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# NATO enlargement: Ukraine

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At its [summit in Washington in July 2024](#), NATO described Ukraine's path to membership as "irreversible" and reaffirmed the view adopted at its 2023 summit that Ukraine's future "is in NATO". However, the Alliance did not extend an invitation to Ukraine to join; that will be when Allies "agree and conditions are met".

Ukraine has sought membership for many years. In 2008 NATO said Ukraine "will become a member" of the Alliance. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, President Zelenskyy [said he had formally requested](#) an "accelerated accession" to join NATO.

The question of Ukraine's membership had been a major talking point in the lead up to the 2023 Vilnius summit, with Ukraine's President Zelenskyy calling on NATO to provide a clear timeframe and security guarantees ahead

of membership. At that summit, NATO waived the need for a Membership Action Plan for Ukraine. This process has been used in the past to help countries prepare for membership.

In Washington, NATO described the decisions it made on Ukraine as constituting a “bridge” to Ukraine’s membership. This includes supporting Ukraine’s progress on interoperability, and democratic and security sector reforms.

This paper explains NATO’s current position on Ukraine’s membership and what Ukraine wants. It also explains the requirements for countries wanting to join the Alliance.

## 1 What did NATO say in 2008?

In 2008, at its summit in Bucharest, NATO welcomed Ukraine, and Georgia’s, aspirations for membership, and agreed that they will become members of NATO:

NATO welcomes Ukraine’s and Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership in NATO. We agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO. Both nations have made valuable contributions to Alliance operations... MAP is the next step for Ukraine and Georgia on their direct way to membership.<sup>1</sup>

NATO has since decided Ukraine does not need to undergo the MAP (Membership Action Plan) process. Section 6.2 explains this further.

## 2 What is NATO’s current relationship with Ukraine?

Relations between NATO and Ukraine date back to the 1990s, following Ukraine’s Declaration of Independence in 1991. Ukraine joined NATO’s Partnership for Peace programme in 1994. Several elements have developed since then, including a NATO-Ukraine Commission, and assisting with reforms relating to its aspirations for membership under the Annual National Programme (ANP). The Comprehensive Assistance Package (CAP), set up at its 2016 Warsaw Summit, supports NATO’s ability to provide its own security and also to implement reforms based on NATO standards. More information on the relationship can be found on [NATO’s website: Relations with Ukraine](#).

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<sup>1</sup> NATO, [Bucharest Summit Declaration](#), 3 April 2008, para 23

## 3

## What does Ukraine want?

Ukraine has long aspired to membership of NATO.<sup>2</sup> In 2019 the constitution was amended to include the goal of “fully-fledged membership” of NATO.<sup>3</sup>

Ukraine’s 2020 National Security Strategy restated the goal of membership of NATO as a key national security objective.<sup>4</sup> In September 2022 President Zelenskyy said he had formally requested an “accelerated accession” to join NATO.<sup>5</sup>

Since then, Ukraine has raised the subject of membership and security guarantees in meetings with NATO allies. In May 2023, ahead of a meeting of NATO foreign ministers, Olha Stefanishyna, Ukraine’s deputy prime minister for European integration, said “Vilnius should give a clear signal that politically, Ukraine is invited to join NATO.”<sup>6</sup>

### 1 NATO’s collective defence pledge

NATO is unique in having at its core a collective defence pledge. This is set out in Article 5 of the 1949 founding Washington Treaty, which [states that an armed attack on one shall be considered an attack against them all](#). Finland and Sweden cited the collective defence principle as the primary reason for their applications to join the alliance in 2022.<sup>7</sup> The first, and only, time Article 5 was invoked was after the 9/11 attacks against the United States in 2001. For more information on this, see Library paper: [What is NATO?](#)

## 4

## The 2023 Vilnius Summit

NATO held its summit in Vilnius in June 2023. In the [Summit Communiqué](#), NATO leaders said that “Ukraine’s future is in NATO” but that the alliance

<sup>2</sup> Taras Kuzio, [The Long and Arduous Road: Ukraine Updates Its National Security Strategy](#), RUSI commentary, 16 October 2020

<sup>3</sup> [Constitution of Ukraine 1996](#) (PDF), as amended in February 2019, Articles 85, 102 and 106. The Constitution lays out the same ambition for membership of the European Union.

