "NATO and Ukraine jointly build a new security architecture in Europe."

Ukraine's wartime experience has become one of the key sources of knowledge about modern high-tech warfare. Military operations in Iran have undermined the counterargument of many NATO skeptics who claimed that Ukraine's experience is a local one primarily shaped by its need to find asymmetric solutions against a much stronger aggressor, and therefore cannot be extrapolated to economically stable and technologically advanced defense systems. In March 2026, with the start of the U.S. operation in Iran, it became clear that the mass use of drones, new approaches to command and control, the integration of digital battle management systems, and rapid

⁹ *Trump weighs new 'pay to play' NATO*. The Telegraph, March 27, 2026: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2026/03/27/trump-weighs-new-pay-to-play-nato/>

technological adaptation are not local or temporary phenomena, but defining features of modern warfare.

The issue is not only about high-tech solutions, which Ukraine's defense industry may not always be able to boast of. In fact, the innovativeness of Ukraine's defense ecosystem lies in the fact that simple solutions — when properly applied and scaled — can have a critical impact on the ability of a larger military power to dominate the battlefield. This is precisely what appears to irritate certain representatives of the "traditional" defense industry, such as Rheinmetall CEO Armin Papperger¹⁰. Such an ecosystem has at least 15 interlocking functions, from jamming to surveillance, mine-laying and explosive production, explains Robert Brovdi, Ukraine's Unmanned Systems Commander in his recent interview. It is a concept NATO generals have yet to grasp, he says¹¹.

There is clear interest within NATO in Ukraine's experience. However, in wartime conditions, Ukraine's ability to systematize this experience is limited. There are also certain reservations about sharing specific data with the entire Alliance, given the ambiguous relations that some political leaders of NATO member states maintain with Moscow.

A potential point of convergence, however, could be the shift from a **lessons learned** model to a **lessons anticipated** model — from analyzing past operations to forecasting future technological cycles of war. In the near future, NATO advisors' expertise is unlikely to be needed for drafting a new Military Strategy for Ukraine or new legislation on the Security Service of Ukraine. However, developing a shared Ukraine–NATO vision of future deterrence and defense in the Euro-Atlantic region against external aggression would already make it possible to identify opportunities for joint solutions in ensuring stability and security. This includes joint *capability-based planning*, scenario modeling of the development of Ukraine's defense forces and those of NATO member states, and the use of real wartime data for defense planning.

However, for such initiatives to have genuine practical value rather than remain merely intellectual exercises, Ukraine will need to allocate valuable time and appropriate personnel. NATO, for its part, will need to move from

¹⁰ *Building Tanks While the Ukrainians Master Drones*. The Atlantic, March 27, 2026: <https://www.theatlantic.com/national-security/2026/03/who-needs-tanks-age-drones/686540/>

¹¹ *Ukraine's top drone commander wants to bleed Russia dry*. The Economist, March 22, 2026: https://www.economist.com/europe/2026/03/22/ukraines-top-drone-commander-wants-to-bleed-russias-army-dry?giftId=OTA2ZjFhY2EtYTk0YS00YmRmLTg3OTMtMjYyM2QwZTBkZWZh&utm_campaign=gifted_article

an advisory format to more substantial cooperation. For example, it could share data on *capability targets* approved at the Hague Summit, which were developed based on existing plans to counter potential aggression in the coming years. Of course, as long as Ukraine remains outside NATO, it cannot have access to information on the same level as Allies. However, joint work on shaping the future of defense in modern warfare and building scenarios will require mutual openness — at least in certain areas.

An important element of cooperation based on inter-improvability is the discussed involvement of Ukrainian military personnel in future NATO exercises as a notional adversary (Red Team), as publicly announced in March 2026 by Deputy Head of the Office of the President of Ukraine Pavlo Palisa¹². One promising direction for developing such cooperation could be the expansion of joint analytical and simulation programs — from joint military exercises to the creation of strategic modeling tools based on real battlefield data. Such approaches are already used within NATO, but Ukrainian experience could significantly accelerate their development. This is particularly relevant in modeling technological cycles of warfare, where the speed of innovation and adaptation determines battlefield advantage.

Another natural direction of inter-improvability-based cooperation is the defense-industrial sector. Ukraine's defense industry, which has significantly expanded its production capacity and technological capabilities over the course of the war, is increasingly viewed by allies not only as a recipient of assistance but as a potential partner in the joint production and development of defense technologies. In this context, initiatives such as ***Build in Ukraine / Build with Ukraine*** are of particular importance, as they envisage cooperation between Ukrainian and allied manufacturers, joint investments, and the integration of Ukrainian companies into Euro-Atlantic production chains. A positive development is also the emergence of a dedicated program for Ukraine within the NATO Support and Procurement Agency (NSPA), which has the potential to become a pathway for Ukrainian producers to participate in joint NATO projects.

A promising dimension of cooperation is the development of the **innovation ecosystem**. NATO instruments — particularly DIANA and the NATO Innovation Fund — can serve as platforms for scaling Ukrainian technological solutions in areas such as counter-drone systems, electronic warfare, and robotic

¹² Ukrainian military personnel could become "notional adversaries" for NATO in exercises, says Pavlo Palisa. UNIAN, March 22, 2026: <https://www.unian.ua/world/ukrajinski-viyskovi-mozhut-stati-umovnimi-protivnikami-nato-v-mezhah-navchan-palisa-13323294.html>

systems. Dedicated programs for Ukraine and flexible financial mechanisms within these platforms could stimulate more horizontal cooperation and production networks.

