

# Working in Political Headwinds: on Ukraine's Plan of Victory

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**Ukraine's Victory Plan sets out steps for ensuring a sustainable peace in Europe. It is also a piece of Ukrainian strategic communication delivered at a time when it is unclear whether Western leaders are prepared to make the necessary efforts for Ukraine to maintain its territorial integrity and secure its full sovereignty. The Plan's lukewarm reception provides yet another indication of ambivalences in the Western support for Ukraine.**

**To prevent a Zeitgeist of increasing defeatism from becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy, Western leaders should remember that long-term security in Europe is only possible through a just peace that prevents Russia from harvesting fruits of its aggression. Western leaders therefore ought to consider the Victory Plan seriously and work through the steps outlined in it, including extending a NATO invitation to Ukraine.**

In any social interaction, you are likely to benefit from considering the following: 1. What is said. 2. What is not said. 3. To whom is it said (or not said). These points are helpful to keep in mind in the light of some of the recent political events in Europe, namely, Ukraine's President Mr Zelensky's travels to Western capitals to introduce the Plan of Victory, his subsequent unveiling of the Plan to the Ukrainian Parliament (Verkhovna Rada), and the lukewarm reactions it received in the West. Looking at what was said, what was not said, and to whom things were said demonstrates key dynamics and challenges ahead, not least the fragility of Western unity on the support for Ukraine. It also shows the importance of enhancing efforts to support Ukraine, rather than giving in to sentiments of defeatism.

## 1. What is said

The Plan of Victory begins by summarising what is at stake: “Today, Russia’s war against Ukraine is determining whether the world will fall into conflicts between hostile blocs that will compete for control of territories, resources and peoples by military means over the next decades, or whether a rules-based world order will be preserved in the interests of the peoples worldwide.” That is to say: a Ukrainian defeat also means the defeat of international law, of the UN system, and of the European security order. The Victory Plan aims to strengthen the position of Ukraine through increased support and security guarantees from its Western partners. Only then can Russia be forced to engage in genuine negotiations, and a just end to Russia’s war against Ukraine, that upholds basic principles of the international order by preventing Russia to harvest fruits of its aggression, can be guaranteed.

The Plan contains five points: first, an immediate NATO invitation to Ukraine (an invitation, it is argued, provides geopolitical certainty for Ukraine and the rest of Europe, strengthens Ukraine’s position in diplomacy, and undermines Russia’s motive to continue the war); second, a point on defence (Ukraine calls for more weapons faster, without restrictions on their use); third, the deployment of a non-nuclear strategic deterrence package in Ukraine (the weapons to be included are not mentioned, but president Zelensky has said that the US, Germany, France and the UK have been informed); fourth, a point on Ukraine’s strategic economic potential (joint protection of critical resources such as key metals, rare earth ores, energy and food production, along with joint investment and use of Ukraine’s economic potential); and fifth, a point on security-enhancing post-war perspectives (replacing American military contingents stationed in Europe with Ukrainian ones). The Plan also includes three classified annexes which have been shared with some international partners.

Admittedly, the Plan consists of little new in substance: it continues to rely on foreign weapons support and an unconditional invitation to join NATO, which are demands that Ukraine has been making before. The Plan has been criticised for lacking implementation mechanisms and for setting too tight deadlines. In the Plan’s defence, it provides a strong packaging: it is short, to-the-point, and does set out the steps necessary for ensuring that Ukraine’s position is strong enough to force Russia to engage in genuine negotiations.

The most important of those steps is to issue an immediate invitation to Ukraine to join NATO, followed by membership immediately after the war. A NATO invitation to Ukraine would not generate any obligations on behalf of the NATO allies under Article 5. However, it encourages Russia to engage in diplomacy, as it provides geopolitical certainty for Ukraine and the rest of Europe, strengthens Ukraine’s position in diplomacy, and undermines Russia’s motive to continue the war. The implementation of the Victory Plan essentially depends on the political will of Ukraine’s partners. But as the half-hearted responses among Western leaders to the Plan show, that political will is far from a given. Looking at the other things to keep in mind in all forms of social interactions – including international politics – is helpful to make more sense of the purpose, importance, and political context of the Victory Plan.

## 2. What is not said

Following the unveiling of the Victory Plan to the Verkhovna Rada, Mr Zelensky presented it for the EU leaders at their European Council autumn summit. Despite this, nothing was explicitly said about the Plan in the [Summit Conclusions](#). The EU's commitment to provide political, economic and military support to Ukraine was reconfirmed, but the practical steps of such a commitment remain either disputed or ambiguous. Finally, while saying that “Russia must not prevail” and referring to Ukraine's Peace Formula, a concrete vision for a Ukrainian victory and for the future of Europe after the war is lacking. In a similar vein, neither Western leaders nor the head of NATO, Mr Mark Rutte, have expressed public support for the Plan or for a NATO invitation to Ukraine, even though they continue to repeat phrases such as “supporting Ukraine as long as it takes” and “the future of Ukraine is in NATO”.