<sup>4</sup> Alyona Getmanchuk, [Russia as aggressor, NATO as objective: Ukraine’s new National Security Strategy](#), Atlantic Council, 30 September 2020

<sup>5</sup> [Zelensky requested accelerated membership to NATO](#), Kyiv Post, 30 September 2022; [Ukraine formally applies for fast-track NATO membership](#), Politico, 30 September 2022

<sup>6</sup> [Ukraine renews push for NATO membership](#), Politico, 30 May 2023

<sup>7</sup> Commons Library, [NATO enlargement: Sweden and Finland](#), CBP 9574, 19 June 2023

would be “in a position to extend an invitation to Ukraine to join the Alliance when Allies agree and conditions are met”.

## 4.1

### Pre-summit discussions

The question of Ukraine’s membership dominated pre-summit discussions.

Jens Stoltenberg, the NATO Secretary General, said that “[different allies will have different views on whether we should stick to the 2008 language or whether we should have something else](#).”<sup>8</sup> He then sought to dampen expectations, saying that NATO is “not discussing to issue a formal invitation” at the Vilnius summit.<sup>9</sup>

Baltic and eastern NATO members were pushing for a clear timeline or plan for when Ukraine can join.<sup>10</sup>

Lithuania’s Foreign Minister, Gabrielius Landsbergis, said in June that “it is high time that we actually sit down and find a very concrete answer as to how Ukraine is going to move closer to NATO and when they become a member of the alliance.”<sup>11</sup> A joint declaration by the Ukrainian President and the Estonian Prime Minister in April explicitly linked the Vilnius summit with establishing a path to help “bring Ukraine closer to NATO membership”.<sup>12</sup>

The Polish President Andrzej Duda also said “Ukraine is waiting for an unambiguous signal regarding a clear prospect of membership in NATO”.<sup>13</sup>

A meeting of the Bucharest Nine - Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Slovakia – who are all members of NATO, expected movement on membership at the summit:

We expect that in Vilnius, we will upgrade our political relations with Ukraine to a new level, and launch a new political track that will lead to Ukraine’s membership in NATO, once conditions allow.<sup>14</sup>

However, other members, like Germany, said they did not feel the time is right. German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock has said “NATO’s open

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<sup>8</sup> Western allies plan to provide long-term security assurances to Ukraine, Financial Times, 14 June 2023

<sup>9</sup> [NATO summit will not formally invite Ukraine to join alliance -Stoltenberg](#), Reuters, 19 June 2023

<sup>10</sup> See for example [Wider Europe Briefing: What Can Ukraine Expect At NATO's Vilnius Summit? Plus, The EU's New Migration Quandary](#), RFE/RL, 12 June 2023; Why NATO wants a plan, but not a date, for Ukraine’s membership bid, Financial Times, 19 June 2022

<sup>11</sup> [NATO divided on Ukrainian membership as Zelenskyy renews call](#), Al Jazeera, 1 June 2023

<sup>12</sup> Estonia Prime Minister’s office, [Joint Declaration of the President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy and the Prime Minister of Estonia Kaja Kallas](#), 24 April 2023

<sup>13</sup> [Polish President pushes for Ukraine’s NATO membership at Paris talks](#), RFE/RL, 12 June 2023

<sup>14</sup> President of Poland, [Statement by the leaders of the Bucharest Nine](#), 6 June 2023

door policy remains in place, but at the same time, it is clear that we cannot talk about accepting new members [who are] in the midst of a war.”<sup>15</sup>

Antony Blinken, the US Secretary of State, has repeatedly said NATO’s door “remains open to new members” in the context of Ukraine and the Vilnius summit, adding “Ukraine’s membership in NATO will be a matter for Allies and Ukraine – not Russia – to decide”.<sup>16</sup> US officials had suggested President Biden’s support in skipping the MAP process.<sup>17</sup>

In June 2023, Members of the European Parliament adopted a resolution calling on NATO to “honour their commitment” regarding Ukraine’s NATO membership and expects the upcoming summits in Vilnius and Washington (in 2024) to “pave the way for extending an invitation to Ukraine to join NATO”. The Parliament also called for the accession process to “start after the war is over and be finalised as soon as possible”, and for NATO allies to “develop a temporary framework for security guarantees, to be implemented immediately after the war, until full NATO membership is achieved”.<sup>18</sup>

## What was the UK’s view?

Then Prime Minister Rishi Sunak said prior to the summit that “Ukraine’s rightful place is in NATO”.<sup>19</sup>

Then Foreign Secretary James Cleverly said the UK’s support, and Ukraine’s increased acceptance of NATO standards and doctrine, have “shortened the time between now and the point it becomes a full member of NATO.”<sup>20</sup> James Cleverly [visited Kyiv on 6 June 2023](#).

