

CEE: What to expect from the NATO summit

- Continued support to Ukraine will be the most urgent priority during the NATO summit taking place on 9-11 July in Washington, DC.
- However, Ukraine will not be invited to join NATO, nor is it likely to receive credible long-term support guarantees required to prevail in the war against Russia.
- Despite NATO's efforts to boost its defense and deterrence posture on its eastern flank, perceptions of disunity could weaken its credibility.

During the summit, NATO member states are expected to announce the supply of additional air-defense systems and, potentially, other military assistance to Ukraine. The alliance is also set to take over the coordination and provision of most international security assistance to Ukraine from the Ukraine Defense Contact Group (UDCG), which so far has had an ad-hoc structure and relied primarily on the US leadership. In addition, NATO is expected to undertake a greater role in coordinating military training and procurement for the Ukrainian forces, helping to fill the gaps and increase interoperability with NATO militaries. Finally, the alliance members are expected to approve USD 43bn in military support for 2025.

However, Kyiv will not receive the much-sought invitation to join the alliance. For Ukraine, NATO membership would be the most reliable and robust guarantee against potential future aggression from Russia, which could make Kyiv more open to compromises/concessions to Moscow to end the conflict. However, Ukraine's membership remains unlikely at least until some provisional settlement of the war. As a result, Kyiv is seeking bilateral security agreements with individual members of the alliance, although they do not amount to guarantees provided by NATO Article 5. Meanwhile, the alliance members are crafting the wording of the summit communique that would refrain from specific commitments regarding Ukraine's membership but would keep the door open for this.

While NATO does not provide lethal aid to Ukraine, its greater role in coordinating and streamlining assistance is an attempt to at least partly shield the process from potential political disruptions in individual countries, especially ahead of the US presidential election. In this respect, a legally non-binding financial pledge for 2025 and a failure to agree on multi-year financial support to Ukraine is a notable setback. Also, any efforts to "Trump-proof" assistance to Ukraine will likely have a limited impact. Ukraine's battlefield losses suffered in the first months of 2024 — when the US military assistance was held up in Congress — clearly demonstrated that other NATO members have limited capabilities to fill the gap should the (new) US administration decide to halt/scale back its assistance to Ukraine.

Risks of a premature ceasefire

More generally, discussions about supporting Ukraine lay bare the lack of a clear and realistic objective, backed by a strategy and means to achieve it, on the part of Ukraine and its allies. For example, the 2023 NATO summit in Vilnius preceded Ukraine's counteroffensive, which was expected to push the Russian forces back from strategically important areas in southern Ukraine, thereby hoping to change the Kremlin's calculus about continuing the war. At this point, the lack of a clear objective and strategy is prompting call calls for "ceasefire" or "peace" on terms unfavorable to Ukraine.

Any ceasefire along the current lines of contact would allow Russia to solidify its control over the occupied territories and amount to a tacit acknowledgement that Ukraine, even with extensive Western military support, is incapable of pushing the Russian forces back. A pause in fighting would also give Moscow opportunity to reconstitute its military capabilities, which could be relatively swift given the mobilization of Russia's economy for the war. Conversely, a ceasefire might reduce the urgency on the western side to equip Ukraine or invest in its own defense capabilities. Militarily strengthened, Russia under President Vladimir Putin's leadership would present an even greater threat to Ukraine and the rest of Europe, especially in the frontline states of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE).

Internal divisions weaken deterrence

Hence, defense and deterrence will be another major topic of the summit. Alliance members are expected to approve a new Defense Industrial Pledge to scale up military production and promote transatlantic cooperation in this area. Allies will also discuss approaches to counter proliferating hybrid threats and review the implementation of updated defense and deterrence posture on the eastern flank. However, the effectiveness of these plans depends on political unity within the alliance. Various dissenting actions/statements from Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orban or critical rhetoric towards NATO coming from the US presidential candidate Donald Trump weaken the perception of unity. If Putin or other external actors believe that the alliance is not capable of acting unanimously, the risk of destabilizing activities and military threats will rise, especially in the CEE.

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