

## Key points

1. The United States should not guarantee Ukraine's security, whether via the NATO alliance or some lesser means.
2. Guaranteeing Ukraine's security serves no major U.S. interest and would increase the risk of a U.S. or NATO war with Russia and nuclear escalation.
3. Those dangers are why the United States refuses to fight directly for Ukraine against Russia today, and they would induce similar caution if the United States guaranteed Ukraine's security. Lacking a major interest, U.S. promises to defend Ukraine will be unserious and unbelievable.
4. Fake security guarantees for Ukraine might have some deterrent value, despite their lack of credibility, given the terrible risks involved for Russia in testing those promises. However, fake security guarantees would likely degrade Ukraine's security on balance, both by preserving a cause of the war and by encouraging Ukrainian leaders to make dangerous choices based on the false prospect of U.S. protection.
5. Announcing plans to guarantee Ukraine's security once the war ends would encourage Russia to continue fighting. Guaranteeing Ukraine's security now would demand a choice between ignoring the commitment and undermining other U.S. security guarantees or fighting for Ukraine and sparking an immediate nuclear crisis.
6. What the United States can credibly offer Ukraine is armed neutrality, where the United States, ideally with European allies taking the lead, provides Ukraine with arms and training without security guarantees.

## Security guarantees for Ukraine would create insecurity

The United States will not guarantee Ukraine's security, but it might pretend to. The dangers of fighting Russia for Ukraine are so severe—entailing a real prospect of nuclear war—and the benefits so lacking, that commitments to defend Ukraine will be unserious and unbelievable. Paper pledges do not obviate interests and allow states to believably threaten suicidal mass destruction for no good reason. Whether they prefer putting Ukraine in NATO or some other sort of pledge, what advocates of guaranteeing Ukraine's security suggest is an obvious bluff—a fraud.

These false promises for Ukraine might give Russia some pause if it considers invading Ukraine again. Even a very low chance of nuclear war induces caution. But U.S. security guarantees will likely damage Ukraine's security overall by antagonizing Russia, preserving a cause of the war, and encouraging Ukraine to take risks in expectation of help that will not come. Additionally, false promises to defend Ukraine might merely remind everyone that other U.S. alliance commitments are similarly suspect.

Like most states, Ukraine must ultimately secure itself, as it has been impressively doing during the current war. The United States and especially its European allies should continue to fund, arm, and train Ukraine's armed forces. Armed neutrality, not making Ukraine a permanent U.S. security dependent, should be the U.S. goal.<sup>1</sup>

## Why offer Ukraine protection?

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 popularized the idea of putting Ukraine in NATO, or as an alternative option, protecting it through various bilateral arrangements. These proposals come from think tanks in Europe and the United States, former officials, and various European leaders, particularly in the Baltics, the United Kingdom, and Poland. Because most of these proposals entail "security guarantees," it is useful to briefly explore what this means.

Here a security guarantee is defined as it is generally understood: one state's formal agreement to use force to defend another if it is attacked. Merely promising arms or to sanction aggression does not qualify. That could be labelled as something less—such as a security assurance.

That said, there is no universally recognized definition of a security guarantee. Leaders sometimes use the term to mean acts short of war. Even NATO's collective defense pledge, Article 5, which is widely discussed as a pledge to fight, in fact says only that each ally "will take the actions it deems necessary to assist the Ally attacked," not that every ally will necessarily go to war to defend it.<sup>2</sup>

The history of NATO suggests states nonetheless see the Article 5 pledge as something more: as a threat by the United States not just to make war, but to use nuclear weapons to defend allies. The alliance started at a time when the United States had recently used nuclear weapons against Japan and also perceived a conventional disadvantage in trying to defend NATO allies against the Soviet Union.<sup>3</sup> The Eisenhower administration, wary of trying to match Soviet manpower in Europe, saw nuclear weapons as a relatively affordable way to address this problem.<sup>4</sup> The "New Look" or "massive retaliation" strategy thus threatened to use nuclear weapons against attacking Soviet Forces—"first use" in nuclear vernacular.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the emergence of a Soviet arsenal sufficient to make mass destruction mutual if the United States used its nuclear weapons and major changes in U.S. nuclear weapons doctrine, the threat to use nuclear weapons first remains a key pillar of U.S. alliance commitments.<sup>6</sup> That U.S. threat underpins NATO—it is what members most value.<sup>7</sup> U.S. tactical nuclear weapons remain in Europe to make that threat more credible.<sup>8</sup>

This history and the policies it informs mean that putting Ukraine in NATO entails a threat to start a nuclear war with Russia. Offering a non-NATO, bilateral U.S. security guarantee to Ukraine, that is, a promise to forcefully defend it, carries a similar threat—which is why it is so coveted by Kyiv. By design, U.S. pledges to defend allies threaten to resort to nuclear war.

