

A Neutral and Demilitarized Ukraine? Moscow's Demands of Kyiv in Geostrategic Perspective

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Summary

In the past year, the Kremlin has made an array of claims, threats and proposals concerning the Northern Hemisphere's security architecture, on reversing NATO commitments to "new" members, the exclusion of additional accessions to the organization and the future military balance in Europe. Moscow's propositions on the permanent neutrality and demilitarization of Ukraine may appear to some observers to be more feasible than other Russian requests. These demands could become more salient once Moscow and Kyiv start negotiating a ceasefire or a peace treaty. The concurrent implementation of neutrality and demilitarization should nonetheless be resolutely rejected by the West. Parallel fulfilment of both Russian demands would not just make Ukraine's security situation untenable, alienate Kyiv from the West and create tensions within Ukrainian society. It would also undermine the European Security Order and send an ominous signal to the entire world. The West should instead understand and make clear to Moscow that the current unattainability of Ukraine's full inclusion in NATO excludes the possibility of any disarmament of the country. The West needs to help Ukraine as much as it can to strengthen its economy, society, civil service and military, or its capacity to survive as a sovereign state. As membership of NATO is not currently on the table, the country should be given an official EU membership timetable. It is in the West's interests to strengthen Ukraine's resilience and security as much as possible through all available instruments: European Union, NATO and other.

Since the summer of 2021, Russian officials have made a variety of novel proposals to, demands of and plans for Ukraine, Europe and the West as a whole. Almost all of Moscow's requests are unacceptable to Kyiv, Brussels and Washington, and would, if realized, seriously undermine the European Security Order based on the core OSCE principles like each state's political sovereignty, freedom of choosing international alliances, territorial integrity etc. The Kremlin's new ideas include a revision of previous NATO enlargements, limitations on the freedom of Sweden, Finland and other states to join the organization, and a so-called denazification of Ukraine. Implementation of the latter would mean regime change, re-education, deportations and political purges in addition to the already ongoing mass murder in Russia's alleged "brother nation".

A Sensible Russian Proposal?

Most of the Kremlin's suggestions demonstrably violate fundamental standards of international law. The sheer impracticality of Moscow's designs makes their serious discussion unnecessary. Nonetheless, two of the Russian plans – future Ukrainian neutrality and demilitarization – might appear at first glance more reasonable and feasible. These intentions have been met with a degree of understanding in the Western policy-shaping community.

Certainly, any satisfaction of these two demands would also be a clear violation of commitments laid out in basic UN and OSCE agreements, to which Russia is a party. Nonetheless, the permanent neutralization and demilitarization of Ukraine is a Russian scheme that touches on popular themes in Western political discourse. Making Ukraine neutral and demilitarized is an idea that resonates with many Western politicians, diplomats and intellectuals. Its implementation could therefore be attempted.

Ukrainian neutrality could "just" mean the exclusion of any possibility of Ukraine's NATO accession in future, or also permanently preclude Ukraine's membership of the European Union. In view of recent advances in Kyiv's rapprochement with Brussels, the latter now looks as unrealistic as a reversal of earlier NATO enlargements. It is worth remembering, in this connection, that the increase in tensions between Russia and Ukraine that eventually led to war began already in 2013, if not before. It was Ukraine's wish for EU association, and not cooperation with NATO, that triggered Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014. Moscow's increasing pressure on Kyiv as well as its concurrent and successful push of Yerevan out of its negotiations with Brussels were responses to the upcoming signing of far-reaching Association Agreements, which included Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas, between the EU, on the one hand, and Ukraine, Armenia, Georgia and Moldova, on the other.

Demilitarization could mean restrictions on the number of Ukrainian troops, including irregular, voluntary and/or paramilitary units; qualitative and quantitative restrictions on Ukraine's weaponry; limitations on military exercises by or with Ukrainian soldiers; a prohibition on the presence of foreign troops on Ukrainian soil and/or of other international military cooperation; as well as limits on research and development of, and the production and/or trade in weapons. Putin's regime and the Kremlin-controlled Russian mass media claim that a demilitarization of Ukraine is already under way as Russia's ongoing "special operation" is targeting not only civilians, but also Ukrainian military units, installations, supplies and factories.