Another direction of this new logic of cooperation is the gradual integration of Ukraine into NATO's practical support systems — from logistics planning to lifecycle management of weapons. This is not only about the supply of equipment, but about creating integrated systems of maintenance, repair, stockpiling, and logistics that will allow Ukrainian forces to effectively operate Western weapon systems while reducing the burden on allies.

The development of a multi-layered air and missile defense system remains a particularly important area. Ukraine's experience in countering massive missile and drone attacks has already become one of the most valuable sources of practical lessons for the Alliance, and joint work on an integrated air and missile defense system carries clear inter-improvability value.

At the same time, technology is not only one component of a defense system. Human capital is no less important. The Ukrainian army is undergoing an unprecedented transformation driven by large-scale mobilization and the need to establish a long-term personnel management model. In this context, not all NATO member states' experience in personnel policy, NCO corps development, reserve systems, and veteran reintegration is directly applicable. However, the principles of human-centricity and flexible management have demonstrated clear advantages on the battlefield over the rigid and attrition-based model of the Russian army. A reassessment of existing approaches to training, education, and medical support — taking into account new realities — is necessary for both NATO and Ukraine.

In conclusion, the new logic of cooperation between Ukraine and NATO must move beyond the traditional partnership model, even if it is a distinctive one. Instead of advisory support, it is time to speak about joint work in adapting to new challenges to shared security.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1 SHIFT FROM A "PARTNERSHIP ASSISTANCE" MODEL TO A MODEL OF STRATEGIC COOPERATION — FROM INTEROPERABILITY TO INTER-IMPROVABILITY.

NATO and Ukraine should gradually transform the logic of their interaction from one of one-sided support — which Ukraine does not always require — toward jointly shaping a new deterrence architecture in Europe. This implies greater Ukrainian participation in setting the cooperation agenda, as well as the institutionalization of joint mechanisms for planning and developing defense capabilities to address shared security challenges in the Euro-Atlantic region. At the same time, Ukraine should align its national defense planning with the long-term logic of cooperation with NATO. Even under wartime conditions, it is important for Ukraine to develop and share a clearer vision for the development of its Defense Forces in the medium and long term. The presence of strategic benchmarks will allow allies to better understand Ukraine's needs, increase the predictability of support requests, and facilitate the mobilization of resources for defense capability development.

2 ESTABLISH A JOINT PLATFORM FOR STRATEGIC AND CAPABILITY-BASED PLANNING.

Ukraine and the allies could initiate a permanent mechanism for scenario-based modeling of future conflicts and the development of defense capabilities based on real data from modern warfare. The combination of Ukraine's battlefield experience with NATO's defense planning system would enable the creation of more adaptive models of deterrence and defense in the Euro-Atlantic area.

3 INSTITUTIONALIZE UKRAINIAN BATTLEFIELD EXPERIENCE WITHIN NATO'S TRAINING SYSTEM.

It is necessary to expand the participation of Ukrainian military personnel in NATO exercises, particularly in the role of a Red Team, and to integrate Ukrainian lessons learned into the training, planning, and evaluation of allied operations. This would help the Alliance more rapidly adapt its doctrinal approaches to the realities of modern technological warfare. At the same time, the capabilities of the Joint Analysis, Training and Education Centre should receive adequate funding and be systematically expanded.

4 CREATE A JOINT ANALYTICAL PLATFORM FOR STUDYING RUSSIA AND NEW FORMS OF WARFARE.

Ukraine and NATO could develop systematic cooperation in researching Russian military strategy, adaptive warfare models, and instruments of hybrid influence. In this context, such an initiative could serve as an appropriate response to the proposal by Ukraine's Minister of Defense to establish an Institute of Russia, which could become a center for joint research on Russian military doctrines, the war economy, mobilization mechanisms, and instruments of cognitive warfare. Such a platform would allow for the systematic integration of Ukraine's wartime experience with the analytical resources of the Allies.

5 DEVELOP DEFENSE-INDUSTRIAL AND INNOVATION COOPERATION.

Ukraine's defense-industrial complex is increasingly seen by allies as a partner in the joint production and development of defense technologies. Initiatives such as *Build in Ukraine / Build with Ukraine*, participation in programs like DIANA and the NATO Innovation Fund, as well as the development of dedicated tracks for Ukraine within NSPA, could create a foundation for integrating Ukrainian technological solutions into Euro-Atlantic defense supply chains and accelerating innovation cycles in areas such as unmanned systems, electronic warfare, and robotic platforms.



ABOUT NEW EUROPE CENTER

The New Europe Center was founded in 2017 as an independent think tank. The New Europe Center became recognized by offering high-quality analysis on foreign policy issues in Ukraine and regional security by combining active, effective work with advocacy.

The New Europe Center's vision is very much in line with the views of the majority of Ukrainians about the future of their country: Ukraine should be integrated into the European Union and NATO.

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