There are various proposals for how the United States and its allies should protect Ukraine:

1. The most aggressive option is to put Ukraine in NATO now, regardless of whether Ukraine remains partly occupied by Russia or at war. Ukrainian leaders, who seek maximum outside support, prefer this option, as it would seem to entail NATO countries directly joining them in combat with Russia.<sup>9</sup>
2. The most common proposal is to allow Ukraine to join NATO once the war ends, perhaps as part of a peace plan.<sup>10</sup>
3. A similar alternative favored by more avowedly progressive voices is to offer Ukraine a series of bilateral security guarantees as part of a brokered settlement.<sup>11</sup> These guarantees in theory could come from a variety of nations, but Ukraine is naturally most interested in U.S. promises.
4. Those who want Ukraine in NATO but see it politically difficult at present advocate looser security guarantees of some sort now, with a transition to NATO membership at some future point.<sup>12</sup>



5. Finally, there are proposals for security commitments that fall short of guarantees, typically meaning commitments to arm and train Ukraine; this is often called the “Israel Model.”<sup>13</sup> Some authors confusingly label this option as a security guarantee, but it does not meet the definition used here. Commitments to arm and train Ukraine are consistent with its neutrality.<sup>14</sup>

The safest, most credible option for Ukraine is the fifth. Several mistaken assumptions underlie the other four types of proposals. The first assumption, usually left implicit, is that the security of the United States and its allies depend on Ukraine’s.<sup>15</sup> Second, these proposals tend to assume U.S. credibility is created by treaties or promises—that deterrence is easy to extend—and Ukraine can easily enter the long list of nations for which the United States provides deterrence by threatening nuclear war with Russia. Third, it is often assumed the United States and its allies must induce Ukraine to make peace, especially if it is sacrificing some territory to de facto Russian control, and that Ukraine will never cut such a deal without security guarantees.<sup>16</sup>

As shown below, all these assumptions are wrong. U.S. security is almost entirely independent of Ukraine’s—unless it is degraded by promising to defend Ukraine. Credibility is difficult to extend, and in this case essentially impossible—as it would involve threatening nuclear war for a state whose safety does not benefit ours. Finally, it is neither clear why the United States should approach Ukraine as a supplicant to get it to make peace, nor why dubious promises, as opposed to the continued provision of arms, training, and funds, would be needed for that.

## **U.S. security does not depend on Ukraine’s**

Western sympathy understandably lies with Ukraine in its defensive war with Russia. In 2014 and 2022, Russia attacked Ukraine, a smaller, weaker state that is somewhat democratic (certainly more so than Russia), and lawlessly seized its territory. Russia has fired missiles at civilian targets and committed additional war crimes.<sup>17</sup> Law, morality, and ideological affinity drive U.S. support for Ukraine.

It makes sense for U.S. foreign policy and funds to follow U.S. popular sentiment, to a point. But this is a moral or charitable project, not a security one, which is a reason why U.S. support for Ukraine, while quite generous (more than \$113 billion in 2022), is circumscribed to avoid direct U.S. combat with Russia.<sup>18</sup> U.S. foreign policy can be quite ideological and crusading, but risking a nuclear war for ideology, a sense of justice, or democratic solidarity is a bridge too far for just about everyone.

Of course, few advocates of supporting Ukraine admit they are doing charity.<sup>19</sup> It is typical in U.S. foreign policy for presidents and other national leaders to “oversell” their preferred foreign policy to appeal to audiences and constituencies with various rationales.<sup>20</sup> Taxpayers are not eager to spend billions, let alone risk war without a security payoff. So, the more costly and risky an aspect of U.S. foreign policy is, the more it is sold as a vital security project.<sup>21</sup>

There are two major arguments for the idea that U.S. security depends on Ukraine. One is that Russia will use Ukraine as a launching pad for further aggression. The second says the global norm of territorial integrity is important to U.S. security and dependent on Ukraine winning its war. Basically, one says Ukraine losing will lead to further Russian aggression, and the other says it will lead to aggression by other countries elsewhere. The failures of these arguments are laid out below.