Contrary to the Kremlin propaganda machine's reporting about a current Russian disarmament

campaign, however, Ukraine is currently militarizing – and doing so at ever greater speed. Much of Ukraine’s adult male and parts of its female population are being armed and trained for combat, if not already in battle. The country is becoming flooded with increasingly sophisticated and heavier weapons – either domestically produced or imported. A significant amount of Ukraine’s new armaments since February 2022 has come from Russia. Ukrainian soldiers have captured a variety of Russian arms, including heavy weapons. In many cases, Russian soldiers simply abandoned their vehicles, guns and equipment, leaving them in Ukraine – in some case, one suspects, on purpose.

Interpretation and Evaluation

Nonetheless, permanent Ukrainian neutrality and demilitarization are a less elusive agenda than “denazification”. Superficially, they appear more realistic than, for instance, a reversal of previous NATO enlargements. Neutralization and disarmament constitute more practical and comprehensible ideas than Russia’s other proposals on Ukraine. Demilitarization is a familiar term that has been in use since the 1918 Versailles Treaty. Neutrality has been and still is a part of the foreign policy doctrines of several European states, most prominently and consistently in the case of Switzerland.

Western states should, notwithstanding, resist Moscow’s desire for a simultaneously neutral and demilitarized Ukraine. If implemented, it would, after the incursion of the last eight years, further curtail Kyiv’s sovereignty, subvert once more the European Security Order and make it impossible for Ukraine to exercise its right to defend itself according to the UN Charter’s article 51. The Russian plan is obviously designed to make the Ukrainian state defenceless, and effectively a part of Russia’s sphere of unrestricted influence.

Establishing permanent neutrality and forcing a concurrent demilitarization on Ukraine is, moreover, an agenda designed to drive a wedge between Ukraine and the West. The demands are meant to trigger European and North American debates that alienate Kyiv from historically naïve, pacifistically inclined, and geopolitically “realistic” elements of Western societies. The Kremlin’s terms address key longings among especially many West European citizens. In Eastern Europe, by contrast, they are easily recognized as implying Russian hegemony over Ukraine.

The Russian proposal to neutralize and demilitarize Ukraine in exchange for peace is also an instrument for triggering polarization between the more hawkish and the more dovish sectors of Ukrainian society. Ukraine’s neutrality and demilitarization have become unpopular in large sections of Ukrainian society since Russia’s massive invasion on 24 February 2022, and subsequent Russian war crimes against Ukrainian civilians. An attempt by Kyiv, under Western pressure or in response to dovish sentiments within Ukraine, to follow such a plan might result in political destabilization and even domestic conflict within Ukraine. Such an internal escalation would only be welcomed in the Kremlin as providing the pretext for new Russian meddling in Ukraine.

Worse, the Russian neutrality and demilitarization proposal is closely linked to Moscow’s concept of denazification, which is the code for a Russian partial conquest and cleansing operation to transform the Ukrainian state. Denazification seeks to fundamentally transform and degrade the Ukrainian nation into a sub-ethnicity of an allegedly existing larger Russian civilization. The simultaneously ultra-nationalist and palingenetic aspects of the Kremlin’s

agenda for a subjugated and assimilated Ukraine can be seen as making this Russian doctrine essentially fascist.

To be sure, some comparativists of genocide would point out that the Russian 2022 cleansing agenda for Ukraine is reminiscent of other mass violence of imperial nations vis-à-vis their colonies. However, in the minds of the decision-makers in the Kremlin and rhetoric of the Russian government's public apologists, the Ukrainian people are not separate from, but a part of the Russian nation. Moscow's attempted transformation of Ukraine – its "denazification" – via military invasion, country-wide bombing, "filtration camps," as well as mass terror against civilians is thus an essentially domestic and not foreign affair.

