Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

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How Ukraine reinforced the issue of NATO membership?

I was in the room when President Volodymyr Zelenskyy publicly raised Ukraine's NATO accession in January 2021. It was during his Axios interview when, with a smile, he asked the newly inaugurated U.S. President Joe Biden an unexpected question: "Mr. President, why are we not in NATO yet?"

This remark, which was improvised and not in our preparation notes, was surprising. While NATO membership is enshrined in the Ukrainian constitution and Zelenskyy had recently signed a National Security Strategy reaffirming this goal, it had never been discussed as publicly as during that improvised TV question. His comment sparked a debate across Ukraine.

Opinions were divided. Critics considered Zelenskyy's approach tactless and pointed to his inexperience in directly rebuking Biden. They emphasised that Ukraine's progress towards membership stagnated by 2021, held up by internal reforms and compliance issues.

Supporters, on the other hand, argued that his urgency in relation to NATO was necessary for Ukraine's security.

Zelenskyy's bluntness continued during his first meeting with President Joe Biden in September. According to Franklin Foer in The Last Politician, Zelenskyy presented a "long list of demands," including that "he needed to join NATO."

Biden, sceptical, was caught off guard and attempted to explain that this was not solely his decision and that "most of Western Europe did not support it." In response to this logic, Zelenskyy began, after begging to join NATO, lecturing Biden that the alliance was, in fact, "a historical relic, with waning significance."

Zelenskyy predicted that France and Germany could soon leave NATO. "It was an absurd analysis—and a blatant contradiction," Foer writes. "And it pissed Biden off. Even Zelenskyy's most ardent sympathisers in the administration agreed that he had bombed."

When Russia started its unprovoked and unjustified large-scale aggression in early 2022, the NATO discussions flared up again. Now President Zelenskyy concluded that if Ukraine "were a NATO member, no war would have started." Support for NATO accession had increased enormously among Ukrainians who wanted a strong partnership and security. 83% of Ukrainians would support this in October 2022.

What Ukraine needs to enter NATO?

While President Zelenskyy believes that joining the alliance is a purely political matter, Ukraine must fulfil a number of conditions. Zelenskyy has repeatedly asked NATO partners to present the list of requirements for joining the alliance.

However, some of the general ones that apply to any potential member, such as the fight against corruption, judicial reform, and a functioning democratic political system based on a market economy, have been on the list for a long time.

My experience tracking Ukraine's judicial reform process has been both frustrating and enlightening. In 2021, one of the G7 ambassadors sent me a direct message expressing his scepticism about whether this reform would ever materialise in Ukraine. While Kyiv has made remarkable progress in establishing an anti-corruption infrastructure, illicit practises remain a pervasive issue.

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The war only exacerbated this problem, with reports of officials and politicians profiting from bribes as citizens pay to escape the country and the shadow sector that accounts for 43% of economy. Public perception mirrors this reality: nearly 80% of Ukrainians and 76%

of businesses view corruption as the nation's second-largest issue after the war.

The most outrageous scandals are at the Ministry of Defence. After so many corruption scandals in army procurement, there is a new one in the Ukrainian MoD as the minister wants to destroy the hard-won transparent structure of corporate governance in procurement.

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The war economy

On the military front, however, Ukraine has made significant progress in harmonising with NATO standards. Joint training sessions with NATO countries have improved the Ukrainian military's capabilities, particularly in operating Western equipment and weapons.

Ukrainian soldiers have shared invaluable battlefield experience with their NATO counterparts, increasing their operational readiness. However, even with a capable military (even when most Ukrainian soldiers do not speak English), Ukraine must undertake extensive political and institutional reforms to meet the alliance's standards.

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Economically, the challenges are equally daunting. In 2025, Ukraine is projected to allocate $60.1 billion to defence—26.3% of its forecasted GDP. In comparison, neighbouring Poland dedicates 5% of its GDP to defence, amounting to $48 billion.

While Ukraine's wartime defence spending appears extraordinary, it raises questions about sustainability. Can Ukraine maintain such a high share of GDP for defence after the war, especially when Western economic support diminishes? Before the full-scale invasion, Ukraine allocated 6% of its GDP to defence, which amounted to $6.3 billion.

The war economy, despite its necessity, imposes significant limitations on Ukraine's broader capabilities. As long as the conflict drags on, Ukraine's ability to demonstrate the economic stability expected of NATO members will remain limited. Despite how cynical this economic aspect may sound compared to the lives that Ukraine has been losing every day, the reality remains harsh, and NATO membership becomes more elusive.

Can Ukraine access NATO now?

This leads to a critical question: Do NATO members view Ukraine as an equal partner when the country struggles to meet key benchmarks—economic contributions, the rule of law, and democratic standards—expected of member states?

With 20% of Ukrainian territory under occupation, we should ask whether NATO countries are prepared to accept the risks of triggering a broader war with Russia by extending membership to Ukraine.

> A pragmatic approach is essential for developing an effective strategy for Ukraine's defence and security

Like many Ukrainians, I aspire to see Ukraine as a member of the world's strongest military union. However, the current reality suggests

otherwise. A pragmatic approach is essential for developing an effective strategy for Ukraine's defence and security.

A compelling example is democratic Finland, which has successfully strengthened itself both economically and militarily, positioning itself for swift accession when the opportunity arose.

As long as Ukraine does not sufficiently fulfil the membership criteria and instead relies on appeals to the conscience and compassion of NATO member states, the prospect of membership appears increasingly distant.