## Ukraine is not a launchpad for Russian empire

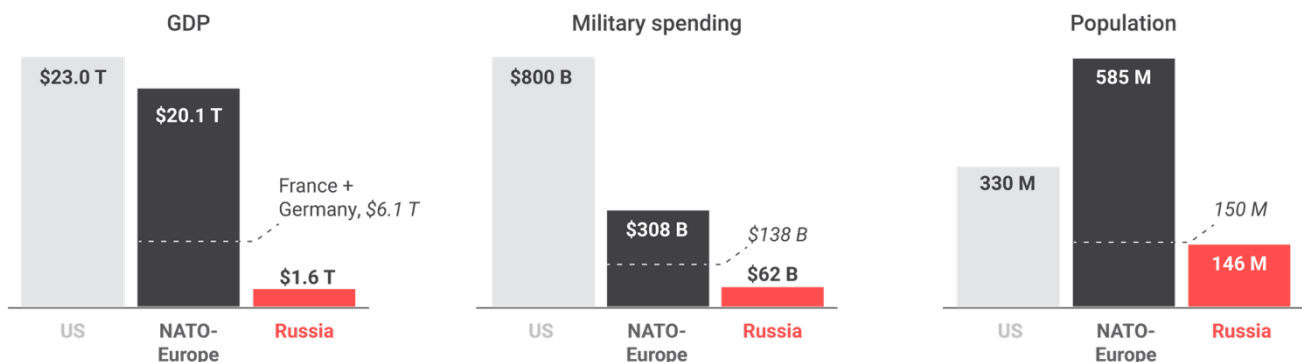
The major way analysts try to tie Ukraine’s security to the United States’ security is by arguing that Russian control of Ukraine would enable further aggression. This argument relies on a misreading of Russian intent and capability.

Russian leaders might well prefer to have the Soviet empire back, but seeing the war in Ukraine as a first step toward that mission is a mistake. Russian concern about Ukraine is unique, even among its neighbors. As a parade of U.S. diplomats and officials have noted, Russia has historically sought to keep Ukraine aligned with, or at least not hostile to, Moscow, not necessarily to rule it directly.<sup>22</sup> That means preventing it from joining Western security institutions, particularly NATO.<sup>23</sup> The same seems to go for Belarus, Georgia, and perhaps Kazakhstan, but Ukraine for historical and geographic reasons seems the “brightest of all redlines” for Moscow as William J. Burns, then U.S. ambassador to Russia and current CIA director, put it in 2008.<sup>24</sup> Russia’s invasions in both 2014 and 2022 fit this reading. This is not to say Russia had legitimate security reasons to attack Ukraine, but that its longstanding concern made the attack predictable.<sup>25</sup>

As for capability, many analysts seem to believe Ukraine is a strategic prize that would empower Russia if fully conquered.<sup>26</sup> This analysis is often based on a shaky interpretation of the start of World War II—the notion that appeasing Nazi Germany merely fueled its further aggression. Besides misreading Britain’s rationale for appeasement at the Munich conference, this view misses the key differences between Nazi Germany then and Russia now. The former was a military juggernaut developing the capacity to conquer much of Europe, and Czechoslovakia was additive to their balance of power advantage.

Taking Ukraine, by contrast, does little for Russia’s capability to further aggress. Of course, holding Ukraine would help geographically if the target were Poland or Moldova. But even that is far from a direct threat to the United States. In any case, there is no great store of latent power in Ukraine that Russia could harness to its war machine. Ukraine’s prewar gross domestic product (GDP) of \$200 billion, even if could simply be added to Russia’s, would still leave it at less than \$2 trillion, a far cry from the European Union’s \$17 trillion.<sup>27</sup> Charitably adding Russia’s informal ally of Belarus and adjusting for purchasing power, the triumvirate would still possess about one-third of the EU’s GDP.<sup>28</sup>

### The U.S. vs. NATO-Europe vs. Russia along three common measures of power



Source: IMF (October 2021); SIPRI (2021); IISS Military Balance (2022); U.N. (2021); "NATO-Europe" is all NATO members except the U.S. and Canada.