Some Policy Implications

Any Western acceptance of Moscow's demands for Ukraine's neutrality and demilitarization would create a dangerous precedent and have consequences far beyond Ukraine's borders. While perhaps sounding sensible to many West European observers, it should not be legitimized by Western states. Ukraine is for geopolitical and geographical reasons no East European Switzerland. Ukraine's permanent neutrality and demilitarization would make sense only if the country were to be lifted into the Alps.

One policy recommendation to Western states and organizations that emerges from the above circumstances is nevertheless that this may not necessarily mean a full and outright dismissal of the Russian demands in their entirety. A parallel and permanent neutralization and demilitarization of Ukraine should certainly remain out of question. However, a general rejection of the Kremlin's plans for Ukraine and their obviously expansionist purpose could be formulated in more nuanced ways.

Ukraine's accession to NATO looks unlikely in the near future. Russia's demand for Ukrainian neutrality could, in the light of current Western sentiments, in part be fulfillable, at least in the short term. Several, in particular West European, NATO member states will not currently approve a hypothetical membership application by Ukraine – independent of the Kremlin's rhetoric around this issue. While Ukraine's demand for far-reaching Western security guarantees is understandable, NATO members have made it quite clear since 24 February 2022 that security guarantees such as the Washington Treaty's article 5 provisions can only be extended to existing members.

Against this background, the 2008 NATO membership perspective for Ukraine could be temporarily watered down. It is true that an official statement to this effect would be unpopular in Kyiv, constitute a partial infringement of the European Security Order and contradict NATO policy principles. However, it would change little in substance regarding the likely stagnation of Ukraine's international embeddedness for several years to come. An official postponement of Ukraine's NATO accession could, moreover, provide the pretext for two more feasible ways to increase Ukrainian security in the short term.

First, a deferment of Ukraine's accession to NATO should be combined with an explicit EU membership perspective or even candidate status for Ukraine, while also assisting it in such a way as to make a full entry into the Union possible in the not-too-distant future. An official EU accession timetable or candidacy would be a strong political and psychological factor in promoting domestic reforms in and international support for Ukraine.

Once Ukraine became an EU member state, moreover, it would benefit from the Treaty on European Union's article 42.7 mutual aid obligation on all member states if one of them is attacked. It is certainly true that the security guarantee in the Lisbon Treaty is, for many reasons, weaker than the NATO Washington Treaty's article 5. Ukraine's accession to the EU would nonetheless sharply increase Ukraine's international embeddedness and safety.

Second, the likely exclusion of Ukraine from any military alliance for years to come provides justification for rejecting Moscow's demand for demilitarization and for instead strengthening Ukraine's ability to defend itself militarily and in other ways. Ukraine's inability to join NATO means that Kyiv should be made able to take care of its own defence. During the interregnum until its accession to NATO, Ukraine will need the opposite of demilitarization.

The Ukrainians should be helped as much as possible to strengthen their state, economy and society, but especially their defences. In Ukraine, such an approach is sometimes called the Israeli model, which refers to Israel's precarious geopolitical situation, limited international embeddedness and effective self-reliance in securing its territory and sovereignty. In the same way as Tel Aviv is only able to take care of its own defence with some Western help, Kyiv too will need continuing support from the US, EU member states, Canada and other friendly countries to be able to provide for its own national security.

The heated current Western debates about heavy weapon deliveries to, and EU accession prospects for, Ukraine have both larger and wider dimensions. They not only address immediate requests from Kyiv related to current needs on the battlefield. These two schemes also resolve the larger issue of a partial compensation for the likely non-admittance of Ukraine to NATO, in the near future.

The continuing provision of heavy weapons and an EU membership perspective should be part and parcel of a larger international peacetime plan for a temporarily neutral Ukraine. Instead of mere responses to recently expressed desires by Kyiv, they would become elements of a sustainable solution to some burning European security issues. At some point, even Moscow might accept such a scheme as a mechanism that saves the Kremlin's face in view of the unattainability of its earlier proclaimed aims in Ukraine.



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