The Foreign Secretary has also suggested the UK would support removing the requirement for Ukraine to participate in the MAP process. Talking at the Ukraine Recovery Conference in London on 21 June, Cleverly said:

I think the U.K.’s position would be very, very supportive if we moved on from the membership action plan recognizing that the offer to both Sweden and Finland didn’t require that, and Ukrainians have demonstrated their commitment to reform the military for requirement of NATO membership through their actions on the battlefield. I think all NATO allies recognize that.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> [NATO divided on Ukrainian membership as Zelenskyy renews call](#), Al Jazeera, 1 June 2023

<sup>16</sup> US State Department, [Russia’s Strategic Failure and Ukraine’s Secure Future](#), 2 June 2023

<sup>17</sup> [Biden ‘open’ to plan that eases Ukraine’s path to NATO membership](#), Politico, 15 June 2023

<sup>18</sup> European Parliament resolution of 15 June 2023 on the sustainable reconstruction and integration of Ukraine into the Euro-Atlantic community (2023/2739(RSP)), para 23

<sup>19</sup> [Ukraine’s “rightful place” is in NATO, says Rishi Sunak](#), Politico, 1 June 2023

<sup>20</sup> [HC Deb 13 June 2023 c139](#)

<sup>21</sup> [UK ‘very supportive’ of fast-track NATO plan for Ukraine](#), Politico, 21 June 2023

## 4.2

# What was agreed at the Vilnius Summit?

In the [Summit Communiqué](#), NATO leaders said that “Ukraine’s future is in NATO” but that the alliance would be “in a position to extend an invitation to Ukraine to join the Alliance when Allies agree and conditions are met”.

NATO also said it recognised that Ukraine’s path to membership has moved beyond the need for a Membership Action Plan (see section 6.2), noting that Ukraine has become “increasingly interoperable and politically integrated with the Alliance”. NATO said it will continue to support Ukraine make the necessary reforms for membership:

In line with the 1997 Charter on a Distinctive Partnership between NATO and Ukraine and the 2009 Complement, Allies will continue to support and review Ukraine’s progress on interoperability as well as additional democratic and security sector reforms that are required. NATO Foreign Ministers will regularly assess progress through the adapted Annual National Programme. The Alliance will support Ukraine in making these reforms on its path towards future membership.<sup>22</sup>

NATO also established a NATO-Ukraine Council, a joint body to provide for joint consultations, decision-making and activities. The Council will also serve as a “crisis consultation mechanism” between NATO and Ukraine. The Council replaced the previously existing NATO-Ukraine Commission, which had been the main body for discussions since 1997. The Council had its first meeting at the summit.<sup>23</sup> The NATO website [provides a fuller description of the new council](#).

Then Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, addressing the House of Commons after the summit, said NATO “took a big step in Vilnius towards bringing Ukraine into the alliance”, shortening Ukraine’s path to membership by removing the need for a membership action plan.<sup>24</sup> Sir Keir Starmer, the Leader of the Opposition at the time, endorsed the Government’s position, saying “the question is not if Ukraine joins NATO, but when Ukraine joins NATO.”<sup>25</sup>

NATO allies also agreed at the summit a “substantial package of expanded political and practical support” to bring Ukraine closer to NATO. Long-term security guarantees were offered outside of the NATO framework by the G7 member states on the sidelines of the summit. Commons Library paper [Security guarantees to Ukraine](#) (CBP 9837) discusses this in more detail.

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<sup>22</sup> NATO, [Vilnius Summit Communiqué](#), 11 July 2023, para 11

<sup>23</sup> NATO, [Vilnius Summit Communiqué](#), 11 July 2023, para 12

<sup>24</sup> [HC Deb 13 July 2023 c494](#)

<sup>25</sup> [HC Deb 13 July 2023 c495](#)

## 4.3 How did Ukraine respond?

In a tweet published on his way to the summit, President Zelenskyy said it was “absurd” not to set a timeframe for membership:

It’s unprecedented and absurd when time frame is not set neither for the invitation nor for Ukraine's membership. While at the same time vague wording about "conditions" is added even for inviting Ukraine.