As events demonstrate, for Russia, Ukraine is more of a strategic trap than a springboard to further conquest. With a pre-war population of 44 million, whose nationalism Russian aggression enflamed, the cost to Russia of



conquering and pacifying Ukraine is far larger than any benefit it might gain by exploiting material riches.<sup>29</sup> And now that Russia has run aground in Ukraine, displaying shocking military failures, there is even less reason to see Ukraine's defense as necessary to protect Poland or other nearby NATO states.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, the defensive advantages Ukraine has exploited, albeit largely with the help of U.S. and Western European technology, seem to make conquest harder than it was in the early or mid-twentieth century, cutting against the case that more U.S. help is needed to hold off Russia.<sup>31</sup>

In this vein, it is notable how advocates of defending Ukraine compare it to postwar Germany, noting they were both divided and under occupation.<sup>32</sup> "Why not then include Ukraine in NATO, as West Germany was?" this thinking goes. What is left out of this formulation is the security rationale for the United States: how West Germany's independence was key to maintaining a balance of the power in the Cold War due to its central geography, its industrial might that would enrich the Soviet Union if conquered, and the likelihood it would develop nuclear weapons and trigger another world war if not defended.<sup>33</sup> By comparison, Ukraine is strategically unimportant.

### **Ukraine has already protected the norm of territorial integrity**

The other argument pinning U.S. security to Ukraine's says that allowing Ukraine to fall prey to Russia would show that states can violate sovereignty with impunity and create a wave of global aggression.<sup>34</sup> The norm of territorial integrity, in other words, is a such a stabilizing (and fragile) force that the United States must forcibly defend it.<sup>35</sup>

This argument suffers from terrible flaws. For one, the United States, with nuclear weapons, docile neighbors, and ocean barriers, is so secure, as are its key allies, that it is not clear that a norm of territorial integrity matters much to U.S. security, even though it may be important globally. Further, it is doubtful states aggress due to the health of a global norm, rather than their peculiar local circumstances and perceived interests. China's decision about whether to invade Taiwan, for example, will likely turn on China's nationalistic feelings, the balance of capability, the politics of Taiwan, and probably the odds of U.S. intervention, far more than whether Russia gets away with taking a part of Ukraine or China's overall assessment of the health of the territorial integrity norm.

To the extent the norm is important, what matters to its health is whether Russia's example seems worth emulating, not whether Russia gains any Ukrainian territory or never attacks again.<sup>36</sup> Even in the best-case scenario for Russia from here on out, Russia's invasion will be perceived globally more as warning against the perils of aggression than a success worth imitating. Russia has suffered terribly for invading Ukraine, due to broad sanctions and especially the pain of the war. It has displayed why modern military technology and nationalism serve the territorial status quo. The norm of territorial integrity is in good shape due to the difficulties of conquest, whatever promises the United States makes to Ukraine.<sup>37</sup>

### **How promising to defend Ukraine erodes U.S. security**

Promising to fight for Ukraine would not enhance U.S. security. Such promises would instead undermine U.S. security for the obvious reason that they rely on threatening a war that could escalate to mass nuclear destruction.

True, as discussed below, U.S. threats to make war for Ukraine, and especially to escalate to nuclear war, would not be credible. But that does not mean they would be cost-free. Even if peace held, the United States would be promising to secure a 1,200-mile land border with Russia. That would be expensive and require substantial manpower to be stationed in Ukraine, if taken seriously. After all, for all its defensive success, Ukraine could not



stop Russia's seizure of Crimea in 2014 or broad advances in 2022. This manpower, like other U.S. capabilities dedicated to Ukraine, would not be available for other contingencies more important to U.S. security.

### Ukraine's land border with Russia



Security guarantees would increase the risk of war. There would always be those who would insist the United States take its promise to defend Ukraine seriously. After all, a small but prominent group of Americans wants the United States to be at war with Russia today.<sup>38</sup> Even a conventional war with Russia in Ukraine would be a nearly unprecedented security disaster for the United States. After all, Russia would have far more at stake, including perhaps its independence, and thus should be expected to fight hard despite its conventional deficiencies. Further, given the profound consequences, even a small chance of nuclear war should be given a wide berth. And in this case, the odds would hardly be small.