Taken together, this shows that the Western unity on the support for Ukraine is fragile and potentially even waning. German Chancellor Mr Scholz recently told Germany's Parliament that it is time to “explore ways to end the war” – possibly including [talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin](#). It is speculated that some Western officials discuss Ukrainian territorial concessions in exchange for a NATO membership, but such a proposal has not been put openly on the table to Ukraine. As Mr Zelensky is working in political headwinds, the Victory Plan is perhaps best understood as a piece of strategic communication that calls for action by attempting to shift the narratives around Ukraine's future prospects, reminding of what is at stake, reclaiming Ukrainian agency, and countering the spreading defeatism that risks becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy.

That president Zelensky is working in political headwinds was reconfirmed in his use of nuclear rhetoric. The Victory Plan does not mention any alternatives than NATO membership for providing sufficient security guarantees to Ukraine, but the Ukrainian president hinted at one such alternative [in his speech](#) to the European Council, when he recalled the lessons of the 1994 Budapest Memorandum and said that Ukraine's survival could be ensured either by joining NATO or by having nuclear weapons. This nuclear rhetoric – that lays out the realistic alternatives for Ukrainian survival in stark terms – is a bold gamble by a pressured Mr Zelensky, who soon thereafter had to clarify publicly that Ukraine is not building nuclear weapons.

A final thing that is not said explicitly in the Victory Plan or in the Western responses to it – but that is evident – is that both Ukraine and the EU are watchful for the outcome in the US Presidential election on 5 November. The fourth and fifth points of the Plan, which emphasise that Ukraine can help ensure Europe's security after the war through its critical resources and military capabilities, are relevant for a European Union that seeks to decrease its geopolitical dependence on the United States. It is also in the light of the US election that the point about replacing some American military contingents in Europe with Ukrainian ones after the war is best understood. Ukraine presents this replacement as a part of Ukraine's accession to NATO, but also states that it would allow the United States to use its released troops to perform other security tasks outside Europe. Mr Trump is likely to look favourably on such a proposal.

### 3. To whom is it said (or not said)

The setting initially chosen for the unveiling of the Victory Plan was a meeting of the Ramstein group, which consists of 57 countries and coordinates military support for Kyiv. But the meeting set for 12 October was cancelled, as Mr Biden postponed his trip to Europe due to Hurricane Milton. Instead, Mr Zelensky had to unveil the Plan in a speech to the Ukrainian Verkhovna Rada. Prior to that, Mr Zelensky had presented the Victory Plan in Washington, Paris, Berlin, Rome, and London. The US President, on his side, made a visit to Berlin one week later than initially planned, where he met with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, British Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer, and French President Emmanuel Macron.

Target audiences matter. First, Mr Biden's meeting in Berlin in the so-called quad-format is indicative of his preference of going through Germany for dealing with European affairs. Throughout his presidency, Mr Biden has worked to reassure Germany of Washington's commitment to European security, yet despite today's strengthened transatlantic solidarity, fundamental risks and challenges remain. The display of bonhomie can be seen as an effort to prepare Europe for all possible outcomes in November.

Second, there is one country missing in both contexts. Mr Zelensky did not travel to Warsaw on his European tour to present the Victory Plan, and Poland was not part of the club of countries that received its secret annexes. Likewise, Mr Scholz did not extend an invitation to Poland when he met with Mr Biden, Mr Macron and Mr Starmer in Berlin. Such things add to the Polish sentiment that everything is decided behind the backs of Poland and of Central Europe. That could pose additional challenges for the support to Ukraine and for Ukraine's EU accession process, the latter of which is dependent on political consensus among the EU member states.

Finally, it is noteworthy that while Mr Zelensky travelled to Western capitals to seek support for the concrete steps to ensure a Ukrainian victory – which would also be a victory for the rule of law, for democracy and human rights, and for long-term peace, security and stability in Europe – Western leaders met in Berlin to discuss the future of Ukraine without him, clearly violating the principle of “nothing about Ukraine without Ukraine”. It is clear that EU leaders want to bring Ukraine closer to the EU, but it is not clear whether they are prepared to make the necessary efforts for Ukraine to maintain its territorial integrity and secure its full sovereignty.

“I truly believe in Ukraine”, Mr Zelensky said as he finished [his speech](#) to the Verkhovna Rada. The question is if Europe and the United States do. Implicit in such a question is also whether the collective West believes that respect for international law must and can be restored and upheld, by not allowing Russia to harvest fruits of its aggression. If the answer to that question is yes, the steps outlined in Ukraine's Victory Plan offer a pathway forward.

## **Recommendations to Western policymakers**

1. Remind relevant actors of what is at stake and the importance of upholding international law by preventing Russia from harvesting fruits of aggression. Resist the increasing defeatism in the West by emphasising Ukraine's potential to win the war and become a security-provider in Europe.
2. Seriously consider an immediate invitation to Ukraine to join NATO along with membership after the war. It is difficult to see any other form of viable security guarantees to ensure Ukraine's long-term security, i.e., to win the peace, for Ukraine and for Europe.
3. Step up the Western military support to Ukraine, in accordance with Ukraine's needs and as outlined in the Victory Plan. That is necessary for Ukraine to negotiate from a position of strength and to ensure a just peace.



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