It seems there is no readiness neither to invite Ukraine to NATO nor to make it a member of the Alliance.<sup>26</sup>

However, after the summit he described the outcome as a “very much needed and meaningful success for Ukraine”, adding that “we have put to rest any doubts and ambiguities about whether Ukraine will be in NATO. It will!”<sup>27</sup>

## 5 The Washington Summit 2024

The summit declaration made clear the significance of Ukraine and the outcome of the conflict to NATO:

A strong, independent, and democratic Ukraine is vital for the security and stability of the Euro-Atlantic area. Ukraine’s fight for its independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity within its internationally recognised borders directly contributes to Euro-Atlantic security.<sup>28</sup>

NATO did not extend a formal invitation to Ukraine to join the alliance. Instead, it affirmed that Ukraine’s future “is in NATO” and described Ukraine’s path to NATO membership as being “irreversible”. The declaration suggested Ukraine still had work to do, on interoperability, and democratic and security sector reforms.

The summit focused more on what assistance NATO could provide to Ukraine, describing the decisions the Alliance took as constituting a “bridge” to Ukraine’s membership in NATO.<sup>29</sup> These decisions include:

- Establishing a NATO Security Assistance and Training for Ukraine to coordinate the provision of military equipment and training for Ukraine by Allies and partners. Commons Library briefings [military assistance to](#)

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<sup>26</sup> [Volodymyr Zelenskyy criticises 'absurd' lack of timetable for Ukraine to join NATO as he arrives at summit in Vilnius](#), Sky News, 11 July 2023

<sup>27</sup> [US and UK call for more gratitude from Kyiv after Zelenskyy's NATO complaint](#), The Guardian, 12 July 2023

<sup>28</sup> NATO, [Washington Summit declaration](#), 10 July 2024, para 16

<sup>29</sup> NATO, [Washington Summit declaration](#), 10 July 2024, paras 15-16

[Ukraine since the Russian invasion](#) and [detailed timeline of UK military assistance to Ukraine](#) provide further information on military assistance so far.

- A pledge of long-term security assistance for Ukraine, to provide military equipment, assistance and training. Allies intend to provide a “minimum baseline funding of €40 billion within the next year”. Further background can be found in Commons Library briefing [security guarantees to Ukraine](#).
- Establish a NATO-Ukraine joint analysis, training and education centre to identify and apply lessons from the conflict and increase Ukraine’s interoperability with NATO.

At the beginning of the summit, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg suggested the wording of the declaration on membership was still being negotiated and yet to be agreed, although he expected that “Allies will agree a strong message on membership for Ukraine”.<sup>30</sup> He added “all Allies agree that Ukraine will become a member, but it's too early to say exactly when that will happen”.<sup>31</sup> The Polish Foreign Minister said “membership would mean that we would need to join the war against Russia. And there is no appetite among Western publics for that.”<sup>32</sup>

Commenting on the language adopted, the Economist newspaper observed “the reality [is] that few [Allies] are ready to let it in while it is at war with Russia”. The Economist went to suggest that “all know that Ukraine’s road to membership is all too reversible if Donald Trump returns to the White House.”<sup>33</sup>

Ukraine also did not indicate it expected a significant move on membership prior to the summit.<sup>34</sup>

Prime Minister Keir Starmer met President Zelenskyy at the NATO summit, reaffirming the UK’s support for Ukraine.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> NATO, [Jens Stoltenberg statement](#), 10 July 2024

<sup>31</sup> NATO, [Jens Stoltenberg statement](#), 10 July 2024

<sup>32</sup> PBS News Hour, [Poland’s foreign minister on defending Ukraine and its path to NATO membership](#), 9 July 2024

<sup>33</sup> The Economist, [When will Ukraine join NATO?](#), 11 July 2024

<sup>34</sup> See for example, [President of Ukraine, Euro-Atlantic Integration, Defense Support and Energy Security: Ukrainian Delegation Met with Jake Sullivan](#), 3 July 2024

<sup>35</sup> Prime Minister’s Office, [PM meeting with President Zelenskyy of Ukraine: 10 July 2024](#), 10 July 2024



## 6 How do countries join NATO?

NATO [has an “open door” policy](#) and any European country is eligible to join NATO.

The only requirement for any applicant is that they are in a position to further the principles of the founding 1949 Washington Treaty and to contribute to the security of the North Atlantic area.

NATO’s principles include a commitment to democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law, and to promote “stability and well-being” in the North Atlantic area.<sup>36</sup>

NATO operates on consensus, meaning all existing members must agree before inviting an aspiring country to join. These requirements are [set out in Article 10 of the Washington Treaty](#).

### 6.1 Are there any other criteria?

Yes.

Aspiring members are also expected to meet certain political, military and economic criteria. These are set out in the [1995 Study on Enlargement](#) and include requirements such as having a functioning democratic system, the fair treatment of minority populations and a willingness to make a military contribution to NATO operations.