In sum, by guaranteeing Ukraine's security, the United States would degrade its own. It would gain no tangible benefit and take a terrible risk. As much as the United States has unwisely expanded its alliances, extending them to Ukraine would be an act of unprecedented recklessness.

### U.S. security guarantees to Ukraine will not be credible

Discussion about expanding NATO to Ukraine and other nations often takes U.S. credibility to go to war for the ally as a given. It is assumed that because the Article 5 pledges have never really been tested by state aggression that the deterrent threats underlying the alliance are inviolate.

But this idea, that extended deterrence comes easy, is at odds with history and the field of strategic studies, which matured in the early Cold War. Much important scholarship, including Thomas Schelling's masterwork, *Arms and Influence*, was an effort to understand how one could credibly threaten to fight a war for an ally in a condition of mutually assured destruction.<sup>39</sup> Scholars offered an array of answers to this question—tripwire forces, counterforce nuclear targeting, battlefield nuclear weapons, and "flexible response."<sup>40</sup> But they universally saw it as a difficult problem. And this concerned a time and place, Western Europe in the early Cold



War, where the stakes seemed high. The European allies, despite their relatively high importance to the United States, required all manner of reassurance during the Cold War—U.S. bases, nominal control over locally-based nuclear weapons, or in the cases of France and the United Kingdom, their own nuclear weapons. In Ukraine, U.S. stakes are far lower.

Threats to fight wars, which alliance commitments entail, become credible when states have the capability to carry them out and demonstrable, strong interests in doing so.<sup>41</sup> With respect to securing Ukraine, the United States has problems on both fronts. While U.S. military capability to help Ukraine is clearly impressive, Ukraine's long border with Russia poses serious challenges. The U.S. has the capability to defend it, but it would be costly to do so, especially in terms of opportunity cost.

More importantly, the United States has no vital security interests in Ukraine, as discussed, whereas Russia has far stronger interests, demonstrated by its willingness to wage war. This asymmetry, combined with Russia's nuclear weapons, makes it inherently not credible for the United States to commit to defend Ukraine.

Having refused to fight for Ukraine when its independence was at stake due to Russia's invasion, the United States cannot easily convince observers that it will fight next time. Putting Ukraine in NATO or otherwise promising to defend it does not magically create a U.S. interest worth risking a nuclear war for.

Advocates of offering to protect Ukraine sometimes argue that U.S. credibility problems actually aid their case. Because the U.S. threats to defend the other 30 NATO members would suffer if it did not defend Ukraine, it must do so to preserve the whole alliance structure, this logic goes.<sup>42</sup> And Russia knows this, so it will be deterred.

The main problem with this thinking is its assumption the Kremlin buys into the same mythology about credibility domino theories. It seems more likely Russians think like leaders normally do and will focus on material U.S. interests that justify taking terrible risks for Ukraine, or the lack thereof.<sup>43</sup> It is difficult to convince people you will fight a war where you lack strong interests in order to show them you will do so when you have stronger interests. You are asking them to believe you are deranged.

Since U.S. promises to fight for Ukraine will not be credible, they will likely be irrelevant to preventing wars, like the 1994 Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances.<sup>44</sup> That agreement is often billed as a promise of U.S. (and other nations') protection for Ukraine in exchange for its agreement to relinquish nuclear weapons. However, it only amounted to a promise to not invade Ukraine and complain at the United Nations if someone did. Like the Budapest Memorandum, a new promise to defend Ukraine could amount to great diplomatic sound and fury, signifying nothing.

That said, the credibility challenge undermining any U.S. commitment to defend Ukraine, phony though it may be, could create several new dangers. One is that a future leader might do something rash, like try to fix the problem by deploying tripwire U.S. forces to the Donbass, making war with Russia and nuclear escalation far more likely.

A second danger in attempting to extend deterrence to Ukraine is that the naked fraud will simply remind rivals that other U.S. commitments are similarly dubious.<sup>45</sup> After all, the U.S. commitment to defend the Baltic states is also unattached to any strong material interest. Although this is probably not news to the Russians, and their failure to invade the Baltics is likely due to other factors than NATO, the net result would be to make an attack testing a U.S. alliance a bit more likely.

A third danger of handing out a fake defensive promise is that the recipient alone might believe in them or believe in them enough to get into trouble. This possibility, which is not hypothetical, is discussed below.



## **Pretending to protect Ukraine is bad for Ukraine's security**

Extending security guarantees to Ukraine may prove counterproductive, heightening its troubles. One reason for this is a kind of moral hazard, where Ukraine takes risks because of protective promises it mistakenly takes as real.<sup>46</sup> Another reason is that security guarantees may prolong the war or heighten the risk of its resumption.

Before elaborating on these points, it is worth replying to one likely objection: that Ukraine surely knows better than American analysts what is good for it. The response is simple: Ukraine is after real protection, not protection theater, which is what it is likely to get from the United States. Furthermore, we should not rule out the possibility that they are mistaken just because we sympathize with their plight.

### **Phony U.S. protection invites bad choices**

Desperate circumstances and understandingly nationalistic politics make Ukraine's leaders eager for any security solution that is not territorial compromise with Russia, and they might be willing to overlook their seeming protector's limited commitment.<sup>47</sup> Thus, they might eschew a possible negotiated settlement that involves territorial sacrifice while the war continues based on the idea that an impending U.S. commitment will eventually improve their negotiating position. Or, if they receive NATO membership or a security guarantee after the war ends, they may suffer from a false sense of security, and misread the dangers of taking various risks vis-à-vis Russia.

Something similar occurred before the war, contributing to the conditions that caused it. U.S. leaders deliberately created the impression in Ukraine that it was a sort of quasi-ally subject to some military protection, at least in the future. As noted, with the Budapest Memorandum, U.S. leaders gave Ukraine the impression that it might be protected by the United States even though no real commitment had been made. At the Bucharest Summit in 2008, the Bush administration convinced the alliance to support Ukraine's (and Georgia's) eventual accession to NATO membership, though without offering a membership action plan.

Ever since, NATO's position has been that it has an "open door" to Ukraine's eventual membership. Ukraine became a NATO "Enhanced Opportunities Partner" in 2020, and in November 2021, just before Russia's invasion, the United States and Ukraine signed a "Charter on Strategic Partnership" which gave U.S. backing to Ukraine's war aims, including regaining Crimea.<sup>48</sup> When Russia began a buildup of troops on Ukraine's border in 2021, the Biden administration repeatedly emphasized its "unwavering" and "ironclad" support for Ukraine's sovereignty and refused to rule out its eventual NATO entry.<sup>49</sup> U.S. aid and joint exercises, both of which increased after 2014, also likely enhanced Ukraine's belief, or hope, that they enjoyed a degree of U.S. protection.<sup>50</sup>

All this effort to imply a kind of commitment to Ukraine, a sort of strategic ambiguity, could have discouraged Ukraine to cut a deal with Russia to remain neutral before the war.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, a Ukraine more evidently on its own might have gone further to implement the Minsk II accords, a key Russian demand before the war.<sup>52</sup>

It is possible Ukraine would have done nothing differently absent all this theatrical support from Washington. Their nationalistic anger at Russia for attacking it in 2014 likely made compromise politically difficult, if not impossible. But the false promise of U.S. protection at least encouraged the uncompromising side of Ukrainian politics. Being unclear about how far it would go to defend Ukraine was irresponsible behavior by Washington, which courted moral hazard, if it did not cause it.

Some will object that this amounts to blaming the victim. But causal weight and blame are different things. A fixation with fairness is often inappropriate or unhelpful in international politics. Safety, not someone's idea of





fairness, is what states have good reason to seek.<sup>53</sup> Saying Ukraine is innocent of aggression and Russia is guilty is true but unhelpful to Ukraine’s security, let alone U.S. security. What matters is that Ukraine failed to secure itself which, given its geography, required compromising with Russia. And U.S. policy encouraged that failure.