New members are also expected to meet “certain minimum standards essential to a functioning and credible Alliance.”<sup>37</sup> This is often referred to as [NATO standards](#), and refers to the need to share a common set of standards, explained by NATO as “rules or guidelines that ensure mutual understanding and practical functionality”.<sup>38</sup> This can range from interchangeability of ammunition to commonality of doctrines and procedures.<sup>39</sup>

However, the study also makes clear there is no fixed or rigid list of criteria, and each applicant is assessed on a case-by-case basis.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> [The North Atlantic Treaty](#), 1949

<sup>37</sup> NATO, [Study on NATO enlargement](#), 3 September 1995, para 40 and 45

<sup>38</sup> NATO, [Standardization](#), 14 October 2022 [accessed 23 June 2023]

<sup>39</sup> NATO, [Study on NATO enlargement](#), 3 September 1995, para 76. The [Ministry of Defence publishes Allied Joint Doctrines](#) (AJP) on a range of topics, including the conduct of operations, targeting, deployment, operations security, logistics and many more.

<sup>40</sup> NATO, [Study on NATO enlargement](#), 3 September 1995, para 7

## Settling international disputes

Of particular relevance to Ukraine's aspiration for membership, is the need for new members to commit themselves to "settle any international disputes in which they may be involved in peaceful means".<sup>41</sup> The Study of Enlargement specifically addresses countries which have ongoing territorial disputes:

States which have ethnic disputes or external territorial disputes, including irredentist claims, or internal jurisdictional disputes must settle those disputes by peaceful means in accordance with OSCE principles.<sup>42</sup>

It goes on to say that resolution of such disputes would be a factor in determining whether to invite a state to join the Alliance.<sup>43</sup>

## 6.2

## What is a Membership Action Plan (MAP)?

Countries interested in joining the Alliance are usually invited to join what is called a [Membership Action Plan](#) (MAP). This process was launched at the 1999 Washington Summit to help countries prepare for membership, and evolved out of lessons learnt from previous enlargements and the conclusions of the 1995 [Study on Enlargement](#). The MAP is described as "a practical manifestation of the Open-Door policy".<sup>44</sup>

Each MAP is tailored to the individual country and may involve political, legal, military, defence and security reforms.<sup>45</sup>

### Is the MAP process obligatory?

No.

Between 1999 and 2020 every new member that joined NATO had used a MAP.

Aspiring member Bosnia and Herzegovina was invited to join the [Membership Action Plan](#) (MAP) in April 2010.<sup>46</sup>

However, [neither Finland nor Sweden used the MAP process for their application to NATO](#).

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<sup>41</sup> NATO, [Study on NATO enlargement](#), 3 September 1995, para 5

<sup>42</sup> NATO, [Study on NATO enlargement](#), 3 September 1995, para 6

<sup>43</sup> NATO, [Enlargement and Article 10](#), 12 April 2023, para 6

<sup>44</sup> For an overview, see: NATO, [Membership Action Plan \(MAP\)](#), Last updated: 14 May 2022

<sup>45</sup> [NATO enlargement and open-door factsheet](#), July 2016, accessed 14 June 2022

<sup>46</sup> NATO, [Relations with Bosnia and Herzegovina](#), 12 July 2022 (accessed 9 June 2023)

President Zelenskyy had cited Finland and Sweden when he called for Ukraine to similarly join NATO under an accelerated procedure, saying “we know it’s possible” to join without a Membership Action Plan.<sup>47</sup>

Participation in the MAP process does not guarantee membership of NATO.

## Is Ukraine already participating in the MAP?

No. NATO decided in Vilnius that Ukraine did not need to undergo the MAP process, saying “Ukraine’s path to full Euro-Atlantic integration has moved beyond the need for the Membership Action Plan”.<sup>48</sup>

The Washington summit declaration stated that NATO Foreign Ministers will assess Ukraine’s progress through the adapted annual national programme. This began in 2009 as Ukraine’s “key instrument” to advance integration and related reforms and consists of five chapters on: political and economic issues; defence and military issues; resources; security issues; and legal issues.<sup>49</sup>

Commons Library paper [How do countries join NATO?](#) (CBP 9813) explains the process in more detail.

The Library’s [Conflict in Ukraine](#) hub provides further information on Ukraine.

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<sup>47</sup> [Zelensky requested accelerated membership to NATO](#), Kyiv Post, 30 September 2022

<sup>48</sup> NATO, [Vilnius Summit Communiqué](#), 11 July 2023

<sup>49</sup> NATO, [Relations with Ukraine](#), 9 July 2024

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