### Guaranteeing more war?

The more obvious reason security guarantees may ironically erode Ukraine’s security is that their prospect helped cause the war and therefore formally issuing them may also help prolong it. This is a controversial but fundamental point: if you believe the war was merely due to a failure to credibly promise to defend Ukraine and that such credibility is easily attained, you will take a different view. But the weight of the evidence says the prospect of Ukraine getting Western protection was an important cause of war, if not a sufficient one.<sup>54</sup>

This is not to justify the invasion or suggest it resulted due to legitimate security concerns. It is rather to note that Ukraine joining NATO, or getting NATO’s protection less formally, was a Russian “red line,” as so many officials and scholars warned.<sup>55</sup> It strengthened Russia’s desire to forcibly seek to control Ukraine, particularly Crimea, to keep it out of the Western sphere.<sup>56</sup>

Europe’s major military alliances in 1990 (left) vs. 2023 (right)



Since 1990, even as the Soviet Union dissolved along with the Warsaw Pact, NATO (in red) has expanded and now includes several states that share borders with Russia.

The prospect of security guarantees for Ukraine seems to be a reason Russia invaded, though hardly the only one. Both Russian rhetoric and the timing of the attack suggest as much.<sup>57</sup> U.S. policy toward Ukraine made the war predictable (and predicted)—not justified.<sup>58</sup> Here it is worth noting that if the United States and its allies want to end the war, even informally, they need both Russia and Ukraine. The insistence by advocates of security guarantees that the United States needs to offer them to placate Ukraine in a peace deal is odd, since that would make Russia likely to refuse any deal. U.S. sympathy with Ukraine and a desire for peace should not make Washington Ukraine’s supplicant in peace talks, sacrificing its own interest to win Kyiv’s assent.

By extending security guarantees to Ukraine, Washington would preserve a grievance that helped spark the war. And that would make the war harder to end. Or if the guarantees came after peace, they would make peace harder to maintain. Note that saying Ukraine can only join NATO once the war ends gives Russia a strong reason to continue the war. Putting it in NATO now, by contrast, would force the alliance to choose: do nothing despite its Article 5 commitment to Ukraine or act in Ukraine’s defense and spark an immediate nuclear crisis.



## Armed neutrality: A safer and credible alternative

What the United States should offer Ukraine rather than security guarantees is armed neutrality—give Ukraine no promised protection but instead provide arms and training so Ukraine can defend itself. The idea is to drive up the already considerable cost to Russia of attacking Ukraine again in a credible and sustainable way, one that avoids unjustified risks.

The advantages of armed neutrality over security guarantees are several. First, while arming Ukraine has been expensive, doing so indefinitely should require considerably lower annual costs than the current rate, as Ukraine should be able to maintain the capability it has gained without an infusion of more than \$100 billion annually. Nor would armed neutrality involve great security risk to Americans. Russia has shown it will not escalate against the United States for arming Ukraine—which makes sense, as that could be suicidal. The United States and Russia have achieved a rough modus vivendi that involves considerable acrimony over Ukraine but sharp limits on mutual danger. Armed neutrality might leave relations in a troubled state, but they would not make them worse.

Second, offering Ukraine armed neutrality, unlike security guarantees, is credible. Rather than promising something—fighting for Ukraine—the U.S. has failed to do for sensible fears of escalation, this option means continuing to do something that has already safely occurred. True, public support for Ukraine might ebb, and continuing the current annual support over \$100 billion would be excessive and unlikely. But the U.S. desire to arm Ukraine will likely remain robust for some time.

Third, armed neutrality is unlikely to trigger further attacks from Russia. Russia would surely be angered by the provision of arms indefinitely and might see this as a soft extension of Western security institutions to Ukraine, which is dangerous in the same sense as security guarantees, only less so.<sup>59</sup> But the “neutrality” part of the equation should limit Russian angst and help keep the peace, along with deterrence.

Two caveats are in order. First, the tendency to try to placate Ukraine and domestic U.S. audiences by labelling arms transfer and training as a kind of security guarantee should be resisted. As noted, this prospect is dangerous and not credible. It could anger Russia, encourage Kyiv to believe it has more real protection than it does, and excite U.S. credibility hawks into pretending real U.S. promises were on the line, making actual steps toward war more likely. That said, dangers would be limited because Russia should recognize these are guarantees in name only, labelled that way for obvious political reasons.

Second, the United States should not make minimum pledge requirements individually, as recent reports suggest may occur.<sup>60</sup> With or without armed neutrality, the United States should shift the burdens of European security to European states, as it is their backyard and security more directly at stake, and they are more than capable of defending themselves against Russia with less U.S. help.<sup>61</sup> Overall pledges from NATO which allow the U.S. to reduce its share of Ukraine’s support costs over time are more sensible. The states now calling for NATO membership for Ukraine should be willing to bear a greater share of future military aid and, eventually, reconstruction.

Ukraine, like most states at most times, must protect itself. That is the reality events have revealed. Since Ukraine has the misfortune of sharing a border and much political history with Russia, its security inevitably depends on reaching some accommodation with Russia, using some mix of deterrence and diplomacy. Attempting to make Ukraine a U.S. protectorate will not change that.



Ukraine can succeed in securing itself; there is a reason Ukraine went a quarter of a century without being attacked by Russia after the Cold War. Russian weakness revealed by the war shows this task is easier than previously thought. Counting on the United States or other allies to fight is understandable but dangerously naive. Counting on their beneficence, while working to build long-term self-sufficiency and a diplomatic path to prolonged peace, is more sensible, credible, and much safer.



## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> This paper is about U.S. foreign policy. So, while it makes arguments that tend to apply to other countries, such as about the challenges of credibility threatening to defend a country you have refused to defend, it does not explicitly prescribe policy for them.
- <sup>2</sup> “The North Atlantic Treaty,” April 4, 1949, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official\\_texts\\_17120.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_17120.htm). Despite this text, this paper treats NATO membership as entailing security guarantees because it is broadly interpreted as a pledge to make war.
- <sup>3</sup> The balance of power was more favorable to the United States than it generally seemed then. Matthew A. Evangelista, “Stalin’s Postwar Army Reappraised” *International Security* 7, No. 3 (Winter 1982–1983): 110–38.
- <sup>4</sup> David Alan Rosenberg, “The Origins of Overkill: Nuclear Weapons and American Strategy, 1945–1960,” *International Security* 7, no. 1 (Spring 1983): 3–71; Glenn H. Snyder, “The New Look of 1953,” in *Strategy, Politics and Defense Budgets*, eds. Warner R. Schilling, Paul Y. Hammond, and Glenn H. Snyder (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), pp. 393–437.
- <sup>5</sup> The White House, “Basic National Security Policy,” October 30, 1953, <https://irp.fas.org/offdocs/nsc-hst/nsc-162-2.pdf>.
- <sup>6</sup> On the evolution of U.S. doctrine see Austin Long, *Deterrence – From Cold War to Long War: Lessons from Six Decades of RAND Research* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2008), <https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG636.html>; Fred Kaplan, *Wizards of Armageddon* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991).
- <sup>7</sup> Henry D. Sokolski ed., *Getting MAD: Nuclear Mutual Assured Destruction, Its Origins and Practice* (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College Press, 2004), 107.
- <sup>8</sup> Jonathan Masters and Will Merrow, “Nuclear Weapons in Europe: Mapping U.S. and Russian Deployments,” Council on Foreign Relations, March 30, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/nuclear-weapons-europe-mapping-us-and-russian-deployments>.
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- <sup>21</sup> Justin Logan and Benjamin H. Friedman, “The Case for Getting Rid of the National Security Strategy,” *War on the Rocks*, November 4, 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/11/the-case-for-getting-rid-of-the-national-security-strategy/>; Ben Friedman, “Biden is Exaggerating the Stakes of Ukraine,” *UnHerd*, June 3, 2022, <https://unherd.com/thepost/joe-biden-is-exaggerating-the-security-stakes-of-ukraine/>.



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- <sup>24</sup> William J. Burns, *The Back Channel: A Memoir of American Diplomacy and the Case for Its Renewal* (New York, Random House, 2019), 233.
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<sup>51</sup> Mike Sweeney, “Saying ‘No’ to NATO: Options for Ukrainian Neutrality,” *Defense Priorities*, August 12, 2020, <https://www.defensepriorities.org/explainers/saying-no-to-nato-options-for-ukrainian-neutrality/>; Van Evera, “To Prevent War and Secure Ukraine, Make Ukraine Neutral.”

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<sup>57</sup> McCallion, “Assessing Liberal and Realist Explanations for the Russo-Ukrainian War.”

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